

Silent Witness

By Barbara Brown

There was a ghost of a smile on Sam's face, it was a smile without mirth beneath eyes cold and grey as a granite tombstone. He was nervous and it showed. He flexed his fingers stretching them inside his pockets. The soles of his shoes felt frozen to the ground and he stamped his feet lifting first one then the other flinching as the ice cracked underfoot. It was bitterly cold and he was finding it difficult to concentrate: he was waiting for the sound of an engine in the distance, a car coming up from the valley.

This was his last mission. Tomorrow would be Pay Day; the golden handshake. His mouth stretched in a humourless rictus as his fingers curved round the metal in his pocket his nails tracing the outline of a gun against his warm thigh. He would keep the gun he thought although his instinct told him to "get rid". Drop it in the river with the others where the tide and its flotsam would cover all evidence of Sam and his dirty little secrets. But this gun, this little black beauty was his friend. Sam's little helper and it had never let him down.

It was past midnight and the moon hung in the sky like a child's yellow balloon. She was late and he was numb with cold. He pulled his cap down over his forehead and his scarf up to his nose. This mission was definitely the last he thought as he eased his shoulders against the trunk of a sturdy tree. The leaves were long gone, there was nothing to shelter him and he felt chilled through to every bone in his body. Each pair of headlights rising the hill quickened his pulse. He wondered what in God's name had made her buy this property.

The house was in darkness fifty yards away. He had planned to lay in wait inside: empty a few drawers and make a mess as if in a burglary but at the last moment everything changed. His task now was to disassemble the outside security cameras and wait until her key was in the lock. There were no close neighbours and his gun had a silencer. He'd twice timed his escape along the path through the woods opposite to where he'd be picked up by an unmarked van en route to Heathrow. A change of clothes would be in the van and his luggage, laptop and

passport would be waiting. This is definitely the last time, he thought, after today every day would be another day in paradise.

There was the sound of an engine close by and his head jerked forward but it was just a lone car cruising the road. Christ, he thought. He was losing it. The cold was making him jumpy and he'd got heartburn. He eased a large white tablet from its foil covering and crunched it between his teeth careful to replace the packet in his pocket. He must leave no clues. Yes, it was time to move on he told himself if his limbs weren't to end up folded into a suitcase or his corpse weighted down in the mud at the bottom of the Thames.

His thoughts turned to the girl. His target. What a waste. She was beautiful, blonde hair with a long fringe and legs to match. He remembered her from a few years back when she'd started out in television: first as a runner, then a researcher and how she'd worked her way up to become a television presenter. She was now an investigative journalist digging the dirt and going where others feared to tread. She went after the untouchables; the powerful, the politicians and not least the royals. Sam shivered, his job was dangerous he knew that well enough but a young woman like that... she could bring down the government and like a house of cards so would all the others come tumbling down too.

A mound of compost leaves and old grass cuttings was massed on the lawn behind him and a whiff of decay reached his nostrils. His years of training made him objectify targets and he tried not to think of them as human beings but the taking out of this girl made him feel sick. So sick that he felt that the stench of death clung to him like an invisible cloak.

He looked upwards sniffing the air. The stars stood out like fairy lights in the dark sky. Tomorrow and the day after and the day after that he'd be in Rio. The sky would be blue and there would be no more pressure from that bloody white building by the Thames. No more subterfuge. He'd put all this behind him.

Sam turned his head, listening, a soft whooshing noise along the main road but it was only a bicycle the one rear light flickering on and off as it disappeared towards the village. He could taste something sour in his mouth and he slowly chewed another antacid tablet. He

wondered if he were getting an ulcer.

When he was younger he'd thought of himself as a kind of hero, the sheriff riding into town. Even in the SAS he had felt himself to be on the right side. His side was the squeaky clean one -- wasn't it? How had he come this far? What had happened to turn him into this cold-blooded killer?

Sam shrugged his shoulders. After tonight there would be no more missions. South America here I come. He was leaving everything behind. They would take care of all his assets, his flat and deposit accounts. The money would follow him to Rio in a month or two. His lips mouthed the words *Je n'regrette pas*. But he couldn't help the nervous smile again. He did have some regrets. Any contact with his family would cost them their lives. Everything would unravel. His eyes watered with the cold. He would be glad to leave this weather behind.

The girl was late. She should have been here by now. The show ended over an hour ago. What was keeping her? He wanted it over. He couldn't wait to send the signal Mission Accomplished.

Sam stretched himself and walked a few steps outside the gate careful to keep in the shadows. Here high up above the Home County valley it seemed as desolate as the tundra. The sky had clouded over while he was waiting and flakes of snow drifted towards him on the breeze settling on his eyelashes. If he'd stayed in the desk job he'd have been looking forward to early retirement now, a little place low down in the valley and membership of the golf club. Huh! That made him smile.

Hurry up woman, he whispered between his chattering teeth. Then he heard the distinctive sound of an expensive engine climbing the hill. She was on her way. Sam turned and traced his steps backwards slipping and sliding in and out of the shadows lining the drive. He gasped and swallowed as the cold air hit his open mouth. His left hand fumbled for the small emergency flask tucked inside his top. The whisky warmed him and gave him courage but its rawness hit his chest making him cough as he gulped it down.

The car turned into the drive crunching the pebbles as it swung past him. Sam froze as

she gathered her bag and laptop from the passenger seat. She stepped out swinging the car door shut behind her and hesitated for a minute waiting as if for the security lights to come on. Then head down against the falling snow and with her keys dangling from her hand she hurried up the steps to the front door.

Sam stepped forward and raised the gun. Adrenaline pumped through every vein and he felt sweat trickle under his arms. She was fumbling with the key in the lock and time seemed to stand still. He took careful aim then without warning bile rose in his throat and filled his mouth. Pain shot through his chest and along his left arm and he was falling, falling –

Her front door slammed shut and it was too late for Sam; the paymasters were asleep in their beds and there was no one there to hear him, rescue him as he lay dying in his victim's desolate driveway. He would not see the sun rise and in a few hours there would be others, the guilty ones, hiding their faces and fearful of the morning light in the knowledge that they were about to pay the ultimate price for their sins.

The End

Barbara Brown bio: I am a founder member of Fareham Writers. I write brilliant prose in my head but when I sit in front of the screen it has all floated away never to return. However, I just love writing. I am passionate about challenging injustice and my interests are global politics and international law. I can't change the world but I like to think that sometimes I can encourage readers to think outside the box.