

One Night in London

Ian Whates

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A complete story taken from the collection...

The Gift of Joy
by Ian Whates



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One Night in London

Mayfair was the last place Kyle wanted to be.

Traditional pubs sandwiched between terraces of takeaways, noodle bars and plate-glassed storefronts – multi-cultural grocery shops and off-licences predominant. This part of London never slept and most of the stores were still open. All around was commotion and garish light.

As he moved further into the district the eateries and shops that granted the place a semi-respectable veneer peeled away, revealing its corrupt heart, like some faded raincoat held open by a sleazy flasher. What lay beneath was tired, naked, and unwholesome.

The days of luxury apartments, expensive hotels and exclusive restaurants were long gone. Mayfair was now clubland – every sort of club for every taste and depth of pocket. He walked unheeding through one holographic obscenity after another and the bright lights became increasingly in-your-face, as the clubs vied for prominence. All they achieved was a brash uniformity.

Doubtless the effect was intended to be welcoming, alluring even, but in contrast Kyle found it sinister and off-putting. To him these places all shouted the same thing: *We're only in it for the money. Come on in and be fleeced.*

Not that he was in any real position to pass judgement, since just such a club was his destination. The street noise vanished as soon as he stepped inside, masked by the pulsing throb of music from within. He paid entrance to the skinny, listless girl behind a recessed desk and headed down the stairs. The music grew louder with every step, reaching a crescendo as he passed through the twin doors at the bottom. The accompanying visual display was overwhelming, if entirely predictable. Swirling lights and rippling lasers accompanied the holographic dancers who took centre stage – scantily clad nymphets and Adonis-like men who oozed allure and sexuality, moving with precision to the mesmeric beat of the music.

A choice of brightly coloured pills was presented to him by the equally bright smile and cleavage fronting a young brunette. Designer narcotics: mass-produced and cheaply cut – not in any dangerous sense, just watered-down. Enough kick to give you a buzz

and leave you wanting more.

Kyle shook his head and walked past.

It was early. The club was doing business but was far from packed. He brushed past a trio of lads intent on leering at the holographic dancers with lecherous glee.

Along the wall to his left hung the shimmering veils of privacy booths, which were always much the same: deeply upholstered seating on three sides, built around a central table. The fourth side, facing towards the dance floor, was fronted by a null-curtain, offering complete privacy to those within. From the occupants' perspective, both vision and sound from outside were reduced without being totally obscured.

A green light on the wall beside the first booth blinked on and off – his invitation to enter. There was no noticeable sensation as he stepped through the veil although there was transition, in as much as the noise level dropped dramatically. The thud of music became muted and flat.

The first sight that greeted him was a pair of raised buttocks, separated by a thin red line which began to develop into a thong before disappearing beneath a dishevelled black dress. The thong did very little to obscure what it covered, but doubtless it was never intended to.

Having taken in this most immediate demand on his attention, he now registered that the booth held three occupants. One lay slumped across a section of the crescent seat and had clearly passed out, presumably as a result of drink, drugs, or a combination of both. She was a young oriental, wearing a body-hugging dress of iridescent blue. Even in her current state of collapse, she was strikingly beautiful.

Then there was Hawkes, sitting in the opposite wing of the booth, his shirt part-open. He raised his eyebrows in greeting as Kyle slipped onto the seat beside the comatose oriental.

The third occupant sported both a skimpy black dress and the shapely buttocks that had first caught his eye. Apart from the fact that she was blonde, there was little else he could tell about her at that moment, since her head was buried in Hawkes' lap.

“Won't be long,” Hawkes mouthed to him, before closing his eyes.

Kyle turned his attention elsewhere, looking out toward the dance floor. The privacy booths still fascinated him; self-contained micro-worlds associated with but not fully a part of the club itself. Within their veiled areas you could indulge in an orgy, hold a business meeting, commit adultery or even carry out a murder, all in a public place while those around you were oblivious. In theory, at least.

He caught movement in the corner of his eye, glancing back across as Hawkes raised a hand, pressing against the back of the girl's head.

It was not often Kyle had an opportunity to observe a man's face during orgasm. On balance, it was an experience he decided he could live without.

Hawkes slumped and his grip on the girl's hair relaxed, allowing her to sit up. Very glamorous, Kyle noted without surprise. She was older than the oriental but still youthful. The black dress now fell to perfectly cover yet simultaneously display a voluptuous figure. The girl favoured Kyle with a smile, full of warmth and suggestion.

She reached to pick a napkin from the table and dab at her chin. The red lipstick never smeared and still looked freshly applied, even when it had every excuse to be completely wiped away. The wonders of modern cosmetics.

“Want some?” Hawkes asked, glancing towards the girl.

Kyle shook his head. “No thanks.” Any fleeting temptation withered before it was born – not because he had no idea where she might have been, but rather because he knew exactly where she'd been.

Hawkes signalled the girl to leave. “And take her with you.” He indicated the still-motionless oriental.

The girl rose gracefully and came across to Kyle's side of the table. Before he gathered enough wit to fully move aside she was reaching across him in an effort to rouse her friend. Without consciously deciding to, he found himself helping the blonde with the oriental girl, who was still barely responding.

He actually felt a thrill as he first touched her, wrapping a hand around her limp arm, an effect probably boosted by pheromones in the girls' perfume. He was acutely aware of the softness of her skin, the tautness of her muscles, and the sensuous feel of the fabric that

formed her designer dress.

“Is she going to be okay?” he asked.

“She'll live,” the blonde assured him, her voice higher, younger than expected. As if on cue, the oriental moaned, her eyes struggling to flicker open. The blonde half-led, half-carried her from the booth.

“You liked the Chink, didn't you?”

Kyle was momentarily startled by the use of the archaic word 'Chink', especially in this era of supposed Anglo-Sino détente.

“Can't say I blame you. She's new here, caught my eye straight away. Unfortunately she passed out before she could catch hold of the rest of me.” Hawkes laughed. The fact that he laughed alone did not seem to deter him in the least. “Ah well, there's always next time.”

A waiter appeared, bearing a fresh bottle of champagne. He hovered discretely outside the veil until given the green light to enter.

“Decent vintage,” Hawkes commented. “It costs a fortune here, of course, but the house champagne's crap.

“Now, to business,” he continued once the waiter had gone and the Champagne was settling in twin flutes. “And don't worry, I swept the place as soon as I arrived. No one's listening.”

Since Kyle had no idea what was about to be discussed, he couldn't give a monkey's whether anyone listened in or not. The fact that the other man thought such precautions necessary spoke volumes.

He picked up the chilled glass and sampled the golden liquid. Hawkes had been right: it was good.

Having drained half his flute in a single gulp, Hawkes produced a photo and handed it across. “I need you to deliver a package for me, to this man.” The picture was a close-up of a Chinese man, early fifties. Not someone Kyle recognised.

“Is this recent?”

“Of course.”

He studied the picture for brief seconds, committing the image to memory, and then handed it back.

“Sure you won't need this?” the other joked. “They don't all look the same to you?”

“If I needed it, you wouldn't be hiring me.”

“True.” Hawkes slid a folded sheet of paper across the table.
“Delivery is to his home.”

Kyle studied the hand-written name and address. Hampstead – an area of London that still boasted some greenery thanks to the sacrosanct status of the Heath. Not just Hampstead, but The Bishop's Avenue, no less. The wealth and power embodied by the residents of that particular street was the primary reason why Hampstead Heath had remained inviolate to planners and developers alike.

Hawkes took back the paper and placed both it and the photograph carefully into a slim metal wallet. “Acid spray,” he explained. “Burns off the ink and photographic image then takes care of the paper itself. The best forensics in the world couldn't reconstruct anything after this.” He beamed a conspiratorial smile and topped up their glasses.

Kyle was familiar with Hawkes' penchant for melodrama, but this seemed over-the-top even by his standards.

He sipped at his glass before asking, “When?”

“Tonight. Straight from here.”

No hurry then. “Am I expected?”

“You will be.”

Kyle stared at Hawkes for long seconds, liking the sound of this less and less. “What else?”

The other smiled. “I don't pay you to be curious.”

“But it does pay me to check exactly what I'm getting involved in.”

“It's a simple courier job, that's all.”

“Then why do you need me? Why not just give it to a kid on a bike?”

“Because certain parties would prefer the delivery isn't made and I know I can count on you to ensure that it is.”

Kyle digested that. His anticipated fee was rising by the second. “So I might meet with some opposition.”

“Oh, I doubt it.”

So it was a possibility. “Are we talking professionals, or just amateurs?”

Hawkes said nothing, but instead handed across a credit chip, which Kyle slotted into his wallet. The amount that came up on the display was sufficiently impressive to raise his eyebrows. For this

amount he would not have argued, no matter what the opposition. “There’s a locked section on the chip,” he observed.

Hawkes smiled, “Carrying the same amount again. When I have confirmation that the package has been successfully delivered, I’ll give you the release code.”

One very serious package, it would seem.

It proved to be a sealed envelope. Really sealed, with microchipped tamper-proof tags laid carefully along each join; none of which gave any clue as to what it might contain. Kyle slipped it away with his wallet.

“I’ll be in touch.”

He rose and left. The club was busier. He glanced towards the crowded bar on his way to the exit, stopping as one face in particular registered. He looked again, without success. Not that it mattered; it was unlikely to have been the same girl, at least not judging by the state she had been in when he last saw her. He was seeing things. She must have made one hell of an impression.

He dismissed the thought and headed for the stairs, triggering dormant systems on the way. His augmentations were extensive. Not just muscles, nerves and tendons, but organs, blood vessels, limb joints – all had been modified. The human body is a balanced system. In order to obtain higher performance from some elements of that system, you have to enhance the capabilities of every other part, or the whole thing will be out of kilter and fail. All the necessary upgrades had been taken care of free of charge, courtesy of the military.

Ideally the authorities would have loved to remove every trace of the costly hardware when he resigned his commission. In practice, the alterations were too extensive. Removal would have killed him. So instead inhibitors were put in place – designed to block access to the upgrades and so prevent a veteran from becoming a ‘menace to society’. The army would have you believe that such inhibitors were state-of-the-art and impossible to circumvent.

Not for the first time, the army was full of shit.

Removing the blocks proved expensive, painful, and not without associated risk, but far from impossible.

Kyle was under no illusions. He knew just how rare his level of body-tech was and how valuable an asset that made him. His fees

reflected the fact.

Due to the inherent energy demands, he tended to leave the systems dormant until required. But Hawkes' paranoia had disturbed him and he decided to run with everything active until the package was safely delivered, just in case.

He reached the top of the stairs. Outside, Mayfair had come fully awake. The air itself danced with impermanent neon graffiti. In the split-second it took his systems to compensate, he was invited to try:

Black Diamond for the trip of a life-time — feel your veins burn and your mind soar...

The Chiang twins. Each more beautiful than the other, both expertly trained in the ancient erotic arts of the orient. They will take you to heaven and back...

The Virtual National – the race of the century! The 40 best horses of the last 100 years pitted against each other over the legendary Aintree fences. You can be there...

The best screw of your life. Hannah the stunning hermaphrodite – have her do you everything you want to do to her...

His systems came to terms with the visual assault and reduced it to mere background, easily ignored.

If he thought the streets had been crowded before, now they were even more so, as locals and tourists alike poured into Mayfair to sample the thrills on offer in London's hottest district.

He passed VR games stations, slot-machine arcades and the doorways to members-only casinos, as well as strip-joints, sex clubs, designer drug bars, virtual booth parlours where you could gamble on mud wrestling and dog racing or take part in sexual acts that would have you thrown in prison with the key flushed away, were they anything other than virtual. *“If it's not real, it can't be illegal.”* That argument had been won in a high profile court case a long time ago. It made no difference how real to every sense the experience might seem.

Kyle hated it. A vast, gaudy money-making machine designed to strip the gullible of their credit by pandering to their basest desires.

Maybe he was just getting old.

As soon as possible, he cut away from the busiest streets by ducking down alleyways and side roads. Even here, every other doorway seemed to lead to a narcotics bar, a model's flat or some

other questionable delight.

He finally escaped Mayfair and was able to make good progress. After a slight bottleneck caused by Regent Street and the retro-chic of Carnaby Street, he was skirting the slums of Soho to his right. Only at that point did it occur to him that he was being followed.

Whoever they were, they were good. For him not to have spotted them until now, they were very good.

Rotating tail, he realised, as one pursuer faded from the scene and another took up the pursuit – a man who had been casually loitering outside a bar. That and the crowds explained how they had managed to stay anonymous for so long. It also suggested they had no shortage of manpower.

Would they try to take him, or were they simply on a watching brief? He was nearly at the car. Did they know that? If they intended to jump him, it was now or never.

Now, it would seem.

A large, hulking figure stepped out and blocked his way, not walking towards him, just waiting. Until this point those tailing him had gone to great lengths to remain unnoticed. Now they closed in behind him; two of them.

Two behind and one in front, doubtless intending to converge together... Not a chance. He sprinted forward, straight towards the new arrival.

He was a big man. Put him in a black suit and any Mayfair club would have been proud to have him standing at their door. Nor was he as ponderous as his size might suggest. Anyone with slower reflexes would have been flattened by the first punch. As it was, Kyle leant away from the ham-sized fist. At the same time he struck a heavy blow of his own, straight into the man-mountain's kidneys. His other hand was already in motion, to chop at the neck. It proved a less effective strike, both because his target was already convulsing forward and because bunched neck and shoulder muscles absorbed much of the impact. Still, the combination had the other almost doubled over. Kyle connected with a swinging upper-cut to the chin. Crude, but effective: snapping the head back despite the thick muscles. The big man toppled. Just in time, as his two associates closed in.

They approached warily, the stance of one suggesting martial

arts training, while the other moved with a fluid gait that spoke of augmentation, a body-system similar to his own. They tried to circle him, one to either side, but he stepped carefully backward, keeping them both in sight. Realising this, they abandoned the attempt and attacked anyway, from as wide an angle as possible. It was timed to be simultaneous, but Kyle stepped towards the Kung-fu kid, enabling him to block his strike a fraction ahead of the other.

Yes, martial arts to one side, body-system to the other, but it was comparatively crude, not in the same league as his own. The Kung-fu kid danced back out of reach. His friend was a fraction slower to respond. Kyle pressed his attack in that direction, unleashing a sequence of blows far too quick for the lower grade system to react to. One landed heavily on the shoulder, numbing if not breaking it.

The Kung-fu kid was back, aiming a kick in text-book style, body leant back as counter-balance. Again, Kyle was simply too fast. He dropped to one knee, allowing the foot to sail over his shoulder, and launched a counter-blow. Just as the kick reached full extension, his fist slammed into the lad's genitals. With a sound that struggled between a scream and a gasp, the kid collapsed, writhing.

To his credit, the remaining attacker still attempted to fight, even with one arm useless, but it was no contest. Within seconds he rested against the alley wall, unconscious. The Kung-fu kid was too busy trying to crawl away while maintaining a semi-foetal position to offer any further threat.

At that point, Kyle's systems went crazy in a manner all-too-familiar. Someone had just locked onto him with laser targeting. He whipped around. Two figures at the mouth of the alley. One slender – a girl – but it was the other who held the rifle.

There was a shouted “No!” and the girl whipped out an arm, striking the gun so that the bullet went high and wide, ricocheting off the wall somewhere above him. Kyle was already moving. As the gun swung back he was on them, operating in full adrenalin-pumped combat mode. He lashed out with trained precision, too swift for his own mind to consciously follow, landing a series of blows on both the gunman and the girl.

Only when both were down did he relent. Only then did he slowly regain normal awareness and fully register what was going on. Only then was he able to acknowledge that the girl who lay

unconscious at his feet was the Chinese girl from the privacy booth at the club.

On impulse he scooped her up. A few people had started to gather, drawn by the sounds of violence and now gawping at its aftermath. Not yet a crowd, but the beginnings of one. He ignored them and strode swiftly past, turning a deaf ear to their whispered mutterings. A dozen strides and he was into Soho square, ringed as ever by its defensive wall of slant-parked cars, one of them his own.

He poured the girl into the back seat, leapt in, and drove off. Not Hampstead, not yet. Home.

He must have hit her hard at some point, because she was still out when he put her down on the settee. By the time the smelling salts had been located there were signs of returning life, but he broke a capsule under her nose anyway.

Eyelids shot wide and a hand came up to try and push away the offending source of ammonia. "God, I hate that stuff." Her cut-crystal accent was pure southern England, the sort only acquired at the best, the most expensive, of schools. "You don't hold back when you hit someone, do you?"

"Not when they're trying to shoot me, no."

"Me? I was the one who saved you."

"Why?"

"Not sure. Seemed like a good idea at the time. Shit!" The last was accompanied by a hand lifting towards her cheek. The pain had started to kick in. "Do you have any ice?"

He held out a bag of frozen peas, wrapped in a tea towel, both of which had been grabbed while he searched for the smelling salts.

She glanced inside the towel before lifting it gingerly to the side of her face. "Peas?"

"Ancient British tradition."

"Shit, shit, shit... I think you've broken my jaw."

"Couldn't have," he assured her. "You wouldn't be able to swear so much. Now, let's begin with you telling me who you are, shall we?"

After a slight pause, "Helen."

"That's a start, I suppose. Helen what?"

"Just Helen."

Okay, he could always come back to that later.

Before he was able to continue, she asked, “Ex-military?”

He nodded.

“Special forces, I presume.” He made no response. “Thought so. How recent is your bio-tech?” Which was something he had no intention of commenting on. “Not that it really matters; it's obviously pretty up-to-date. We've got nothing to match military-tech like that, few people would have. Do you have any idea how unusual that makes you, how valuable?”

Not liking the way she had seized the initiative, Kyle ploughed on with a question of his own: “Why did you jump me?”

“For the package, of course, the one that Hawkes gave you.”

Of course, but it was nice to have it confirmed.

“You had the booth bugged,” he suddenly realised. She smiled. “Hawkes assured me the place was clean, so you must have planted and activated the bug after he'd done his sweep.”

Her smile broadened, “Brains *and* brawn.”

Her unconsciousness had obviously been feigned in the hope that Hawkes would discount her, but she had the bug there as insurance in case he threw her out anyway.

She seemed to guess the train of his thoughts. “Thanks for being so gentle with me, by the way.” Her words and coy half-smile brought back the memory of the thrill experienced as he had first touched her. Even now, despite the angry bruise that was starting to show on her cheek, she was disconcertingly beautiful.

He determined not to be distracted. “The fact that someone's done their homework on Hawkes well enough to plant you at that particular club speaks of quite an organisation. I repeat my first question: who the hell are you?”

She looked at him, as if searching his face for something, “You really have no idea what you're carrying, do you?”

“No. Not my business.” Since she had the booth bugged, she must have been confident of that answer in any case.

She took a deep breath. “Where do you stand on the government cozying up to the Chinese?”

Politics? Was Hawkes getting involved in politics? Surely the man had more sense than that.

In an age that had seen a growing rift develop between the USA and continental Europe, the UK's attempts to keep a foot in both

camps had misfired badly, leaving her trusted by neither.

Conveniently, this all coincided with China's true emergence on the world stage.

China had been quietly going through its own upheavals, drifting away from communism and doing much to address human rights issues, events that had gone all but unnoticed in the prevailing turmoil and anxiety of world politics. The UK needed a strong ally, while China needed the international knowledge, connections and experience that Britain could provide. Common links through Hong Kong and Singapore were emphasised and suddenly Britain developed a growing political warmth towards the cleaner, more palatable China.

Not everyone was happy with the situation, including Kyle himself to a certain extent. Nothing against the Chinese as such, but he simply couldn't see such an unlikely alliance working in the long term. More than a few people were concerned that China might end up swallowing Britain whole.

"You'll know that not everyone is convinced by the current alliance," Helen continued. "What you may not know is that even people within the government are having second thoughts about the direction we're headed in.

"There have been negotiations, very sensitive and very hush-hush, intended to build bridges with both the EU and the USA. Of course, publicly we're still committed to a program that ties us ever closer to China, but behind the scenes the groundwork's being laid for a move back towards more traditional alliances."

He felt increasingly uncomfortable, wondering again exactly who he the girl represented; was she part of a radical action group as implied, or something more official?

"And Hawkes is involved in all of this?"

"Somewhere along the line papers have come into his possession." Papers, he noted, it was always paper. Ironic that in such a hi-tech age, all the really sensitive stuff was still being committed to paper, because it was so readily destroyed and left the least traceable trail.

Helen continued. "We understand they contain details of meetings, transcripts of conversations, possibly even photographs, we're not sure. Enough to sabotage the whole process at this early

stage, in any case.”

“And you think Hawkes is selling all this to the Chinese?” He would of course, were he ever to obtain such high-level and sensitive intelligence.

“Yes. If you're taking it to the address in Hampstead we think you are the information will be in Beijing-King by the morning. That will give them enough ammunition to quash the negotiations and bind us even more tightly to the Chinese cause.”

So they knew enough to know his destination, as well.

Did he believe her? It certainly explained his unprecedented fee. Of course, Hawkes would never involve himself directly in such a situation; no, he would employ a go-between, a mule. Someone like him. “You keep referring to 'we',” he said. “Who exactly is this 'we'?”

“We're a group of committed patriots,” she said cautiously, “working in the interests of the British people.”

He shook his head, still uncertain what to believe. A smile played at the corners of his mouth.

“You find this amusing?” she nettled.

“No, it's just that...” What was it exactly: the fact that she looked so obviously Chinese and he had always believed the Chinese to be loyal to their own culture? Or was it the fact that she seemed so young?

“You're wondering what a nice Chinese girl is doing mixed up in all this and why I'm so concerned about Britain,” she said, raising her voice as she second-guessed with commendable accuracy. “I was born in Britain. I was educated in Britain. I've never even *been* to China. I am *British*.” The last was virtually shouted.

“Okay, I'm convinced.” He held up his hands, realising he'd hit a nerve. So much for judging by appearances.

“I'm not just some wet-behind-the-ears half-wit rebelling against a privileged up-bringing. I went into this with my eyes open. I know exactly what I'm doing.”

“If you say so.”

“Fuck you!”

He couldn't help it, he grinned.

Instead of the anticipated outburst of rage, her anger seemed to melt away and she responded with a reluctant smile of her own.

“That wasn't a statement of intent.”

“Pity.”

“Look,” she implored, the smile vanishing but her voice now softer, “can't you see how important it is that the package never arrives?”

“I've been paid to ensure that it does.”

“And you still intend to deliver it, even knowing what it contains?”

He hesitated. The truth was that if the package were all that she claimed, he *would* prefer it never arrived. “I'll need some more persuading, if you expect me to renege on a commission.”

“Then we'll have to see what I can do.” With a smile, she rose to her feet.

Only a few steps separated them, but she managed to turn those steps into a parade as she flowed towards him. It would have been impossible to look anywhere else.

“Are you still wearing that scent from the club?” a small corner of him wondered, surprised by the intensity of his reaction.

“Does it matter?”

No, it did not.

Her lips were soft, cool. He was conscious of not hurting her, of the bruise to her face, but such concerns almost instantly melted away. His hand caressed her slender back as they kissed, moving up to stroke her neck, all the while aware of the gentle pressure where her breasts pressed against him. They came up for air, her smile reflecting a combination of triumph and invitation.

They kissed again, his fingertips tracing the detail of her neck, her chin. This time, as they separated, he wondered if his own smile mirrored regret. “I'm sorry,” he assured her, pressing the ampoule he had palmed to her throat.

At the base of the neck, the carotid artery is deeply buried and protected, but as it travels up the throat it ventures closer to the surface and becomes more accessible. The ampoule released a fine spray of chemicals which shot through the skin and into the carotid, to be delivered directly to the brain.

Her beautiful face just had time to register puzzlement before it slackened into unconsciousness. He caught her as she wilted and carried her through into the bedroom, to be placed tenderly on the

bed. She would be unconscious for several hours, more than enough time for him to drive to Hampstead and back.

As he drove, he took the opportunity to reflect on things. What it boiled down to was that he only had her word for any of this. Beautiful, charming and bewitching though she was, he knew nothing about her except what she had volunteered, which might or might not be true. Everything she had said could be complete bullshit; probably was. Of course, he could settle matters by opening the envelope and seeing what it contained, but that in itself would involve making the choice, since he hardly dared deliver a package that had been tampered with.

No, the only decision facing him was whether he trusted her word enough to abort the delivery. Logically, he had no solid reason to... which did not prevent him from being tempted.

However, at the end of the day, he simply could not imagine Hawkes being involved in anything so crucial. Hawkes, with the fate of nations in his hands? No, the man was strictly small time, whatever pretensions he might nurture.

Kyle only hoped he could make Helen understand his point of view when he returned. Unlikely, but a man had a right to dream.

The high iron gates fronting the Hampstead house opened automatically once he had identified himself. Slick-haired, shades-toting security opened the imposing front doors. He was immediately confronted by a neat, short man, fifty or so, immaculately clad in suit and tie even at this hour. He recognised the face from the photo Hawkes had shown him.

“You're late.”

“There were complications,” Kyle explained, immediately bristling at the man's air of assumed authority. He reached into his pocket and drew out an envelope. In the act of passing it across, he froze.

“Is there a problem?”

“Yes.” His voice turned leaden by realisation. “This is not the envelope I was given to deliver.”

Similar, so similar that the bug placed in the privacy booth must have provided visual as well as audio, but not the same.

The kiss. What had her hands been doing while he concentrated on exploring her throat and tracing the artery? Clearly the lady had

hidden talents, and he had grossly underestimated her.

Extricating himself from the house on The Bishop's Avenue without resorting to violence proved as difficult as expected, but eventually he succeeded. The hardest part was persuading them to let him leave unaccompanied, but he managed that as well – largely by assuring them that he knew where the envelope was and could return with it, if they let him go quickly and alone.

All of which proved to be overly optimistic.

She was gone, of course.

The bed's only occupant was a torn, empty envelope – the original given to him by Hawkes. A brief message was scrawled across it. Three words followed by a kiss.

He forgot about the envelope for a moment and activated the computer. When first moving in here he had routinely hacked into the building's security systems. He now used that access to scan the security tapes.

There she was, leaving by the front door, timed at less than ten minutes after his own departure. So much for 'unconscious for hours'. No apparent accomplices, she was alone, so her body must have been primed with a cocktail of counter-drugs. Over two hours. No chance of finding her now.

He turned from the computer and wondered who to call first. Hawkes. Would the man want his money back – the half that had already been paid via the open part of the credit chip? Probably not, but Kyle would return it anyway. Maybe at some point in the future Hawkes would trust him enough to put some work his way again... Maybe.

So, had the girl spoken the truth about what the envelope contained? World events would likely provide the only clue.

He picked up the envelope, rereading its brief message. What did those three words and the kiss mean to her as she wrote them? Were they intended as a threat, a promise, or were they just flippant farewell?

Be seeing you x

He knew exactly what they meant to him. Prophecy.

About this Story

I went to school in central London and have been visiting the place throughout my life. As a result, I've seen it in all manner of moods, seasons and circumstance. This probably explains why London features in a number of my stories.

Various snippets and factors went into this one, including a recent lunchtime visit to the wonderfully indulgent *Le Gavroche* restaurant in Mayfair, memories of an intimidating walk through Soho during a time when sex clubs were deploying pavement hawkers to entice passers-by into their parlours, marvelling at the houses along 'The Bishops Avenue', Hampstead, while en-route to the Kenwood music festival, the prevailing political climate in the wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq – the growing strain the invasion was putting on US and British relations with the rest of Europe – not to mention the rise in prominence of China as an international presence... and, of course, the desire to write a story featuring an explicit sex scene for a change.

About Ian Whates

Ian Whates lives in a comfortable home down a quiet cul-de-sac in an idyllic Cambridgeshire village, which he shares with his partner Helen and their pets. Ian's love of science fiction began while still at school, manifesting when he produced an SF murder mystery as homework after being set the essay title “The Language of Shakespeare”, much to the bemusement of his English teacher. Ian also represented his school at various sports, including football, squash, and table tennis, whilst swimming saw him perform for both school and the county of Hertfordshire! Such athletic feats are now ancient history. These days he exercises only his mind and his imagination (and, occasionally, a cocker spaniel called Honey).

In 2006 Ian launched independent publisher NewCon Press, quite by accident (buy him a pint sometime and he'll tell you about it). That same year he also resumed submitting short stories, and has now seen some 40 appear in different venues. He is currently the chairman of the British Science Fiction Association and co-organiser of the Newcon conventions in Northampton.

Ian also likes to write books, and has two novel sequences ongoing, the 'Noise' books (space opera) via Solaris, and the 'City of 100 Rows' series (urban fantasy with steampunk and SF overtones) through Angry Robot. Anxious not to have too much spare time on his hands, Ian started writing a new series of books, provisionally titled 'Drake's Dark Destiny', towards the end of 2010... So watch this space!

The Gift of Joy

One Night in London is taken from the collection The Gift of Joy.

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