BLIND EYE

By Aline Templeton

KELSO STRANG SERIES

Human Face

Carrion Comfort

Devil's Garden

Old Sins

Blind Eye

MARJORY FLEMING SERIES

Evil for Evil

Bad Blood

The Third Sin

BLIND EYE

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For Elaine Singleton,
who wanted to know what happened to Cat.

If you wake at midnight, and hear a horse's feet,
Don't go drawing back the blind, or looking in the street,
Them that asks no questions isn't told a lie.
Watch the wall my darling while the Gentlemen go by.

A Smuggler's Song
Rudyard Kipling

CHAPTER ONE

The east wind was blowing today, the wind that had an edge as keen as a butcher's knife, the wicked wind that had savaged the gorse growing near the cliff edge into surrealist shapes. There was a salty burn in the light spray it whipped up from the sea and the browned pink petals of the thrift clinging to the rocks ruffled as it passed across.

It had been a day just like this the last time he'd been here: sunlight then sudden shadows as clouds were whipped across the sky. It was a fine, bracing day for a walk to dramatic St Abb's Head, with its sheer cliffs and the surging sea below that, hour by hour, tide by tide, was eating them away. He had started out on the path from the visitor centre but veered onto the tarmac service road that hugged the cliff edge to reach the lighthouse and the farms beyond. There were a couple of groups on the same pilgrimage, and a spaniel that raced around, excited by the force of the wind blowing its ears back.

Just as there had been, that other day. As he had reached

the spot where he was standing now, a car had driven up the path and parked not far in front of him – a sporty yellow Cooper S. He remembered feeling irritated – what was wrong with people? They had legs, didn't they? If everyone started bringing cars up here it wouldn't be long before it was all a churned-up mess.

The car door opened and a young woman jumped out. The wind snatched at her long blonde hair, sweeping it back from her face. She slammed the car door behind her and took off, running with a springing step straight to the cliff edge twenty feet away. Then she jumped.

He had agonised afterwards. Was there something – anything – he could have done to stop her – launched himself at her, shouted? But by the time he realised what she was going to do it was too late anyway; she hadn't paused, not to think, not to pluck up courage, as you would imagine a woman planning to take her own life would do. As she disappeared from view, he stood frozen in shock.

Then people were screaming and he had grabbed his phone just as others did the same. The emergency services were on the scene quickly and he hadn't needed to look over to make a report on the broken body on the rocks below. They'd had to call out the lifeboat to bring her in.

At the fatal accident inquiry, one of the other witnesses said that the woman had raced to the cliff edge as if all the devils in hell were after her. When it was his turn, he had confirmed that yes, she'd jumped out of the car and run, but it hadn't seemed necessary to dramatise it by saying what his own thought had been.

Beneath the windswept hair, he had seen that she was

smiling, her blue eyes bright, her face eager as she ran, like a little girl who was late for a party and couldn't wait to get there.

It had been attributed to depression after the coronavirus pandemic, but in those last moments she had looked excited. What wretchedness in her existence had made a death like this hold such joyful promise?

It was afterwards in his working life that he began to be haunted by a persistent unease. Someone had told him once about The Hum, a pervasive, insistent low humming that is reported worldwide with no satisfactory explanation. Not everyone hears it, and it has driven some of those who do to the edge of insanity.

He seemed to be the only person to notice the constant trickle of nasty minor criminality, like a quiet indeterminate mutter in the background that was never quite clear enough for him to pin down. But it was getting louder.

He had come here on his day off, as if to see whether returning might in some sense lay a ghost. It hadn't, of course, but the wind ruthlessly blowing all the cobwebs away did clear his mind. What he could see now was that unless something more serious, and nastier, happened there was nothing he could do. And he was very much afraid that it would.

'Don't go,' Niall Ritchie said. 'It's asking for trouble.'

Sarah Lindsay looked up from her breakfast coffee at her partner. Niall was standing by the door, almost blocking it, and she felt her stomach knotting with tension. She'd always hated confrontation and she was

nervous enough already about the day ahead.

'Oh, please, Niall!' she said tiredly. 'What are you talking about? We've been over and over this. I feel we haven't discussed anything else for all the months we've been waiting for the trial to call. I've made up my mind to testify because it's right and I'm not going to change it now.'

'Then you're a fool,' Niall said.

'Give me one good reason why I should.'

He raised his voice. 'I've given you a dozen!'

'For the hundredth time, that's why you haven't convinced me. Please give me the real reason – it might even make me reconsider.'

Niall hesitated. She could see his cheeks above the dark beard take on colour and he dropped his eyes. He said, 'I don't know what you mean.'

Sarah shook her head helplessly, then shrugged. She went to the door and after a second he moved aside. He was slight and not quite as tall as she was; he didn't really have the physical presence for a bully.

'You'll regret it,' he said ominously. 'We both will.'

The man in the legal wig had hard grey eyes, deeply hooded, a soft, loose mouth, a thick roll of fat round his neck and a paunch that he carried like a bandsman bearing a bass drum. His steely gaze was skewering the police constable in the witness box.

She was visibly shaking. 'No, that's not right,' she said.

'No? Not right?' He hadn't raised his voice, he'd dropped it, which somehow made it more frightening still. 'You admitted you had put it there – but it's not right?'

'I didn't, the way you mean—'

'Yet your fingerprints were on the wallet?'

She was starting to cry. She was very young, very slight and there was an uneasy movement from one of the jurors.

He noticed at once. 'No wonder you're upset, PC Moore. It's hard to disobey orders when you're being bullied. You're a very junior officer – it would be unfair to blame you when the superiors who could be expected to guide you have an axe to grind themselves.'

He wasn't gauche enough to turn his head to look towards the body of the court where DCI Kelso Strang was sitting, having given his own evidence. He didn't need to. He just carried on smoothly, 'I'm sure the ladies and gentlemen of the jury will understand your problem – and may even feel some indignation that you should have been put in this position.'

Choking back her tears, she made one more brave attempt. 'It wasn't like that—'

But he was turning away. 'No further questions.'

Tears were spilling over as she turned blindly to go. From the bench, the sheriff said, 'Wait, please,' and turned to the procurator fiscal, who shook his head, looking bleak. 'Thank you. Now you are free to go.'

Wiping her eyes with her knuckles, the constable blundered across the court room and Strang, his face set in angry lines, got up and followed her out. He'd recognised what was going to happen when Vincent Dunbar's cross-examination of his own evidence had been brief, almost perfunctory – the defence would claim that this was a stitch-up, with evidence being planted on their innocent

client. There had been no way to warn PC Moore what was about to happen to her; she was only just out of her probationary year and QCs like Dunbar ate witnesses like her for breakfast – from the looks of him, with black pudding and a fried tattie scone on the side.

Moore was sitting on a bench, scrubbing at her eyes with a tissue. She stood up when Strang came over and said, 'Oh, sir, I'm really sorry—'

He smiled. 'Don't be. There's not a lot you can do when you're attacked by a man-eating tiger. Find a mate, have a cup of tea and slag him off. You'll feel better.'

She gave an uncertain laugh. 'But we'll lose the case . . .'

'Oh yes,' he said. 'It's happened before and it'll happen again. It just means that a small-time ned got off with it but he won't be able to resist doing it again and we'll get him next time. Forget about it.'

As Moore left, looking reassured, Strang's own face darkened. Sure, losing a case was all part of the day's work but it was the slur on his own integrity that stung. He valued his hard-won reputation as a decent copper and he'd been traduced in a public forum, with no right of reply.

One of the court officials came over to speak to him about a trial diet that would be calling the following week and before they had finished their conversation he heard cheers, rapidly suppressed, from the courtroom. He withdrew to a corner as Dunbar, sweeping his client along with him, came past in a little procession with his jubilant friends.

Disgusted, Strang followed in their wake and found himself coming up to the outside doors beside a young woman wearing an academic gown over a dark suit. He'd

noticed her sitting on the bench behind Dunbar; she was tall and perhaps a little too thin, but she was vividly attractive, with fair hair and very blue eyes.

He stood aside to let her go in front and she said, with a slightly mocking smile, 'Thank you, DCI Strang. Generous, in the circumstances.'

It would be more dignified to smile insincerely and let her join the well-wishers outside but he was too angry.

'Perhaps I could ask you to tell your principal that nothing – nothing! – was planted on his client and that I deeply resent the implication.'

She skirted Dunbar's noisy group, going out of the Edinburgh Sheriff Court and onto the Royal Mile. Then she turned to him, still with the same mockery in her smile, 'Good gracious, Chief Inspector, you don't think Vincent Dunbar would stoop so low as to defend an innocent man, do you?'

He was surprised into laughter. 'Oh, of course I know, really. It's just hard to take, being smeared like that when you take a pride in honesty.'

'Dirty work, down here at the coal face. And to be honest, it doesn't get a lot dirtier than Vincent Dunbar.'

Her frankness was astonishing. 'But you're working for him?'

'I wish! I'm an advocate's devil, unpaid, and he's my devil master. Beggars can't be choosers and if you get an offer, you don't turn it down.'

Strang looked at her with interest. They were just passing a smart café and he said, 'I'm needing a coffee. What about you?'

‘Above my touch,’ she said ruefully. ‘Every credit card I have is maxed out.’

‘Have this on me, to demonstrate my forgiving nature. As long as associating with a police officer won’t wreck your street cred.’

She brightened up. ‘That’s really kind. And anyway, I like cops. My mum was one till she retired.’

‘Come on then.’ He held open the door. ‘You know my name, but I don’t know yours?’

‘Catriona Fleming. Cat,’ she said, and led the way over to a table.

Driving on the motorway when you couldn’t see wouldn’t be smart so Sarah Lindsay couldn’t even give way to tears as she drove home down the A1 to Tarleton. It had been a horrible, horrible experience. She’d given truthful, straightforward evidence, at considerable cost to herself, but she’d been made to look like a police stooge and a fool.

A fool. That was what Niall had said. But he hadn’t just been talking about what would happen to her in the witness box; there was something else that he wouldn’t tell her. What was the secret he knew but she didn’t? She gulped, scared now.

What was getting clearer and clearer was that their relationship was doomed. In the first lockdown they’d been stuck, each in their own one-bedroom flat, which had been miserable; they hadn’t really been ready to move in together before, but now it suddenly seemed the obvious thing to do. And as if that wasn’t risky enough, they’d had a sudden rush of blood to the head and decided they’d move to the

country as well. Now Working From Home was a Thing, there was nothing to stop them.

They were both city folk but Niall had always talked about organic farming and after they'd watched his old DVDs of *The Good Life* so often that the discs started hiccupping, she'd let him convince her. The need to save the planet was becoming more urgent all the time; there was something romantic about making such a direct contribution.

Prices for flats in Edinburgh were high at the time they sold and with a combined mortgage they'd been able to buy Eastlaw, a little sheep farm that wasn't much more than a small-holding, from a retiring farmer who had run down the flock – and the house – before selling.

Starting with forty sheep had seemed manageable and after taking a course to get an organic farming certificate, Niall had been fired with enthusiasm. There was a bit of arable land too and liberated rescue hens would produce free-range organic eggs to sell.

Sarah had certainly been more wary but they wouldn't be relying on the income for subsistence; she had a home-decorating consultancy and Niall was an accountant for a large business and worked almost entirely online anyway. The farm would be like a hobby for him and she'd pictured herself rosy-cheeked, bringing in baskets of fresh eggs and bottle-feeding orphaned lambs. To breathe country air would be wonderful, especially here, surrounded by gentle green hills and woodland, with a view up the coast as far as Tantallon Castle on a clear day.

It was a clear day when they came to look at Eastlaw.

She'd gripped Niall's arm and said, 'Look out there! This is just – just idyllic!' She would swear there hadn't been a day like it since.

Intoxicated with the view, they hadn't been bothered by the dilapidated state of the house that went with it. 'Oh, we'll do it up gradually. It's fun just camping,' she'd said airily to visiting friends who, while impressed by the outlook when it was visible, obviously felt it didn't entirely make up for primitive plumbing and open fires as the only source of heating.

It wasn't fun now. Organic farming was exhausting because everything had to be done the purist way, without recourse to pesticides or chemicals, and squashing bugs by hand rapidly lost its appeal. The sheep all seemed to be hypochondriacs, going into decline at the slightest excuse, and since you couldn't just give them antibiotics it meant expensive vet's visits. Sarah found, too, that she absolutely hated hens; despite their fluffy appearance they had nasty sharp beaks and so ruthlessly enforced the pecking order that a miserable victim would often be left all but featherless and the only kind thing to do was put it out of its misery. Niall hated despatching them but she'd told him he was the farmer and her job was merely to cook it – which wasn't too arduous, the poor creature being pretty well oven-ready anyway.

Discovering that rats liked eggs and ignored humane traps was almost the last straw; it wasn't long before they were bitterly regretting their decision. Niall's employer's business folded and hers dried up. They'd be destitute now if Gresham's Farms, an umbrella company for organic

farms that supplied all the big supermarkets, hadn't taken them on, promising a guaranteed market for what they produced.

A certification officer had come round not long after and gave them top marks for integrity, if not for husbandry, and mercifully Jimmie Gresham had been quite happy with that, even if Sarah couldn't see how they were ever going to make it pay. With only Niall and the animals for company, she'd often thought she should have paid more attention to what she'd felt when they were watching *The Good Life*: that if she'd been Barbara Good married to the irritating Tom, she'd have killed him.

Once the virus was in retreat, she'd managed to get a cheap lease on a little shop in Tarleton to sell decorative furnishings. It barely washed its face but it gave her an excuse to escape the farm and she'd been hoping it would be a way to make local friends.

When, to her astonishment, Doddie Muir had the nerve to come into her shop and ask for a 'retainer' to keep an eye on it and protect it from 'trouble', unspecified, she'd laughed in his face. 'Chancer!' she'd said. How confident she'd been then!

He wasn't a threatening figure – bald, fairly slight, with a receding chin – and it had seemed a quiet little town. So it was quite a shock when she found the paintwork on her shopfront scraped and scarred one day. The following week a stone was thrown through the window.

She wasn't confident after that. She asked around and, suddenly, the shopkeepers who'd been friendly enough before were less forthcoming. They didn't, apparently,

know what she was talking about, though it was clear they were lying.

Eventually the quiet Asian lady, Mrs Patel, who ran the small convenience store next door said, 'It's not that much, you know. Easier just to pay.' And she didn't want to say anything more.

Niall had taken the same attitude. It left her feeling helpless and when Muir slimed his way in next time, a sly grin on his face, she'd talked terms. It wasn't 'that much', really. But everything had gone so badly wrong for them lately that even 'that much' meant giving up something else. She could have gone to the police, of course, but she hadn't any confidence that they'd take effective action – or at least, not until her shop was totally wrecked. There was no way she could find the money for repairs.

It was only when a senior policeman from Edinburgh, DCI Strang, had turned up on her doorstep that she'd mentioned the problem. He'd accepted her offer of a cup of coffee – a tall man, good-looking apart from a jagged scar that disfigured the right side of his face.

He'd wanted to know if they'd had any problem with farm machinery being stolen and she'd given a hollow laugh.

'Such machinery as we have is the sort we'd probably have to pay someone to take away.'

He'd laughed too, but warned that stealing quad bikes and even tractors was big business and suggested that it might still be as well to keep them secure. He was very easy to talk to and the conversation soon drifted on to her real problem.

He was interested immediately. When she'd explained, Strang said, 'Well, as you've obviously realised there's no way we can mount a twenty-four-hour guard outside your shop. You can always install security lights and a camera but I think you'd probably only get pictures of a stocking-mask, which wouldn't be much help. If you have the stomach for it, we could set up a trap. We give you marked banknotes, you give them to him and we take it from there.'

'Oh, I've got the stomach for it, all right,' she'd boasted. 'Anything to stop his nasty little racket.'

She'd naïvely thought that in court all she had to do was tell the truth about what had happened, not appreciating how cleverly truth could be reshaped by an advocate at the top of his game. He hadn't even suggested Sarah was lying, just that she was stupid, which felt worse.

Her neighbours were antagonistic now. They had wanted no part of it and obviously felt that as an incomer she had no right to cause this sort of trouble, and it was hard to be robust when a cheerful greeting was met with silence and a glare. And Doddie Muir, who hadn't bothered her since the police got involved, would be free to slither in next week, probably with an increased demand. He'd be feeling vindictive and she felt sick at the thought.

Now she'd have to go home and listen to Niall saying, 'I told you so.' Her heart sank as it always did when she turned off up the little road leading to Eastlaw.

From the first, she'd been horrified by the farm next door. The dogs that spent their time tied up outside with only a dilapidated wooden hut for shelter upset her, and the way the yard looked, with abandoned implements rusting

where they stood and empty plastic bags left lying till the grass grew up round them, made anyone coming to visit them think they lived in a slum.

Ken Blackford, the farmer, was coarse-featured and coarse-tongued, mocking the new townie neighbours and their daft ideas. His, he had pointed out at their first meeting, was a farm, while theirs was a small-holding, inviting her to ask the difference.

'A farm makes money and a small-holding doesn't,' he'd said, and roared with laughter at the tired old joke.

The thing was, he was right – his farm was thriving, despite the disorder. His sheep produced twins and even triplets that could then be sent off to market while Niall's flock struggled even to keep up the numbers once he'd sent off his quota of lambs to Gresham's.

'Ken was born to it,' Niall said bitterly, 'and I'm having to learn the trade. And if you're prepared to use every chemical in existence it's easier, even if it's poisoning people and the environment at the same time.'

Of course, they were at a permanent disadvantage because you had to charge so much more to break even and not enough people cared about the planet to pay more for their food, when it came right down to it. It was a constant strain to meet their commitments, let alone make any serious profit. When they'd lost the turnip crop they'd been growing for winter feed to a plague of cabbage root fly, Jimmie had stepped in with a supply at cost, but that had still been money they couldn't afford to spend.

It was the rats that really got to her – those hideous, squirmy bodies and scaly tails that wriggled through her

dreams at night. There were feral cats in the stackyard on Ken's farm and she'd thought they might be the answer; she put out food to tempt at least some of them over but he spotted what she was doing and bawled her out.

'They're working cats! If they can get food from you, do you think they'll bother their backsides to catch rats?'

She'd withdrawn, on the verge of tears, and from then on avoided him. He seemed to have a horrid fascination for Niall, though, and once it became legal to go back to the pub they would set off together while she sat at home miserably in the dark sitting room in front of a grudging fire – the Waterfoot Tavern was the sort of bleak, dismal Scottish pub where even if women weren't formally banned, they wouldn't want to go.

Ken was out in the yard as she drove past. Sarah didn't turn her head but she knew he was watching her, probably with the usual snaggle-toothed sneer. She gave a little shudder as she drew up beside their own house with its neatly tended garden. The inside of the house might be still a horror they couldn't afford to improve but plants had been non-negotiable.

She paused for a moment, head bowed, then reached for her phone and texted: *Coffee tomorrow, elevenish? Please!!*

The reply was immediate. *Sure. Not good?*

Not good. She didn't elaborate; she'd tell her all about it tomorrow. Briony Gresham was her only friend and she always offered a sympathetic ear to Sarah's problems.

She switched off her phone. She had to take a deep breath and square her shoulders before she could bring herself to get out. Home sweet home.