

The Barbary Burglar of the King's Road

by William Mulder



A Zanders Investigates story



Chelsea in the 1930s and 1940s

Kultura Press

THE BARBARY BURGLAR OF THE KING'S ROAD

A Long Short Story

By William Mulder

[It is important to emphasise that this is historical fiction. The narrative does include some real characters and some actual events from history and mixes this with majority writing which is entirely fictional. Advance apologies to any relatives and descendants of real life historical characters depicted.]

Toast, Carrot Marmalade, and a Dangerous Reunion

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Chelsea, even in the languid cold of a January morning in 1944, still managed to look faintly beautiful. The night's frost clung stubbornly to the iron railings along Ixworth Place, glittering like diamonds for anyone who still had the imagination to see such things during wartime. Detective Inspector Tom Zanders did. He might have been overworked, underpaid, and chronically deprived of sleep, but he still noticed the frost on railings.

He walked briskly away from the Section House, hands deep in pockets, hat pulled low, and determined — absolutely determined — to avoid breakfast with his colleagues in the police canteen. The new Chelsea Police Station had been opened to much fanfare a few years before, but someone had miscalculated spectacularly and forgotten to include a canteen. So the Section House had become the default eating spot, and Tom had discovered a simple truth about policemen: the earlier the hour, the worse their conversational habits. At breakfast, their talk ranged from the colour of phlegm to the consistency of socks after a night on duty. Tom had decided long ago that such topics, while perhaps suitable for battlefield surgeons, were not the ideal aperitif before a day of honest CID work.

Thus he set off toward his sanctuary: the National Restaurant near Sloane Square.

Inside, warmth embraced him immediately, along with the slightly burnt smell of Camp Chicory Coffee and the sweet-sour aroma of carrot marmalade. Wartime austerity had turned British breakfasting into an exercise of persistent courage, but the National Restaurant had at least one saving grace — the mural.

Tom sat at his usual table beside Clive Gardiner's painted, sprawling countryside: rolling green hills, a contentedly grazing cow, and a stream so blue it might have fallen out of a dream. Clive, now Headmaster of Goldsmiths Art School and an old acquaintance from Tom's student days, had produced a mural that looked like a love letter to an England that had temporarily gone missing. Every morning Tom sat beneath those painted hills and imagined the world was a gentler place.

His breakfast arrived — a thin slice of toast, a very determined smear of margarine, carrot marmalade with ideas above its station, and a small metal pot of Camp Coffee trying valiantly to smell like something that had once passed through a coffee bean.

He sighed. At home in East Bergholt, when life was younger and simpler, breakfast had involved proper eggs, fresh ham, a slice of Dutch cheese known as kaas. This happened when his commercial traveller father Hans, always somewhere abroad, was in funds and was prepared to send some of them to his impoverished mother struggling with TB.

The real coffee would be imported by some cunning merchant who knew how to circumvent tariffs.

His Dutch grandmother, the legendary Lammerdina Zanders, she of the prosperous figure and big round face and a laugh you would never forget, used to insist the morning only began once the kitchen filled with the aromatic slap of Javan beans being ground. Wartime London offered no such luxuries. The coffee tasted like a boot had stepped on its soul.

Still — he sipped it gratefully.

He unfolded the newspapers someone had left on the next table: more news of ration cuts, a minor scandal involving the War Agricultural Committee, and a photograph of a celebrity sheepdog that had saved three evacuee children from a river in Shropshire. He appreciated the sheepdog. It looked far more alert and better nourished than most policemen in B Division.

For a fleeting moment — a very fleeting one — he felt peaceful.

The Blitz in London had more or less come to an end in May 1941 when Hitler had decided to invade Russia. Less of the violent deaths in the streets and squares of this famous little riverside Borough. But then the level of grieving did not subside.

Telegram boys would be delivering terrible news from overseas to Chelsea families telling them of those loved ones missing and then confirmed dead. His Majesty would send his condolences to each and every one.

Chelsea Police Station was always informed first that the terrible news was coming. It usually came to them late at night, so the officers going out on their beats first thing in the morning had a good idea where the death knocks would be coming.

The warm feeling of peace was evaporating and disappeared altogether when he remembered his first appointment that morning.

Superintendent Bulmer had demanded to see him at nine sharp.

The coffee curdled in his stomach. The carrot marmalade no longer sang of orange groves but of impending doom.

Bulmer in the morning was the spiritual equivalent of marching into a thunderstorm wearing a copper helmet. Something would strike you; the only question was where.

Tom finished his toast, swallowed the last of the Camp Coffee with something like bravery, tipped his hat to Clive Gardiner's cow — "Keep grazing, old girl; you've the right idea" — and stepped back into the cold.

He walked through Sloane Square toward Draycott Avenue where the wind stole across the houses like a gossiping neighbour in a bad mood. He passed a milk lorry, two schoolchildren racing one

another with satchels flying, and a very determined cat inspecting the contents of a dustbin. Normality in wartime always felt slightly heroic.

As he approached Draycott Avenue, he heard an unmistakable sound: an adult woman bellowing at children in the unforgettable tone of a teacher pushed past her patience.

“You three — yes, YOU — where do you imagine you’re skulking off to? School is that way, not wherever your idle little legs are dragging you!”

Tom recognised the rhythm instantly — the clipped, commanding cadence of someone who believed strongly in the moral obligation of punctual education.

The boys, three truanting seniors from Marlborough Elementary, stood frozen like small guilty hedgehogs.

The woman had her back to Tom but something — a tilt of her head, the cut of her dark coat, the athletic stance as she brandished a rolled-up register like a weapon — tugged at a memory.

He was taken back to the playing field at the back of Goldsmiths’ College in the late 1920s where he and his sister trained as teachers.

For a moment he was watching the College’s women’s hockey 1st XI thrashing Birkbeck College and how much pleasure he had watching the Goldsmiths’ devastatingly aggressive forward crashing her stick into any opponent’s thigh or rear end getting in her way.

On this particular afternoon she was getting sent off having left too many opponents prostrate on the ground and rubbing badly bruised limbs and backsides. The referee and Goldsmiths’ hockey coach had had enough and shouted out her name, condemned her as a danger to the sport and awarded her a moniker the young lady would thereafter always be known by and rather proud of.

Back in Draycott Avenue Tom moved closer.

“Come along,” she said sternly, “you can skive off when you’re older, but you’re not old enough to waste my time yet.”

She turned — and Tom nearly stopped breathing.

“Susan Lancaster...” he said, raising his voice playfully, “...you’re DANGEROUS!”

She spun, dark hair swinging like a well-oiled whip, and her expression cracked into a grin that could have illuminated a blackout.

“For heaven’s sake,” she exclaimed, “don’t I know you?”

Tom stepped into the light. “Have you forgotten already?”

“Forgotten?” she scoffed. “I certainly have NOT... Thomas Zanders. What on earth are you doing here? Why aren’t you in some splendid uniform fighting for King, Country and Empire?”

“Long story,” he replied. “Love to tell you about it. I’m CID at Chelsea these days.”

“Well I’ll be damned.” She folded her arms. “How’s your brilliant sister? Zelda, wasn’t it?”

“Still brilliant,” Tom nodded. “Headmistress now, back home running the Burnt Oak Elementary in the village.”

“I always said she’d go far. She was the best — better than me.”

“I don’t know,” Tom said, “you were pretty formidable with a hockey stick.”

She flashed a grin. “Still am. We’re putting together an Old Smiths team in London. You should come support us. If you’re brave.”

“I’d like that,” he said, far too quickly.

Susan raised one eyebrow — a somewhat cheeky gesture Tom remembered vividly from Goldsmiths. Then she stepped closer, took his hand, and squeezed it. Not a polite squeeze — no, this was warmer, deliberate, lingering.

“I’ll be seeing you, Tom Zanders.”

He felt that electric shock — the old one, the dangerous one — that he had once mistaken for youthful infatuation but now recognised as something potentially far more potent.

She released his hand. The warmth stayed.

The boys trailed reluctantly toward the school gates. Susan marched after them, authoritative and faintly amused. Tom watched her go, a small smile tucked at the corner of his mouth. A brief shaft of winter sunlight caught her hair, and she looked, for a moment, exactly like the sort of memory a man might carry with him through several bleak years.

It was almost enough to make him forget about Bulmer.

Almost.

Because as he turned toward Lucan Place, the clouds thickened, and the Superintendent’s earlier summons came back into painful, stomach-tightening focus.

By the time he reached the police station, whatever warmth Susan had sparked was already being pushed aside by the creeping dread of what awaited him upstairs.

And so the day’s real trouble — moral, bureaucratic, comic, and simian — was about to begin.

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Bulmer’s Wrath & the Three Trials of Compassion

Superintendent Horace Bulmer’s office had always reminded Tom of a large, irritated badger’s sett...

Superintendent Horace Bulmer’s office had always reminded Tom of a large, irritated badger’s sett — dark, cramped, smelling faintly of old carpet, ink, and the sweat of outrage. One rarely entered without expecting a moral lecture or a flying blotter.

This morning, Bulmer was already standing behind his desk when Zanders arrived. Standing — which was never a good sign. Bulmer only stood when he wished to appear taller, angrier, or closer to God.

He didn't bother with greetings.

"ZANDERS," he boomed, "SIT."

Tom sat.

Bulmer paced behind the desk like a clergyman preparing to denounce sin at a revival meeting. His moustache bristled with moral energy and his eyebrows twitched like two offended terriers.

"Let's start," he barked, "with the Victoria Station prosecutions. Baxter and Pickford. TWO disgusting men — one FORTY years old and the other SEVENTEEN!"

Tom folded his hands calmly. "Sir, the magistrate found them both guilty and fined them five pounds each — a substantial amount, especially in wartime—"

Bulmer slammed his palm on the desk. "Substantial? Nothing is substantial when SIN is the matter! What is all this nonsense in your report about them 'bumping into each other' in the lavatory and Baxter's hand 'inadvertently' touching Pickford?"

"That," Tom replied smoothly, "is what they explained to me."

Bulmer snatched up the report as though it were a venomous snake.

"According to PCs 112B and 287B," he read, "Baxter had his hand, and I quote from their witness statements.. *'round Mr Pickford's anatomy as though he were grabbing a beanpole!'*"

It was a remarkably undignified sentence for a police document. Tom resisted the urge to apologise to the English language. In any case he had rewritten their statements for the court hearing, removing this exaggerated and rather lewd observation on the grounds of good taste.

"Well," Tom said mildly, "in a crowded station restroom—"

Bulmer practically shouted in the tone of a prosecuting barrister summoning a witness: "This was INDECENCY Zanders! Of the WORST ORDER!"

Tom took a breath.

And the memory rose up in his mind of the interview he conducted with the young Pickford.

Only seventeen. Spotty, trembling, and sitting before Tom in the draughty interview room. His cap twisted nervously in his hands.

Pickford: "Well the gentleman... did grab me down there."

Tom: "Which gentleman?"

Pickford: "Mr Baxter."

Tom: "But it was crowded, wasn't it? Lots of men brushing past. Middle of the Rush Hour. Easily confused."

Pickford: "Well, I... suppose so... yes."

Tom leaned forward with the gentlest smile.

"Well, that's what I'll put in your statement. More likely accidental. Could happen to anyone."

Pickford nodded gratefully, relieved to be rescued from the full weight of the law.

Back in Bulmer's office, the Superintendent looked ready to combust. "Shall we move on to that reprobate actor — Franklyn Ives and his prosecution? Or LACK OF?"

Tom straightened. "We *did* prosecute, sir. He was sentenced to three months."

"And then IMMEDIATELY released on bail because of some fancy barrister who materialised out of thin air!"

Tom shrugged. "Bail happens."

Bulmer narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't know anything about that?"

Tom lifted an eyebrow hoping he didn't look at all like the face Susan Lancaster had presented to him about ten minutes earlier. "Haven't the faintest."

Bulmer inhaled deeply — the dreadful sound of volcanic anticipation: "How did you allow that pervert back on the streets?"

Tom easily recalled how that was achieved, but thought it wise to keep it all to himself.

He had been in the CID office and fortunately on his own ringing through to the beautiful and rich Black American singer and actress Elizabeth Welch, now very much a celebrated resident of Chelsea.

Elizabeth had some visa and currency transfer difficulties which he had been able to sort out, all the while somewhat mesmerised by her celebrity and charm and they had clicked: "Anything you can do Inspector Zanders, I would be more than willing to do in return and better."

This was particularly the case with wayward and naughty members of the acting and entertainment profession when their high jinx jaunts pushed the boundaries and were more like legal misadventures or more precisely criminal misdemeanours.

With the Bakelite telephone pressed between his shoulder and ear Tom explained: "Poor old Franklyn Ives is in a pickle. Decided to research a role in the lavatories of Victoria Station."

Elizabeth Welch: "Not Franklyn! He's a kitten. What on earth was he doing?"

Tom: "Curiosity. You know that occupational hazard of actors. Any chance of arranging a decent brief? Perhaps Hamblen?"

Elizabeth: "Hamblen? Darling, he's one of the best."

Tom: "Exactly. And a good character witness would help."

Elizabeth: "Can he get off?"

Tom: "Not with Magistrate McKenna. But he'll win the appeal."

Tom was now remembering the scene in the number One Court of Bow Street Magistrates. The small press bench was overflowing with journalists well into the public gallery behind.

Franklyn Ives stood dignified in the dock, hair greying at the temples. And making the mistake of trying to do his best Hamlet, Macbeth or even worse- a meandering and very unconvincing King Lear.

"I am a professional actor and vocalist of some thirty years", he declared. "Very happily married for more than a year. I had gone there because I had heard there was a lot of homosexuality going on there and having talked about this among friends and older members of my profession while I was in the station I thought I would look around and see what there was of the business."

"Oh please stop" Tom had said to himself as he watched in sadness as the dear Franklyn was putting the noose around his neck and rapidly tightening it.

"It was purely an experiment to find out what was going on," Franklyn continued hopelessly. "I definitely swear that during the whole time I was there I saw nothing, nor did I do anything. It was purely actor's curiosity you know. We have to research these things for the parts we may or may not be given in the future."

There was a cold and very chilly pause of silence experienced by everyone in the courtroom. It felt like the precursor to the final chop from the executioner's axe.

Franklyn finished with a short and very inappropriate sentence that could well have been both his his final downfall and epitaph: "We artists must research what we may portray."

His character witness, a stout Welshman from Swansea, began earnestly:

"He is a perfectly honest and upright gentleman— and his curiosity your Worship...his curiosity..."

The Chief Metropolitan Magistrate of London, one Donald McKenna, no doubt a descendant of Charles Dickens's Magistrate Fang, was training his laser eyes on him with the descending temperature of many ice ages. The witness was losing his life source and McKenna cut him off with a glare that could indeed freeze the River Nile and an ocean or two.

Franklyn was sentenced to three months with hard labour and as he was despatched to the cells with disgusted efficiency, McKenna told him: "There's another curiosity for you to research and portray upon the stage."

Back to Bulmer's Office

Back in the Superintendent's office Tom found himself feeling the blast of Bulmer's huffing and puffing. He was like a pair of over-exercised bellows. "I would have cut his BLOODY legs off and had him hanging by his stumps."

Tom blinked. "Three months for something like that..."

He stopped himself. No point throwing fuel on a furnace. In any case Elizabeth Welch's expensive barrister got his client bail and a suspended sentence on appeal.

Bulmer leaned forward. "And now — the BIGAMY case. WYATT and WYATT. Outrageous! Abominable! BOTH of them bigamists! You prosecute — and they get PATTED on the BACK by the judge!"

Tom allowed himself a tiny smile, but cut it short on the grounds that allowing it to linger would no doubt have compromised his personal safety: "I prosecuted honourably, sir. They pleaded guilty. The judge sentenced according to his..ugh.." He was about to say "conscience:", but then quite rightly substituted with the words "the law" instead.

Bulmer threw up his hands. "The end of civilisation as we know it!" he roared.

Tom quickly recalled his interview with the defendant Emily Wyatt (or Waters — she'd somewhat lost track of her married names) who sat before him wringing her hands.

Tom: "You didn't come forward because your husband married again, did you?"

Emily: "Didn't I?"

Tom: "No. You thought he'd been killed in the Blitz. Perfectly reasonable. You believed yourself a widow."

Emily blinked. "I... I suppose I did."

Tom: "Precisely. We'll put that in your statement."

She nodded gratefully.

Tom remembered the very useful call he had put into his secretary, Winifred Botting's sister Sybil.

Winifred had been Chelsea Police Station's allocated secretary and was originally posted to Superintendent Bulmer's office.

But the wartime call-ups of police officers, particularly detectives, meant there were long periods when Zanders was on his own in CID.

Winifred had been sent to help.

She became indispensable, largely because with all her knowledge of police procedures and operations- she was now in her early forties- she could do police detecting better than those who had actually been sworn to serve the King in the office of constable.

Winifred had two sisters: Mildred working in the Chelsea Library and Sybil who was in charge of the listing of court hearings at the Central Criminal Court; otherwise known as the Old Bailey.

This became an invaluable intelligence network for Zanders.

Tom: "Hello Sybil, it's Tom. Need a favour."

Sybil: "For my favourite Inspector? Of course."

Tom: "I've got a double bigamy case. Sweet couple, wrong choices. They need a sympathetic judge. Might Pettigrew be presiding?"

Sybil chuckled. "Because of certain... life experiences of his own?"

They both knew but would not articulate over the telephone that Pettigrew had long separated from his wife and had a child with another lady, somewhat younger than himself, who changed her name by deed poll to Pettigrew. Nothing against the law of course and never going to get into the newspapers...or even reach the ear of the Lord Chancellor.

They both knew that 'life experiences' as Sybil so sensitively put it had the potential to bring a sense of mature justice in the case of R v Wyatt and Wyatt.

Tom: "Experience does indeed breed mercy," he added most hopefully.

Sybil: "Leave it with me."

And it was quite a performance from the Judge that Tom remembered so vividly.

He could see the Common Sergeant of London, the junior of the two resident judges at the Old Bailey, one Judge Herbert Lance Pettigrew peering down at the Wyatts with a grave countenance, but with eyes that were in Tom's view not unkind.

"James Thomas Wyatt and Emily Elizabeth Wyatt. Stand up please!" he intoned.

"You have both pleaded guilty to bigamy. I don't know what to do with people like you. I regard bigamy, rightly or wrongly, as a serious and wicked offence. Each of you has committed bigamy, but I don't know that the interest of the public will be served by sending either of you to prison. You have both made a mess of your lives, but that is no excuse for this offence. I want you to realise that in nine cases out of ten, so far as I am concerned, bigamists go to prison, be they man or woman, but I do not propose to interfere with what little happiness each of you can get. Neither of you wronged one another in spite of the marriage ceremony you went through."

The Wyatts chimed together: "Thank you, your Lordship. Thank you!"

Judge: "You needn't thank me. I am probably not doing the right thing."

Tom had to suppress a smile. It was precisely the right thing in his opinion as he looked round a very disapproving courtroom.

The judge continued: "I am giving you both a chance to make something of the lives you have still to lead. Mrs Wyatt, I do not have to tell you that you have done a wicked and blasphemous thing. People like you and your husband make a mockery of marriage. You are apparently living with a decent man who is good to you. There may be some way out of this tangle in the divorce court. I don't know. But you have got this chance. See what you can make of it."

He bound them over for two years. They were free to go so long as neither of them married bigamously again.

The Wyatts wept with relief.

Back in Bulmer's office the apoplectic Superintendent had been reading out the judge's sentencing from his copy of that morning's *Times*. He stood quivering with indignation.

“What is the world coming to Zanders when an Old Bailey judge lets them off? It’s the end of civilisation as we know it. What on earth are all our brave soldiers, sailors and airmen fighting for? It’s judges like that and bloody useless police officers like you who are responsible for all this rot.”

Tom did not hate Superintendent Bulmer. In fact he did not even dislike him. He was fully aware Bulmer had two sons in the services. One was in the Merchant Navy fighting the treacherous U-Boat war which the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, had been calling the Battle of the Atlantic.

The other was in Montgomery’s army now fighting in Italy.

Even when Bulmer was shouting at him, Tom had feelings of respect and even on occasion had actually worried for him.

“I’m very sorry sir. But the judge did condemn their behaviour very harshly.”

“It’s actions we need these days Zanders,” Bulmer thundered back at him. “Not words. Actions! And that’s what we need from you!”

Tom sat calmly, hands folded, knowing resistance would only lengthen the storm.

Bulmer opened his mouth to continue — but a loud knock interrupted.

PC Flack entered breathlessly.

“Sir — there’s a situation on the King’s Road. Mrs Cynthia Barham has cornered a burglar at her shop. Shots fired.”

Tom leapt to his feet.

Bulmer waved him off with a mixture of fury and relief.

“GO. Do something USEFUL.”

Tom nodded, grabbing his coat.

As he reached the door, Bulmer was not finished:

“You know Zanders I never wanted you in my CID, but you are all I’ve got. Please try! Will you?”

Zanders nodded desperately in a heart-felt attempt to show some degree of willingness.

As he stepped into the corridor and exhaled a long breath, he could hear Bulmer yelling one more thing.

“Remember. We enforce the rule of law. We’re not here to change it!”

The day, already complex, was about to turn downright absurd.

And loud.

And fur-clad.

And armed.

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Gunshots on the King's Road: Mrs Barham Goes to War

The King's Road had always had a flair for drama...

The King's Road had always had a flair for drama. Even in wartime, with half its shops boarded up and the rest clinging to rationed existence, the street possessed an uncanny talent for producing absurdities that would have baffled even the ancient Greeks. This morning's absurdity was already gathering a crowd by the time Tom pedalled into view on a clattering police-issue bicycle.

He had been forced to commandeer it from outside the station. There were no motor cars available. Every single one, along with most of the uniformed branch, had been deployed to Westminster for a grand Home Guard exercise — the Home Guard attacking the Regular Army, or possibly the Regular Army ambushing the Home Guard. No one could quite remember which side was which, though both seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Thus Zanders cycled, coat flapping behind him, hat pulled down tight, praying that his chronic lack of practice — he had not cycled regularly since Ipswich — would not deposit him onto the pavement before he reached the crime scene. The King's Road stretched before him like a stage whose curtains had been flung open prematurely.

Halfway down the road, he heard it.

A gunshot.

Then another.

Then something between a scream, a battle-cry, and the strangled wail of a frustrated soprano.

"Oh good Lord..." he muttered. "She's armed."

He pedalled harder.

By the time he reached the shop — *High Class Clothes of Discernment*, owned by Mrs Cynthia Barham, sister to the Mayor of Chelsea — a sizeable crowd had gathered. Some were ducking behind lampposts. Others craned their necks with enthusiastic interest, as though attending a matinee performance. One elderly gentleman, perched on an upturned crate, appeared to be taking notes.

From the pavement came another shriek:

"YOU COME DOWN AT ONCE, YOU FILTHY LITTLE DEVIL!"

The source, unmistakably, was Mrs Barham.

She stood on the pavement outside her shop, face flushed, pearls jangling, hair jolting with every wild gesture — and most notably, gripping a revolver in her right hand.

She fired it straight upwards into the shop's awning.

BANG!

The crowd scattered with a collective gasp.

Tom threw his bicycle aside and sprinted forward.

“Mrs Barham!” he shouted. “Put the firearm DOWN!”

This was a mistake.

She swung round towards him with a speed that would have impressed the Commando School.

“YOU!” she shrieked. “WHERE IS HE? WHERE IS THAT FOREIGN LITTLE MONSTER?”

Tom raised both hands placatingly. “Madam,” he said in the tone of a man trying to soothe a panicked horse, “I need you to hand over the weapon.”

Instead, she advanced, brandishing it at the sky.

“He STOLE my FUR,” she wailed, “and one of my BEST HATS! A foreigner! A dark, hairy little beast! He clambered up my window like a spider on gin!”

“Please,” Tom said carefully, “give me the gun—”

She swung around again, one hand still in the air, the other swinging forward in a wild arc of righteous indignation.

Her fist connected with Tom’s cheekbone.

He did not have time to yelp. The world simply twisted sideways.

There were several things Tom had learned about Ménière’s disease: sudden movement could trigger it, shock could exacerbate it, and being punched in the face by an enraged Chelsea socialite was enough to ignite the whole wretched symphony. His vision swam, his ears rang, and the pavement rushed up to greet him far too enthusiastically.

He landed, groaned, and lay still.

A voice above him drifted through fog.

“Tom... Tom? Oh for heaven’s sake...”

A hand tapped his cheek. He blinked, slowly returning from a nauseating swirl of dizziness and muffled noise.

The face of Police Woman Wendy Scott came into view. Her uniform cap was crooked, her expression a blend of concern and exasperation.

“Well,” she said dryly, “that’s one way to disarm a suspect.”

Tom croaked. “Did we... get the gun?”

“You did,” Wendy said, helping him sit up. “Or rather, you *fell* on it. Perfectly timed, if unconventional.”

Tom winced as he touched the side of his face. “Who hit me?”

Wendy’s eyebrows rose. “The Mayor’s sister.”

He blinked. “Right.”

He paused, then added, “And... we’re arresting her?”

Wendy hesitated. “The Mayor’s already spoken to Superintendent Bulmer. Mrs Barham will be forfeiting her revolver. And the entire matter is being... categorised as a misunderstanding.”

Tom groaned. “Of course.”

He tried to stand. Wendy steadied him, one hand on his arm as the pavement wobbled like a boat in rough sea.

The crowd had begun to settle into murmurs. Mrs Barham had retreated inside her shop, aided by assistants, gesticulating furiously. The revolver lay safely in Wendy’s pocket.

Tom pressed a hand to his swelling cheekbone.

Wendy shook her head sympathetically. “It’s going to bruise, you know. Quite spectacularly.”

Tom sighed. “I’ll say I fell off the bicycle.”

“Oh good,” Wendy said, “that’s what I told Jennifer.”

“Who?”

But he didn’t need to ask. At that moment a familiar figure appeared from behind the crowd, notebook at the ready.

Jennifer Blakeston of the *West London Press*, young, sharp-eyed, and radiating the kind of journalistic curiosity usually reserved for parliamentarians and prizefighters, strode toward them.

“Well, Inspector Zanders,” she said cheerfully, “that is **SOME** shiner you’ve acquired.”

Tom drew himself up with all the dignity available to a man whose cheekbone was rapidly turning a dark pink and would soon be aubergine-coloured.

“Ah,” he said, nodding sagely, “fell off the bicycle in Cale Street.”

“Did you really?” Jennifer narrowed her eyes. “Funny how often policemen seem to suffer cycling accidents when dealing with irate shopkeepers.”

Tom gave her an innocent look. “Terrible handlebars.”

Jennifer scribbled something in her notebook.

Wendy leaned close and whispered, “She doesn’t believe you.”

Tom whispered back, "She never does."

The witnesses approached.

The crowd had begun to volunteer their own versions of events.

A road sweeper tugged at Tom's sleeve. "Looked like a bloomin' gorilla to me, guv. Hairy fella. Swingin' about like he owned the place."

A young woman insisted the culprit was "a small foreign man... nothing like anybody from around here," who had "climbed up the drainpipe like a theatre acrobat."

A boy from across the street claimed the thief was a "pantomime midget" from the winter shows at the Palace Theatre.

An elderly man announced it was definitely "a monkey," though he added he had misplaced his spectacles sometime in 1938.

Jennifer's pencil scratched furiously.

Tom winced again. "Thank you," he said diplomatically. "All very helpful."

He turned back to Wendy. "What was actually stolen?"

"Two coats," Wendy recited from memory, "one mink and one sable, plus a hat — the most expensive one, naturally."

Tom nodded. "And the suspect, according to Mrs Barham?"

Wendy's face tightened in an effort not to laugh. "Quote: 'A terrifyingly small, dark-haired foreigner with an unnatural amount of body hair who scuttled up the building like a demon.'"

Tom sighed. "Jennifer, please don't print that."

Jennifer smiled a serene, angelic smile that suggested she very much *would* print something, though perhaps phrased slightly more elegantly. The *West London Press* and its *Chelsea News* edition was a very traditional weekly newspaper.

"Inspector," she said, "do you mind if I accompany you for follow-up interviews? Human-interest angle. Wartime crime wave. The fighting spirit of Chelsea's shopkeepers."

Tom glanced at her. He had, despite several polite rebuffs, never fully given up hope of impressing Jennifer Blakeston — though he was beginning to understand she lived in a realm where romantic entanglements were optional, but scoops were sacred.

"Fine," he said. "But no mention of... bicycling mishaps."

"Of course," she said innocently.

Wendy smothered a laugh.

Inside the shop

The interior of High Class Clothes of Discernment looked like a boutique that had survived a minor air raid — which, as Tom knew, was saying something for 1944. Hats were strewn across the floor as though the mannequin heads had been involved in a barroom brawl. A display of silk gloves lay toppled next to an overturned chair. The shop assistant was still trembling.

Tom interviewed her first. She described the intruder as “tiny... astonishingly fast... wearing a waistcoat that clearly wasn’t his... and grinning.”

“Grinning?” Tom repeated.

“Yes,” she whispered. “It was... unsettling.”

Jennifer’s eyes gleamed.

Wendy shot Tom a look that said, *this is getting stranger by the minute.*

He agreed.

Aftermath on the pavement

As Tom stepped back outside, the winter air hit his bruised cheek like a slap of cold steel. His head still throbbed. His pride throbbed more.

He took one final look up at the shop’s roof. Empty. No acrobatic midget. No spider-like foreigner. No miniature gorilla.

But something — some small instinct — tugged at his attention.

A movement. Perhaps imagined. Perhaps not.

Just the sort of movement that might be made by a creature both clever and lightly built — and, quite possibly, possessing a strong fondness for stolen furs.

He narrowed his eyes.

He did not yet know the name Nelson.

But he was about to.

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The King’s Road Crime Wave: Shops, Stories, and a Silent Child

A cold draught blew along the King’s Road as Zanders...

A cold draught blew along the King’s Road as Zanders, still massaging his bruised cheekbone, set off with Jennifer Blakeston at his side. Wendy returned to the station with the confiscated revolver,

and Tom felt a faint, ridiculous pang of envy that Nelson — whoever he was — had managed to avoid arrest far more gracefully than he had avoided a punch.

Jennifer walked briskly, notebook tucked under her arm, eyes always ahead. She had the purposeful stride of someone who considered every pavement cracked by a boot heel a potential headline.

“So,” she said conversationally, “how does it feel to have been struck by a woman wearing pearls?”

Tom exhaled patiently. “Please, Miss Blakeston, I would like the official version to remain that I fell off a bicycle.”

“Oh, it will,” she said airily, “it will. More or less.”

They reached the jeweller’s next door — *Sable & Chimes Fine Timepieces* — its sign hanging slightly askew as though the shop itself disapproved of being burgled.

Inside, clocks ticked in solemn chorus. The owner, a lean man with pince-nez and the cautious demeanour of someone who believed every human being was either a potential buyer or a potential thief, wrung his hands as Tom entered.

“Inspector! Such a relief. I thought you’d never come. We’re practically a charity now.”

“Tell me what was taken,” Tom said.

“Well, two pocket watches — valuable ones — a set of bracelets from the Edwardian display, and a tiara. At least,” he added mournfully, “the stones were paste.”

“Paste?” Jennifer echoed.

“Yes. For a production at the Palace Theatre. But they looked expensive, which is the point.”

Tom made notes. “Any sign of forced entry?”

“None. Whoever it was... slipped in like a breeze.”

“A small breeze?” Tom asked.

The jeweller blinked. “Well, yes. Very small. I only saw a blur. Quite... lively.”

Tom’s cheekbone throbbed anew.

As they stepped out, Jennifer murmured, “Lively blur. Waistcoat. Grinning. Climbing walls. I might have a title already.”

“Please don’t,” Tom said.

Antiques and Curiosities

The antiques shop next door was a cavern of dusty treasures: half a Boer War helmet, Victorian swords, a chess set inlaid with fake ivory, and — glowering from its mounted position — a stuffed lion’s head that looked perpetually surprised by its own circumstances.

The proprietor looked no less alarmed.

“Inspector! The thief — that scoundrel — has robbed me blind!”

“How many items?” Tom asked gently.

“Well... the fully intact Boer War helmet. Two swords. One of my delightful chess sets. The valuable one inlaid with real ivory. And...” He pointed miserably. “My lion’s head. Someone has *tampered* with it.”

“Tampered?”

“Yes! Its tiara is missing.”

Tom paused. “Your lion had a tiara?”

“It was brought to me for restoration! What sort of a degenerate robs a lion of its dignity?”

“That’s two tiaras gone. Each from a different shop. A Tiara cat burglar?” mused Tom.

Jennifer was scribbling with great enthusiasm.

Tom sighed. “We’ll do what we can.”

“Please do. Chelsea society will not tolerate naked lions.”

“No,” Tom said. “Perish the thought.”

Sweets, Illustrated Crimes, and Gobstoppers

Next came the sweet shop and newsagent: jars of black liquorice half-empty, gobstoppers diminished, and — rather bafflingly — a week’s supply of *War Illustrated* vanished from the stand.

Mrs Gleeson, the shopkeeper, stood behind her counter in a flour-dusted apron.

“I swear,” she said, “I had twenty copies. All gone. And half the liquorice too! The nerve!”

“Did you see the culprit?” Tom asked.

“I saw a shadow. A small one. And the gobstoppers rattled as if blown by a gust of wind.”

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. “Any chance it was, say... a child?”

“Oh no,” Mrs Gleeson said, scandalised. “No child I know could jump onto that high shelf. And certainly not with such... flair.”

“Flair,” Jennifer repeated approvingly.

Tom’s headache intensified.

A Pause on the Pavement

They stepped outside again. Jennifer flipped through her notes, her brow furrowed in exhilaration.

“If you line up these witness accounts,” she said, “you get a picture that’s either a circus troupe of one... or something very unusual indeed.”

“Unusual is one word,” Tom muttered. “Absurd is another.”

He turned toward the next shop: a small corner grocery owned by Mr and Mrs Bartlett. The bell above the door jingled as they entered.

The Bartletts & The Silent Niece

The grocery was clean, neat, and smelled of dried fruit and wartime dust. Mr Roderick Bartlett, tall and kindly with a moustache that drooped like a weary caterpillar, greeted them with a nod.

“Inspector Zanders,” he said. “We’ve been expecting you.”

His wife Mary joined them — shorter, round-faced, with the sort of eyes that looked perpetually ready to show kindness.

Tom glanced around. “I understand you’ve suffered losses as well?”

Mary nodded. “Small things — tins, mostly. And dried fruits. Someone’s developed a taste for raisins.”

Tom exchanged a look with Jennifer.

“And there’s... Caroline,” Mary added softly.

Tom’s expression gentled. “Your niece?”

Mary nodded again. “From Coventry. Lost her parents in the bombing. She came to live with us three years ago. Sweetest girl. But she hasn’t spoken since.”

Jennifer’s notebook paused. Her eyes softened too.

“She helped us look after the shop,” Mr Bartlett said. “Or tried to. But with the recent thefts, we asked her to keep an eye out. Poor child hasn’t been herself this week.”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked.

“She’s been slipping off downstairs more often. Into the basement.”

“Is that unusual?”

“Yes,” Mary said. “She used to avoid that space. Said it felt funny. But now... she spends hours there.”

Tom nodded slowly. “May we see it?”

Before either Bartlett could answer, a small figure appeared at the doorway behind the counter.

A girl of about eleven, dark-haired, thin, pale as a flower pressed too long in a book. Her eyes — large, expressive, and uncertain — fixed on Tom with the intensity of a deer watching a hunter.

She lifted her hand slightly. Not quite a greeting. Not quite a sign. More a cautious acknowledgment.

Tom softened his voice. “Hello, Caroline.”

Her eyes flicked to his bruised cheek. A tiny crease of worry appeared between her brows.

Then she withdrew quietly into the back.

Back on the Street

Outside, Jennifer closed her notebook.

“She’s extraordinary,” she murmured. “Even silent, she has such presence.”

“She’s been through more than most adults,” Tom said. “Children carry bombs inside them. The quiet ones especially.”

Jennifer looked at him, surprised by the comment.

“You should write,” she said softly.

Tom blinked. “Write?”

“Yes,” she said. “Properly. You have a way with words when you’re not being punched in the face.”

He chuckled despite the pain.

They began walking again, though Tom’s mind was still in the grocery, still watching the solemn, silent child with eyes too old for her age.

Something in her expression lingered with him — a shadow of guilt, or protectiveness... or both.

He frowned slightly.

“What’s wrong?” Jennifer asked.

“Not sure yet,” Tom said. “But something about this case isn’t sitting right.”

As if on cue, Mrs Bartlett had called out to him from outside her shop.

Telephone call for you Inspector!

He returned to the shop to find Winifred Botting at Chelsea CID had tracked him down. He was to call Max Knight immediately on the secret Whitehall number. But he had to do this from a nearby callbox and give an additional code to the Flaxman telephone exchange working out of a building further up the King’s Road past the King’s Picture Playhouse Cinema on the corner of Church Street.

Maxwell Knight was Tom's Security Service controller. That was the covert parallel job Tom was sent to Chelsea for in 1939. He was in Special Branch but not known officially as a Special Branch officer. And this extended to being kept on the lower divisional CID officer's wages.

He had all the donkey CID work and responsibilities while being Mr Knight's gofer, helper and protector. Counter-intelligence, espionage and a lot more. The 'protector' part was another story altogether.

Wherever he looked all he could see was Jennifer's eyebrows and her nose twitching as though she knew she was onto something.

"Got to go in the phone-box" he said purposefully. "Sorry...no room for you." He had to keep the door closed with his unused hand to stop Jennifer pulling it open so eager she was to listen in.

The Flaxman exchange transferred him into some secret place in the London area, a distant and much posher voice said "You're through now" and then...

"Zanders," came Maxwell Knight's clipped voice, "I need you on a matter of high discretion."

"This wouldn't be about gobstoppers and furs, would it?" Tom asked.

"No," Knight said crisply. "It's about a missing man. Commander Barney Shiplake. The Royal Navy's leading combat diver."

Tom's eyebrows lifted. "Missing where?"

"Chelsea," Knight replied. "Where else? And he's not alone. He may be in the company of Nelson."

"Nelson?" Tom repeated. "Is he a sailor?"

"No, Zanders," Knight sighed. "He's a Barbary macaque."

Tom stared at the phone. "A... macaque?"

"A monkey, Tom. A monkey from Gibraltar. They're highly intelligent. Easily agitated. And fiercely loyal."

Tom opened his mouth, closed it again, and rubbed his forehead.

Knight continued: "Find Shiplake. Find Nelson. And do NOT let the local police or that lunatic Superintendent Bulmer get hold of them."

Jennifer, watching through the glass, mouthed: *What's happening?*

Tom held up a hand.

"Where do I start?" he asked Knight.

"Try the usual naval haunts," Knight said. "If Shiplake's in Chelsea, he's either drinking or hiding. Both are equally likely. And Tom? One more thing."

"Yes?"

“If Nelson likes you — he’ll hug you. If he doesn’t... he’ll steal your watch.”

The line went dead.

Tom stepped out of the call box.

Jennifer folded her arms. “Well?”

Tom took a deep breath.

“Turns out,” he said, “our burglar may not be... entirely... human.”

Jennifer blinked.

Then she said quietly:

“Well. I suppose that explains the grinning.”

Tom nodded. “We’re going to Shawfield Street.”

“Why there?”

“Because that’s where naval men with troubles usually hide.”

Jennifer tucked her notebook under her arm. “Lead the way, Inspector.”

And as they set off toward Shawfield Street, Tom felt the peculiar thrill that came only when cases shifted from merely confusing to utterly absurd.

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Shawfield Street: The Diver, the Monkey, and the Basement of Secrets

Shawfield Street always looked a little surprised to find itself attached to the King’s Road...

Shawfield Street always looked a little surprised to find itself attached to the King’s Road. It was quieter, more domestic, lined with narrow terraced houses that leaned towards one another as though whispering gossip across the cobbles.

Here, even during wartime, small gardens persisted — defiant rows of frostbitten geraniums, an apple tree stripped for firewood but still stubbornly upright, and the occasional milk bottle left on a step like an offering.

In November 1940 one of the Luftwaffe’s biggest high explosive bombs had destroyed one third of the western side towards the bottom on the way to the embankment. It was now empty waste land.

You could now see through to Flood Street and the electricity generating station.

Tom and Jennifer walked down the street, their breath forming pale clouds. The morning light had taken on the muted, grumbling texture of London winter. Somewhere behind them, a radio in an open window played Vera Lynn.

Jennifer glanced sideways at him. "If a monkey really is responsible," she said, "this could be a front pager. I could earn a holiday on the lineage phoned through to Fleet Street.

"Please," Tom muttered. "It isn't a story. It's a headache with fur."

They stopped outside a basement flat halfway down the street. A curtain twitched inside, then stilled.

"This is the address?" Jennifer whispered.

"So I understand. Chelsea's safe house for a certain kind of absent without leave naval officer," Tom said, knocking firmly.

A groan drifted through the door.

Then a shuffling.

Then the door opened a hesitant two inches.

Behind it stood a man who looked like he'd been dragged backward through both Hell and the Navy.

Commander Barney Shiplake, Royal Navy Special Operations, was unmistakably hungover. He was tall, even handsome, or had been until alcohol and grief had taken turns with him. His blond hair was unwashed, his eyes bloodshot, and his uniform — or what remained of it — hung loosely like a flag that had given up on patriotism.

"Police?" he croaked.

"Yes," Tom said gently. "Inspector Zanders. Chelsea Police. May we come in?"

Shiplake hesitated, then pulled the door open fully with the resignation of a man who had stopped resisting fate sometime last Tuesday.

Inside the Basement Flat

The interior was dim, cluttered, and smelled faintly of rum, pipe smoke, and something Tom suspected was wet rope. Maps of the Mediterranean were tacked to the walls, along with faded photographs of wartime comrades.

Jennifer scribbled. "You're Commander Shiplake?"

"Was," Shiplake muttered. "These days I'm more of a cautionary tale."

He rubbed his face. "Maxwell Knight sent you, didn't he?"

Tom nodded. "He's concerned."

Shiplake let out a hollow laugh. "Concerned. Right. That'll be a first."

He slumped onto a battered sofa. "If he's worried, it's about Nelson."

Tom exchanged a subtle look with Jennifer.

"Nelson," Tom said, "is missing?"

Shiplake rubbed his temples. "He ran off. Been a week now. Damned fool monkey. I was supposed to look after him."

Jennifer leaned forward. "You sound fond of him."

Shiplake sighed. "Fond? Nelson's... complicated."

He stared at the ceiling. "He was our mascot on the Gibraltar base. Smartest animal I've ever seen. Knew when we were scared. When men didn't come back... Nelson knew. He would sit outside the door of the barracks until dawn."

Tom softened. "I'm sorry."

Shiplake swallowed hard. "Lost three of my men in the Aegean. Operation went to hell. I got leave. Came here. Brought Nelson with me, God knows why. Thought he needed company. Maybe I did. But I... I haven't been reliable lately."

He glanced at a half-empty glass on the table.

"Nelson used to sleep on the foot of the bed," Shiplake said, voice cracking. "But I didn't buy raisins this week. He loves raisins. Harrods used to get a Jamaican shipment. He... he must have gone looking for them."

Tom's eyes sharpened. "Dried fruits?"

Shiplake nodded.

Tom sighed, a long, knowing exhale that told him he was on the right track. "Commander... was he accustomed to wearing clothing?"

Jennifer blinked. "Clothing?"

Shiplake shrugged miserably. "Base officers spoiled him. Waistcoats. Hats. That sort of thing. I told them they were turning him into a naval dandy."

Tom's headache amplified. "Did he have any fondness for jewellery?"

"Fondness," Shiplake said darkly, "doesn't cover it. He'd steal watches off officers during morning inspection."

Tom pinched the bridge of his nose. "Commander, I believe Nelson may be involved in a series of petty crimes along the King's Road."

Shiplake stared at him. "Nelson? A thief?"

Tom simply raised an eyebrow.

Shiplake groaned into his hands. “Oh damn it. He’s not violent, you know. A bit cheeky, maybe. Likes shiny things. And raisins. He would never hurt anyone.”

“He didn’t,” Tom said reassuringly. “Humans did more of the hurting today.”

Jennifer smothered a grin.

Shiplake stood abruptly. “Where is he? You’ve found him, haven’t you?”

“Not yet,” Tom said. “But we have an idea where he may be.”

“Take me,” Shiplake said.

“Not in your state,” Tom replied kindly but firmly. “You need rest.”

“I need Nelson.”

Tom nodded. He understood loyalty — the strange bonds forged by war and loneliness.

“We’ll sort something out for you,” Tom promised. In the meantime, Lady Dorothy will be seeing you.

Shiplake sank back into the sofa, defeated and hopeful all at once.

Lady Dorothy Winter was another Chelsea Society figure who ran a rescue service for dipsomaniacal and conked out service officers overwhelmed by the war.

Her chauffeur would be taking Barney to a sanatorium in the countryside that she ran which specialised in ‘drying out’ drunken sailors, soldiers and airmen. It was the prototype for the modern health farm.

The Call That Confirmed It

Back on the pavement, Tom turned to Jennifer.

“We need a missing animal,” he said, “not a missing person.”

Jennifer’s eyes flashed. “Inspector... this is going to be tremendous.”

Tom had no time to respond. A thought struck him, sharp and clear.

He pulled out his notebook, flipped to a small page where he kept essential local contacts, and back at the phone-box dialled the number for Chelsea Library.

This time Jennifer had got her foot in the door so she could listen in.

The voice that answered was crisp, organised, and unmistakably Mildred Botting — The second of Winifred’s sisters he had cadged a favour from this week.

“Chelsea Library, reference desk.”

“Mildred, it’s Tom.”

“Oh hello, Inspector. What can I do for you? Lost book? Need a dictionary? A good map of the Adriatic?”

“Something rarer,” Tom said. “Any chance someone has borrowed a book on apes or monkeys in the last week?”

A pause.

“Funny you should ask,” Mildred said. “Just days ago, a little girl from the Bartletts — Caroline — came in looking for information on monkeys. She was terribly polite. Didn’t speak a word, but wrote her request beautifully.”

Tom’s eyebrows rose.

“And did you find a book?”

“Of course,” Mildred said. “We gave her *Apes and Monkeys* by E. G. Boulenger. Beige cloth boards. Published 1936. Last borrowed by a Mr Maxwell Knight.”

Jennifer was most intrigued by the strange look of knowing and irony that spread across Tom’s face.

Tom exhaled slowly, lips pressed together. “Thank you, Mildred.”

“She did a little skip as she left,” Mildred added fondly.

Tom hung up.

Jennifer tucked her notebook away. “Inspector... that child knows something.”

Tom nodded. “She knows more than something.”

Back to the Bartletts

Wendy was waiting outside when they arrived, her face serious.

“Tom,” she said quietly, “the Bartletts have been worried.”

They were ushered inside. Mr and Mrs Bartlett stood at the top of a small staircase leading down into the basement. Anxiety hung around them like mist.

“She’s at school,” Mary said softly. “But... Tom... we didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what?”

Roderick Bartlett opened the door.

The Basement of Secrets

The basement was dimly lit by a single hanging bulb. Dust stirred in lazy spirals as Tom descended the stairs.

And then he stopped.

The scene before him looked like Aladdin's Cave curated by an enthusiastic child and a kleptomaniac monkey.

Furs — expensive ones — lay draped over crates. Mrs Barham's prized hat perched at a jaunty angle atop a flour sack. Two pocket watches glinted from a makeshift shelf, one attached to a gold Albert chain that seemed far too familiar.

Tom immediately identified the missing tiara that should have been perched regally on the stuffed lion's head.

The Victorian swords rested beside an artfully arranged chess set — pieces aligned as though mid-game.

Jennifer stood behind Tom, speechless.

Wendy's eyes widened. "Good grief..."

But the greatest sight of all was in the far corner.

Nelson.

The Barbary macaque was sitting with perfect self-possession on an old blanket, nibbling from a torn-open packet of dried fruit. He wore a tiny waistcoat — patched, slightly askew — and when he looked up, he tilted his head with the friendly curiosity of a child meeting new visitors.

He blinked once.

Then he flashed a grin.

The other costume jewellery tiara for the Palace Theatre taken from *Sable & Chimes Fine Timepieces* was resting on the blanket to the other side of him.

Jennifer gasped. "He's adorable."

Wendy clasped her hands together. "Oh Tom... he's *precious*."

Tom cleared his throat. "He's also a burglar."

Nelson climbed down from the blanket and padded towards Wendy. His eyes sparkled. He was clearly drawn to her uniform which in the dim light with brightly polished buttons was somewhat Royal Naval.

Wendy knelt instinctively — and Nelson wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a gentle, utterly disarming hug.

"Oh," she breathed, "he likes me!"

Tom muttered, "Yes. That's what worries me."

Jennifer was scribbling furiously.

And then Tom saw it

On the floor near Nelson's feet lay Caroline's notebook — open, filled with drawings.

Detailed sketches of Nelson: perched on the rooftop of the grocery, sneaking through the sweetshop door, wrapping himself in Mrs Barham's fur, playing chess with pieces half his size.

Drawn not with malice — but affection. And evidently with an artistic talent.

Caroline had not been participating in crime.

She had been *caring* for a lost creature.

A small, traumatised girl who had lost her entire world... helping a small, traumatised monkey who had lost his own.

Tom closed the notebook gently.

"Mr Bartlett," he said quietly, "your niece is not in trouble."

Mary Bartlett's eyes filled. "She started speaking again last week," she whispered. "Just a few words. We didn't know why."

Tom swallowed.

Wendy held Nelson close. Jennifer wiped at her eyes when she thought no one was looking.

Tom Zanders — bruised, tired, and carrying the weight of a long war — felt something warm settle in his chest.

Compassion, yes.

But also certainty.

This case was not about crime.

It was about rescue.

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Legal Monkeys & Illegal Compassion: The Battle for Nelson

Nelson's journey to Chelsea Police Station caused an uproar...

Nelson's journey to Chelsea Police Station caused an uproar before he had even crossed the threshold.

They were conveyed there by Q-car. Tom asked the driver to activate the siren which Nelson seemed to approve of.

Wendy carried him in her arms like a rescued child, and Nelson — delighted by both the attention and the ride — clung to her collar, occasionally reaching out to pat her hair with grave ceremony, as if awarding her a medal for services to primates.

The constables at the front desk stared in disbelief.

PC Wilkes whispered, “Is that...?”

PC Madden nodded faintly. “A monkey. In uniform custody.”

PC Wilkes swallowed hard. “Should we... salute?”

“Don’t encourage him,” Tom muttered, sweeping past.

But any hope of slipping quietly into the CID office died immediately as Superintendent Bulmer’s door burst open.

He was in excellent spirits. The report of Mrs Barham giving his renegade Detective Inspector a landing right hook had cheered him up.

“What,” Bulmer bellowed, “in the name of CHRISTIAN DECENCY is THAT?”

Tom took a steadying breath. “I’ve found your King’s Road burglar- not a cat burglar but a monkey burglar. Sir, this is Nelson. The—”

“I can SEE what it is!” Bulmer thundered. “A filthy, foreign BEAST committing serious CRIMES in the Borough!” He jabbed a shaking finger at Nelson. “I want it ARRESTED!”

Nelson, misunderstanding entirely, gave Bulmer a cheerful wave.

Wendy stifled a laugh. Tom stepped forward. “Sir, it’s an animal. It can’t be charged under—”

“It has STOLEN!” Bulmer roared. “It has terrorised the King’s Road! It assaulted Mrs BARHAM!”

“Actually,” Tom said gently, “she assaulted me.”

Bulmer ignored this. “Zanders, book the creature. Put it in the cells. And prepare a destruction order.”

Wendy’s face drained of colour. “Sir—”

“DO NOT ‘SIR’ ME!” Bulmer shouted. “Rabies! Contagion! Chaos! It must be DESTROYED!”

Wendy clutched Nelson protectively. “Superintendent Bulmer, please—”

But Bulmer had already stormed away, muttering more about the collapse of civilisation and monkeys running the Empire.

Nelson hugged Wendy’s neck tightly, sensing the tension.

Tom exhaled, long and low.

“This,” he murmured, “is going to be... complicated.”

Nelson in Custody

The holding cells of Chelsea Police Station had never been host to anything quite like Nelson before. Dogs, certainly. Drunks, daily. A goose stolen from a market trader once. But a Barbary macaque from Gibraltar? Never.

Wendy set Nelson gently inside the largest cell. She crouched, her fingers curled around the bars, anguish written across her face.

“Don’t worry,” she whispered. “We won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Nelson pressed his forehead against hers through the bars — a tender, devastating gesture.

Tom stood by, feeling an ache in his chest stronger than the bruise Mrs Barham had given him.

He heard the faint click of heels.

It was Jennifer Blakeston, who had of course followed the entire procession inside.

She stared at Nelson in the cell, then at Tom. “This is monstrous.”

“It is,” Tom agreed.

“You’re not going to let Bulmer do it.”

“No.”

Jennifer glanced at him, softening. “Good.”

Nelson made a soft sound and reached through the bars, hoping for another hug.

Even Jennifer melted.

Back in the CID Office

Tom sat at his desk, head in his hands, trying to muster a plan that would avoid losing his job, avoid Bulmer’s wrath, and avoid being responsible for the death of a traumatised, clever animal who only wanted raisins.

Wendy burst in.

“Tom,” she whispered urgently, “you need to speak to Max. NOW.”

Tom nodded. He reached for the phone, dialled the private Security Service exchange, and waited.

Knight answered almost immediately.

“Zanders. Report.”

“It’s... complicated, sir.”

“When is it not?” Knight said sharply.

“Shiplake has been Lady Wintered.”

“Good.”

“We’ve recovered Nelson. Healthy, well-fed, no sign of disease.”

“Excellent.”

“But Superintendent Bulmer is—”

“Ah,” Knight said grimly. “Bulmer.”

“Yes. He wants him destroyed.”

There was a long, frigid pause.

“Get Police Woman Scott on the line.”

Wendy blinked, then took the receiver.

Knight’s voice boomed faintly through the earpiece even from Tom’s side of the desk:

“POLICE WOMAN SCOTT! You must not allow that animal to come to harm.”

“Yes, sir!” Wendy said.

“Nelson requires a NATURAL diet — fruits, leaves, seeds, insects—”

“Insects?” Wendy squeaked.

“Yes! And the occasional lizard.”

“Oh. Not many of those in Chelsea.” Wendy thought out loud.

“And absolutely NO human food” insisted Knight. “He may give you a kiss in exchange for treats, but resist. Especially if you are attractive.”

Wendy flushed deeply. “Goodness. Well...”

Tom couldn’t resist: “She is very attractive.”

Wendy flapping a hand in his direction: “You, shut up!”

Knight continued: “Go to Harrods. Ask for Archibald in the pets department. Tell him it’s on my account.”

Wendy scribbled furiously. “Yes, sir.”

“Tom,” Knight said, back on the line, “Bulmer cannot have the monkey. Find a legal method to stop him.”

“A legal method?” Tom repeated.

“Legal *enough*,” Knight clarified.

“Max, he wants a destruction tender.”

Knight muttered something unprintable.

“Try Sterns,” he said finally. “Burnaby Street. Old Mr Stern, and the young one — Monty Easton. Good man. One arm, better than most vets with two. They know what to do.”

Tom inhaled sharply. “But sir — Bulmer wants full documentation.”

“Then,” Knight said with profound satisfaction, “Stern will give him documentation.”

He hung up.

The Tender Begins

Wendy returned from Nelson’s cell with moist eyes and a determined jaw.

“We’re not letting him die,” she said simply.

“No,” Tom agreed. “We’re not.”

They set up the destruction tender formally — partly because they had to, partly because they needed to ensure a loophole big enough to smuggle Nelson through a parade.

Two veterinary practices submitted bids:

1. **Casks & Sons**, Beauchamp Place. High-priced. Efficient.
2. **Stern’s Veterinary Practice**, Burnaby Street. Modest. Ethical. Functioning on pennies.

Wendy handled the paperwork.

Bulmer strutted into the office during the process, looking triumphant.

“Well, Zanders,” he crowed, “Casks has underbid Sterns. Just came in with a new quote.”

Tom’s eyebrows shot up. “A *new* quote?”

Bulmer smirked. “Yes. This young vet — Bellamy — clearly understands austerity.”

Tom exchanged a glance with Wendy.

Bellamy. That would be trouble.

Wendy whispered, “Tom, he wants to test a new euthanasia drug. This is his chance.”

Tom sighed. “Right.”

Tom Zanders, Student of Human Folly

Tom had long ago discovered that human beings were often undone by two things: vanity and greed. Bellamy appeared well-stocked in both.

Tom phoned Casks & Sons.

The senior partner, Mr Cask himself, answered with the severe politeness of a man whose moustache probably had rules.

“Casks & Sons.”

“Good afternoon, Sir. Inspector Thomas Zanders, Chelsea Police.”

“Yes, Inspector?”

“I’m calling about your tender.”

Mr Cask cleared his throat. “A routine matter, Inspector.”

“I understand your young Mr Bellamy submitted an extraordinarily low bid.”

Silence.

Tom waited.

“I... beg your pardon?” Mr Cask said stiffly.

“It appears he intends to carry out the job at a rate so low it would hardly cover your travel expenses.”

An icicle formed in Mr Cask’s tone. “He WHAT?”

“For only a few shillings, according to the paperwork.”

There was a sound like a man removing his glasses in order to rub his temples in fury.

“That boy,” Mr Cask hissed, “has lost his mind.”

“I quite understand, sir,” Tom said with a sympathy so gentle that even the telephone wires blushed. “It would reflect terribly on your practice to be seen accepting such an... exploitative fee.”

There was a long breath.

“Inspector Zanders,” Mr Cask said, “Casks & Sons hereby withdraws its tender. Effective immediately.”

“Thank you, sir. Most responsible.”

The line went dead.

Wendy clapped her hands in delight.

Bulmer, reading the revised tender list later that afternoon, frowned deeply.

“Sterns?” he muttered. “Well. Very well. Cheaper. The Yard will appreciate that.”

Tom kept a neutral face.

Wendy kept hers turned away so Bulmer would not see her smile.

The Plan

With Sterns now the official tender winner, the final step was simple:

Do not include the word *destruction* in the paperwork.

Wendy wrote:

“Remove the animal from the Metropolitan Borough of Chelsea.”

Not kill, not euthanize.

Remove.

A perfectly valid instruction.

A beautifully ambiguous one.

Bulmer signed it without seeing the trap.

Monty Easton Arrives

Monty arrived in a battered van that had once been green before the war bleached it into a respectable drab. He stepped out — young, strong, kind-eyed — with one sleeve neatly pinned where his left arm had once been.

“Inspector Zanders,” he said warmly. “Wendy. Heard all about your situation.”

“Nelson’s in the cells,” Wendy whispered.

Monty smiled. “Let’s have a look.”

Bulmer, eager to witness what he thought would be a swift execution, marched behind them with self-importance practically steaming from his ears.

When Nelson saw Monty, he perked up immediately. The macaque had lived among soldiers — he knew a man who had seen pain and survived it.

Monty knelt (awkwardly but capably), reached through the bars, and Nelson touched his hand with quiet trust.

“Well,” Monty murmured, “aren’t you a beauty.”

Bulmer huffed and thought “Enough sentiment! Do your job,” but decided to offer some public courtesy- “I’d be obliged if we could look forward to being a police station rather than a zoo Mr Easton.”

Monty stood. “Certainly, Superintendent. Wendy? The release order?”

She handed it over with perfect seriousness.

Bulmer snatched it, scanned for confirmation, and grunted. “Good. Proceed.”

Monty unlocked the cell. Nelson hopped eagerly onto his shoulder.

“That’s right,” Monty murmured. “Let’s get you home.”

Bulmer crossed his arms. “Be quick about it. I expect all paperwork back by tomorrow morning. Including the cremation certificate.”

Monty’s face remained perfectly calm. “Of course, Superintendent.”

As he carried Nelson out, Wendy reached for a line in irony that was dangerously close to sarcasm: “Whatever you do with him, I hope you’ll be kind and it will be quick.”

Tom shot her an admonishing glance. He knew it was wise never to underestimate Superintendent Bulmer’s nose for mischief.

Nonetheless he left, apparently satisfied and oblivious.

The moment he was out of earshot, Wendy whispered:

“He’ll be safe now.”

Tom nodded and whispered: “I hope so.”

Nelson would not be destroyed.

Nelson would be rescued.

Nelson would be *removed from the Borough of Chelsea* — exactly as instructed.

The Perfect Disappearance

Old Mr Stern arranged the transfer.

A trusted friend who managed a small private zoo near Windsor would take Nelson — under a forged set of papers claiming the macaque was a diplomatic gift from an overseas wildlife sanctuary in neutral Portugal.

A kindly Austrian refugee, working part-time at the crematorium and grateful to Stern for helping him escape the Nazis in 1939, forged a cremation certificate of exquisite authenticity.

Bulmer, seeing it the next morning, nodded gravely.

“Justice,” he declared, “has been done.”

Tom did not correct him.

Justice *had* been done — just not in the way Bulmer imagined.

Tom had always appreciated the importance of illusions.

A Child's Reunion

Later that week, Tom and Wendy arranged a quiet day trip.

The zoo was officially closed during wartime — but its staff had long grown accustomed to Stern's quiet rescues.

Caroline Bartlett walked between Tom and Wendy, her small hand tucked into theirs. She was pale with anticipation.

A keeper led them inside.

"Napoleon," he called, "visitors for you!"

Nelson — now renamed Napoleon for safety — bounded forward with a delighted chatter.

Caroline let out a soft gasp.

Then — for the first time in years — she spoke in a public situation.

"Hello, Nelson."

Her voice was small, but clear.

Wendy felt a tear running down her cheek.

Tom swallowed hard.

Nelson hugged Caroline tightly.

Tom watched, feeling something inside him settle — a deep, quiet rightness he hadn't felt in years.

War brought cruelty enough. Moments like this were rare.

Moments when kindness won.

Moments he could carry with him in the worst of times as gracious consolation.

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A Zoo for Nelson, A Future for Caroline

The journey back from Windsor took place under a pale winter sun...

The journey back from Windsor took place under a pale winter sun, the kind that never quite managed more than a distant glow before sliding off behind the rooftops of Chelsea. Tom, Wendy

and Caroline rode in the back of the small hired motorcar, the girl's hand still clenched around the tiny wooden toy the zookeeper had given her — a carved monkey, painted lovingly if somewhat wonkily.

She had not stopped looking at it since they left Nelson's enclosure.

Tom watched her from the corner of his eye. Even now, hours later, he could still hear the soft, miraculous sound she had made the moment she saw Nelson — that whispered, breath-light "Hello, Nelson." A sound like a flower opening, delicate and determined.

Wendy glanced at Tom, eyes shining with unspoken emotion.

"That," she whispered, "was the most beautiful thing I've seen in many a year."

Tom nodded. "Yes."

"And you did it," she said softly.

He shook his head. "She did it. And Nelson. And war. And kindness. Mostly kindness."

Wendy exhaled, settling back. "Still. You shepherded the pieces."

He didn't answer. Compliments unsettled him far more than criminals.

Back at the Bartletts

The Bartletts' front door creaked open, and Mary Bartlett hurried forward with arms outstretched.

"Oh, my darling girl!" she cried, enveloping Caroline in a protective hug. "Are you all right? Did you have a nice time? Did you see—"

"She saw him," Tom said with a warm smile. "And he saw her. All is well."

Caroline stepped back and nodded once — shyly, but decisively.

Roderick Bartlett's eyes shimmered. "Tom... Wendy... thank you."

"No thanks needed," Tom said.

But Mary insisted. "You brought her back. I hadn't heard her speak since Coventry."

"That wasn't us," Wendy corrected gently. "That was a friend."

Caroline tugged at her aunt's sleeve, then reached up to whisper something into her ear.

A soft, astonished gasp escaped Mary's lips. She pressed a trembling hand to her mouth, tears forming.

"She says," Mary whispered, "she'd... like to go again. To see Nelson."

Tom smiled. "We'll find a way."

Caroline looked at him then — properly looked — with a gaze that held a quiet, profound trust. It landed in his chest like a gift he didn't know how to receive.

The children in this ugly and violent world so needed that trust given back to them.

“Goodnight, sweet girl,” Wendy said, brushing Caroline’s hair gently.

Caroline waved goodbye — a small, triumphant gesture.

The door closed softly.

Tom let out a long breath.

Wendy and Tom looked at each other and smiled without saying another word as they set off slowly toward Lucan Place.

Chelsea Evening

Chelsea in wartime had its own kind of beauty — the quiet, lamplit streets; the blackouts softened by moonlight; the faint hum of the river in the distance. Night-time Chelsea felt like a theatre stage after curtain-fall: shadows mingling with memory, buildings whispering old lines to one another.

Tom and Wendy walked side by side, their footsteps soft on the pavement.

“You know,” Wendy said, “Bulmer will never understand any of this.”

“That’s all right,” Tom said. “Understanding is not his spiritual vocation. In a way that’s why he’s good at this job.”

Wendy laughed. “He’ll never believe a monkey could do all that.”

“No,” Tom agreed, “but Nelson is no ordinary monkey.”

They passed Chelsea Library, its lights dimmed; Mildred Botting inside, no doubt cataloguing something with the fierce precision of a woman secretly proud of her own quiet rebellion. They passed the closed sweet shop, the street sweepers, the ration queues thinning at this hour.

Tom’s cheek still throbbed, magnificently bruised, but he found he didn’t mind.

“One thing I’ve learned,” Wendy said thoughtfully, “is how the power of kindness multiplies. Even in dark times. Perhaps especially in dark times.”

Tom smiled at that. “Yes. I hope so.”

“And you,” she added, “seem to attract trouble, chaos, and impossible moral dilemmas like a magnet.”

“Well,” Tom said mildly, “someone has to.”

“Most people choose the easier path,” she said. “You don’t.”

Tom hesitated. “Sometimes I feel like I’m just... improvising.”

“‘I’m my worst enemy’ is what people say,” he continued.

“That’s what all good men do,” Wendy replied gently. “They improvise toward the light.”

He looked at her — really looked — and saw in her eyes a mixture of warmth, fatigue, fondness, and something more fragile.

But Wendy was Wendy. Steady, self-assured, and gently refusing anything that strayed beyond friendship. He respected her fiercely for it.

The moment passed like a lantern blown out tenderly.

Back at Chelsea Police Station

Bulmer was not in. This, Tom felt, was divine mercy.

Jennifer Blakeston, however, was waiting near the steps, her notebook in hand, coat wrapped tight against the wind.

“Well?” she asked.

“Well what?” Tom replied.

“Where’s the monkey?”

Tom smiled. “Removed from the Borough of Chelsea.”

Jennifer narrowed her eyes. “Removed... as in...?”

“As in he’s safe,” Wendy supplied.

Jennifer relaxed but shook her head in disbelief. “Inspector Zanders... you do realise I can’t write ANY of this?”

Tom shrugged. “Probably for the best.”

“Though,” Jennifer added slyly, “the bicycle explanation holds up surprisingly well.”

Wendy snorted.

Jennifer closed her notebook with a snap. “I’m glad you saved him,” she said quietly. “This world is cruel enough.”

Tom nodded. “It is.”

Jennifer stepped closer, eyes flicking momentarily to his bruise. “You, however,” she murmured, “should stick to walking.”

He gave a wry smile. “Maybe so.”

She touched his arm lightly — a gesture of friendship, nothing more — then disappeared into the night with her coat billowing.

Wendy sighed. “She’s impossible to read.”

“No,” Tom said softly, “she’s quite easy. She’s made of words. The ones she uses, and the ones she withholds.”

Wendy gave him a knowing glance. “You really should write.”

Tom didn’t answer.

A Quiet Ending

On his way back to his cramped studio flat at Wray House, overflowing with hundreds perhaps thousands of books, Tom paused at the corner of Elystan Street. The blackout curtains hung stiff in windows. A faint breeze rattled a loose shutter. Somewhere in the night, a cat startled a pigeon, causing both to complain dramatically.

Chelsea was quiet now, but also grieving. Behind those closed doors and blacked out windows, there were mothers, fathers, widows, and children; even unborn children who had lost loved ones.

In the month of January 1944, the telegrams had been delivered to Chelsea homes regretting the deaths while on active service of Warrant Officer Second Class Ernest Israel Glass of the Canadian Air Force, Commander Stewart Magee Walker of the Royal Navy, Private Jack William Lipscomb of The Queen’s Royal West Surrey Regiment, and Major John Everard Tyldesley Jones of the Scots Guards. He died at Anzio and his headstone inscription would read: “In short measures life may perfect be.”

Chelsea was gently and mournfully holding its breath until morning.

Tom felt the tiredness of the day finally settle into his bones. But beneath the exhaustion was something rare:

A sense that, just for once, and in one short measure the world had tilted toward a small gesture of mercy.

He tilted his head back and looked at the thin ribbon of stars peeking through the cloud gaps.

He whispered, “Goodnight, Nelson.”

And then he walked on.

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Epilogue: What Zanders Would Only Learn Years Later

Years later — long after the war, long after Bulmer retired in a blaze of self-righteous glory, long after Chelsea changed its face like an actress in new makeup — Tom Zanders would learn something that warmed him in a way very few memories ever had.

In **1960**, a young woman joined the veterinary practice at the World’s End.

Bright-eyed.

Quietly confident.

Kind to the bone.

Her name was **Caroline Bartlett**.

She had trained as a veterinary surgeon — one of the new wave of women entering the profession after the war — and had chosen to join Monty Easton in his humble, beloved practice.

Monty would later tell Tom:

“She’s brilliant. Has a way with frightened animals. A gentle patience. They trust her. Completely.”

In the sixties in that part of Chelsea, celebrities, artists, and pop stars loved to keep exotic animals; yes even live apes and lions.

There is no doubt Caroline Bartlett was the best kind of vet to look after them.

Tom had smiled — older now, wiser, but still capable of deep quiet joy.

“That,” he said simply, “doesn’t surprise me at all.”

And whenever she saw a Barbary macaque at London Zoo — or even heard of one — she always paused for a moment, eyes softening.

Some friendships, even secret ones forged in wartime basements, leave imprints that never fade.

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Synopsis/Blurb

THE BARBARY BURGLAR OF THE KING’S ROAD

A Zanders Investigates Story

Chelsea, January 1944.

Detective Inspector Tom Zanders is overworked, underpaid, and nursing both a bruised cheekbone and a bruised faith in the justice system. But when an eccentric shopkeeper opens fire on a mysterious rooftop burglar, Zanders is drawn into one of the most bizarre cases of the war years.

A wave of daring thefts sweeps the King’s Road: furs, jewellery, antique swords, gobstoppers — even a stuffed lion’s head adorned with a tiara. Witnesses describe the culprit as a foreigner, a midget, an acrobat... or possibly a gorilla.

When Zanders finds a traumatised naval diver and a missing Barbary macaque from Gibraltar, he begins to suspect the truth may be stranger — and far kinder — than anyone imagines.

With the help of policewoman Wendy Scott, intrepid reporter Jennifer Blakeston, the redoubtable Botting sisters, and a silent young evacuee who has befriended the thief, Zanders must protect both justice and compassion against the full force of Superintendent Bulmer’s wrath.

Warm, witty, humane, and rich in period detail, *The Barbary Burglar of the King's Road* introduces a deeply compassionate detective whose greatest weapon is understanding. A feel-good mystery of wartime Chelsea — where humanity, eccentricity, and kindness triumph against the odds.

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Kultura Press

