

Praise for *Without the Moon*

“Few people can match her extraordinary capacity to capture the atmosphere of louche, bygone London and the mood of its people. In *Without the Moon* she tackles the blitzed city of 1942 with the same unerring touch” Marcel Berlins, *The Times* (Crime Book of the Month)

“A classic noir novel in every way” *The Lady*

“What a fabulous piece of work this is. It practically out-Hamiltons Patrick Hamilton in its sense of menace and place, conducting a kind of séance with that bombed-out but brassy London of the war-torn '40s; on each page you can practically smell the cheap scent, powder, Brilliantine and black-market whisky” Travis Elborough

“Brilliant and brave, *Without the Moon* blends murder and magic to create a vision of London as a spiritual maze. Prostitutes, psychopaths, detectives, villains and psychics move through corridors, glimpsing heaven and hell in an atmosphere that is so charged it can almost be touched. Fact and fiction link as justice is demanded. The best work yet from a genuine, original talent” John King, author of *The Football Factory* and *Human Punk*

Praise for *Weirdo*

“A serious talent ... An unusually gifted writer of heartfelt noir ... she has brilliantly captured that desperate sense of teenage boredom, isolation, danger and mayhem” Henry Sutton, *Daily Mirror*

“An absorbing mystery, an extraordinarily powerful evocation of time and place and a cast of characters whose every breath feels real – Unsworth gets better with every book” Laura Wilson, *Guardian*

“The whole package works beautifully: memory traces, bad magic, sounds, smells ... a great, page-turning read” Iain Sinclair

“Masterful ... brilliant evocation of time and place, Unsworth adds astonishing and disturbing insight into the minds of disaffected youth who cannot find love and acceptance” Marcel Berlins, *The Times*

Praise for *Bad Penny Blues*

“The author has been compared to cult noirist Derek Raymond, but here she enters a pantheon of writers exploring London lowlife that extends from Patrick Hamilton and Colin MacInnes” Christopher Fowler, *Financial Times*

“There’s something about the textured layers of Cathi Unsworth’s third novel that effortlessly draws the reader into the dark and disturbing environment she creates ... Unsworth lives up to her growing reputation as one of the UK’s stars of noir crime fiction, combining hardboiled prose with vivid characters and a lucid sense of place” Yasmin Sulaiman, *The List*

Praise for *The Singer*

“A cracking page-turner that feels authentic, authoritative and evocative. And it’s beautifully written. This is a bloody good book” Val McDermid

“Brilliantly paced, plotted and stylish crime novel from the hugely talented and highly original Cathi Unsworth” *Daily Mirror*

Praise for *The Not Knowing*

“Brilliantly executed with haunting religious imagery, interesting minor characters, great rock ’n’ roll references and a spectacular ending. *The Not Knowing* is a cool and clever debut. Sleep on it at your peril” *Diva*

“Hugely entertaining debut from a future star of gritty urban crime literature” *Mirror*

**CATHI
UNSWORTH**
THAT OLD
BLACK MAGIC



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PROLOGUE

Tuesday, 14 January 1941

London lay ghostly white beneath a fresh fall of snow, glowing in the thrall of a full moon. Despite the blackout, as Hannen Swaffer stepped from his cab, his view of the Holland Park thoroughfare, its stuccoed mansions and tall trees, was as clear as day. Humming to himself, he rattled across to 3 Lansdowne Road. Fine night for a séance, he thought.

Both as a reporter for the *Daily Herald* and a keen practitioner of spiritualism, Swaffer was delighted by the prospect of the night's gathering. A small circle had been invited by Miss Winifred Moyes, herself a former Fleet Street journalist, who now ran the Christian Spiritualist Greater World Association from this address. Since the onslaught of the Blitz, her mission had turned from spreading enlightenment to more practical matters, finding shelters and relief for the bombed-out women and children of the capital, and occasions such as this had become rare. Tonight was a special exception for the woman in the grey moiré gown who opened the door to Swaffer, and everyone else she had privileged with an invite. Tonight they would be sitting for one of the greatest mediums in the world.

"Miss Moyes," Swaffer doffed his stovepipe hat in greeting, unleashing a torrent of hair as white as his snowy surroundings.

“Mr Swaffer,” she replied, a smile lighting up her rather mannish face. “Here you are. Please do give Mr Hillyard your coat and come through.” With a sideways step, she revealed the short, stocky caretaker beside her, his blue boiler suit replacing the traditional butler’s livery. With a few words of greeting, Swaffer divested himself of his outer layers and stepped into the room beyond, reporter’s antennae bristling.

Chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle around a cabinet at the centre of the floor. Milling around it, sipping glasses of sherry and murmuring to each other, were four ladies in late middle age, dressed in their best costumes and fur capes. Swaffer’s eyes strayed past their coiffured heads for the guest of honour and alighted on a couple, huddled together on a chaise longue behind the cabinet, in the furthest, darkest corner of the room.

Most of the space on the seat was taken up by a woman dressed entirely in black, with thick bobbed hair of the same raven hue. Her face was the image of the full moon against her dim surroundings, wreathes of smoke from her cigarette standing in for clouds. Her companion, a man in a dark suit, bit at the stem of a rosewood pipe, eyes darting around the room with an expression pitched somewhere between hostility and nervousness.

“Dear Mr Swaffer!” one of the ladies distracted him. Two companions fluttered after her, cooing greetings. The fourth, whose platinum curls, ostrich boa and diamond jewellery signified a greater wealth than all the others put together, stood exactly where she was. Self-made millionairess Olive Bracewell fixed Swaffer with a look of disdain.

“Care for a sherry, Mr Swaffer?” Mr Hillyard offered a tray of thimble-sized glasses.

“Most kind.” Swaffer took a bracing sip as Miss Moyes approached.

“Are we all ready?” she asked. “Our guest is rather shy, as you may have gathered.” She flicked her gaze towards the chaise longue and back. “To help her reach through the veil, she has requested that we say *The Lord’s Prayer* and then sing for her the *23rd Psalm*. Mr Hillyard, would you do the honours, if everybody else would take their seats...”

The sitters fanned out around the semi-circle as the caretaker dimmed the lights, so that only a single red bulb, placed on a standard lamp behind the cabinet, remained to illuminate the room. Swaffer was aware of the long shadows that unfurled themselves into the absence of light; the ponderous ticking of the grandfather clock; the breathing of other sitters; and the shuffling of the caretaker’s feet as he travelled across the carpeted floor to sit beside him.

“Now that we are all assembled,” said Miss Moyes, “please welcome Mrs Helen Duncan and her husband, Henry, to the circle. They have come a long way to be with us.” She began to clap, provoking an enthusiastic response from the others. In the twilight glow of the lamp, Swaffer found the Duncans’ expressions even more unreadable.

He had first met this woman a decade ago, when he had written of her feats for the *Psychic Times*, a journal to which he frequently contributed. She hailed from Callander, a village in the Highlands, and had been blessed with the gifts of Prophecy and The Sight since childhood. As an adult, her copious manifestations had aroused both passionate devotion and virulent scepticism. Swaffer’s first assignment with her had required him to put those powers to the strictest of tests devised and observed by magicians and medical men. She had passed each one with ease.

“Thank ye,” the Scotswoman said. “I hope I’ll no’ disappoint

you tonight.” Nodding to her husband, she turned towards the cabinet and, with his assistance, lowered herself into the tall-backed chair inside it. Once she had settled, Henry murmured something to Miss Moyes and she turned back to her circle.

“Are we all ready?” she asked. At the nods of affirmation, she took her seat at the centre of the semi-circle. As the assembled began to intone the words of prayer, Mr Duncan drew the curtains around his wife. Swaffer caught a last glimpse of her head lolling onto her chest, her eyes closed. By the time they had said “Amen”, the medium’s breathing had grown heavier, and, in the brief pause before the beginning of the hymn, became the loudest sound in the room. Then the ladies began trilling “The Lord is My Shepherd”, the reedy voices of the sopranos floating tremulously before the more forceful male baritones and Miss Bracewell’s equally gusty alto.

Swaffer began to see a flickering of something pale beneath the curtains. Was this the ectoplasm that signalled the arrival of Mrs Duncan’s spirit guides? His nostrils caught a faint aroma of brine, a sign that this was indeed the substance that linked the two planes of existence.

“*Goodness and mercy all my life, Shall surely follow me,*” he sang, teetering on the edge of his chair, straining his eyes as the thin line became more a substantial billowing, “*and in God’s house for ever more, My dwelling place shall be.*”

Henry Duncan drew back the curtains. With a collective intake of breath, Miss Moyes’ circle witnessed the vision of his wife sitting fully erect with ectoplasm streaming from each nostril, down onto the front of her dress and out into the room before them. Her eyes snapped open, two glittering black buttons that stared straight through the assembled as if seeing far beyond the confines of the room. Her laboured

breathing stopped sharply. Swaffer felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck and his heart quicken.

“Oh, I say!” the lady to Swaffer’s left gasped.

The spectre of a young woman rose from the cloudy mass surrounding the medium to float in the air in front of them. An enchanted creature, her head turned to one side, showing an aquiline profile surrounded by waves of hair that seemed to shimmer on the air, despite the absence of a breeze. She softly murmured a tune without any discernible words. For minutes, the seated watched in awed silence as she twisted languorously from left to right, performing a phantasmagoric fandango to the childlike melody she was fashioning, something between a nursery rhyme and the fragments of a dream.

“Spirit,” Swaffer said, “what is your name?”

Slowly, the spectral head turned towards the mortal countenance of the journalist. The singing stopped and a different voice issued from the cabinet.

“You know what my name is, dearest.”

It was a woman’s voice, but not Helen’s Highland brogue. She spoke clearly and precisely, like an actress projecting from a stage.

“And you were right, it *was* a fine night for it,” she went on. She had a slight Midlands dialect, only she couldn’t quite pronounce her ‘w’s. “Perfect, with this moon and the snow. You *are* clever. And this... Oh my... This...”

The vision undulated again, the features of the woman becoming less discernible, as if she was beginning to fade. Then a sob and the voice returned. “What is this? Why have you brought *me* here? This isn’t what we agreed!”

The ladies looked around at each other in consternation. Mr Hillyard grunted.

“My dear, you are quite safe here,” said Swaffer, “we only invite those to our circle who wish to be heard. Are you not known to anyone present?”

“No!” There was a sudden, abrupt choking sound and the vision fell sharply away, the ectoplasm seeming to collapse and vanish, so that afterwards, Swaffer was never sure if the expression of terror he witnessed had been upon the visage of the manifestation just before she disappeared, or was that of the woman who had brought the spirit forth.

“Noo!” Mrs Duncan’s cry brought his eyes back to the cabinet. She was pulling at the neckline of her dress. “Help!” she gasped a wheezing rattle. “Help me!”

In two bounds he was beside her, shouting: “Put the lights on, Mr Hillyard! She’s choking!”

Swaffer had received his medical training many years before, in a field hospital on the Western Front. Inside the cabinet was a heady reminder; a tight space so full of sweat and panic that he could barely fit himself in beside the heaving medium. His feet blundered on the fabric of her dress, but he managed to get his hands around her shoulders and propel her forward.

“Cough, Mrs Duncan!” he shouted. “Cough, if you can!” He gave a hefty thump to the centre of her back. Her wheezing worsened but she did as he said. A cough snapped across the room like thunder. Swaffer dealt a second blow and this time she spluttered something up, the vomiting noise she made was followed by a shuddering intake of breath. The floor moved under Swaffer’s feet as she lurched, yanking the hem of her skirt away from under him. He caught hold of the back of the chair to stop himself from falling and, as he did so, the lights came on.

Henry Duncan knelt in front of his stricken wife,

murmuring: "It's all right, hen, you're safe now." Mrs Duncan's shoulders rose and fell dramatically, but thankfully Swaffer could hear her breath come in thick sobs. Beyond them, the ashen faces of Miss Moyes and her companions rose from their chairs, staring aghast.

"Don't panic," Swaffer advised, manoeuvring himself out of the cabinet, feeling more than a little disorientated. "We got to the problem in time, didn't we, Mr Duncan?"

Henry mopped his wife's face with his handkerchief. "Aye," he said, not moving his gaze from hers. "I think ye did, Mr Swaffer, I think ye did. Thank the Lord for that."

"How are you feeling now, Mrs Duncan?" Swaffer asked.

Her face was bright red and the fear still gleamed in her dilated pupils. She nodded, made a gesture to her throat with her left hand and coughed painfully.

"Of course, you shouldn't speak," he reprimanded himself. "Let me fetch you a glass of water. And a brandy, perhaps?"

"Should I call for an ambulance?" Miss Moyes' voice behind them strained with anxiety.

"No, no," Henry turned to speak to his hostess. "There's no need, Helen will be right enough in a minute. Eh, but the brandy's a good idea."

"Well, if you're sure," Miss Moyes looked doubtful. Mr Hillyard, meanwhile, had seized the initiative and pulled out an armchair for their guest to recline on. Each taking an arm, he and Henry helped guide her to it, while Swaffer returned with a glass of water in one hand and brandy in the other. Kneeling down to offer them to the medium, he felt a wave of light-headedness. He could still hear the spirit's lullaby-lament echoing through his mind.

"Take the water first," he said, steadying himself against

the arm of the chair. "Sip it slowly." She did as she was told, dabbing at the side of her mouth with Henry's handkerchief after each drop. The redness gradually faded from her cheeks.

"Mr Swaffer," she wheezed, "ah owe you." She put her hand on his arm and he noticed the delicacy of the white skin, her tapered fingers, the crescent moons on her neatly manicured nails.

"My dear lady," said Swaffer, "your good health is all that concerns me."

Helen shook her head slowly, her gaze becoming more intense. She pulled at his sleeve so that he had to lean in closer. "The lassie was being murdered."

Swaffer's eyes widened.

"Nearly took me with her, aye," Helen rasped on. "Tha's how she was goin'," she put a hand back to her throat. "Chokin'" The movement caused her to start coughing again. "Please," Swaffer held out the tumbler she had emptied, "could somebody fetch some more water?" Another hand, belonging to Miss Moyes, took the glass from his.

Mrs Duncan's grip on Swaffer's arm tightened.

"She's lost out there, away in the woods, in the snow," she told him, black eyes seeing straight through him, to the other world she had witnessed from the inside of the cabinet.

"Clara," she said. "Her name is Clara."

PART ONE

THE SHADOW WALTZ

January – August 1941

1

NO MOON AT ALL

Friday, 31 January – Saturday, 1 February 1941

Karl Kohl had a bad feeling about his mission, long before he left Schiphol Airport on the moonless last night of January 1941. It had stolen up on him gradually, this sense of unease, this conviction that their carefully crafted scheme was going to end in disaster. At first, he had been exhilarated by the idea. His sudden selection from the backrooms of the meteorological division by the Abwehr, subsequent training in the arts of subterfuge and the daring nature of what he had been entrusted with, were all a confirmation of the powers he had been promised. Most of all, it meant he would be reunited with the owner of the face on the photograph he kept hidden, stitched inside the lining of his suit, the one who had made those vows to him.

Standing on the tarmac in front of the aircraft, he felt the last vestiges of confidence in his ability to carry out his orders draining away. The Heinkel HE 111 looked like a thing of nightmare. It had been painted black for its mission: to fly across the North Sea and drop Karl in the part of England that most resembled the land he was leaving, the marshy lowlands of East Anglia dug out of the swamp by Dutchmen

three centuries before. Karl was to parachute, under the cover of darkness, to a co-ordinate on a map called Bury Fen. It was not a name that inspired confidence. He touched the amulet around his neck as he followed Captain Gartenfeld, head of the secret airborne division, up the steps and into the bowels of the sinister craft. He knew for sure now that, at heart, he was a coward. His fate had been written in darkness all along.

They were nearly two hours into their flight, himself and Gartenfeld in the gunner's gondola that hung below the fuselage, when the navigator's communication crackled over from the cockpit, announcing they had made it into enemy territory. Gartenfeld slapped him on the back and relief coursed through Karl's veins. Throughout the whole, swaying, juddering journey, with the cold gradually seeping through the fur-lined flying suit he was wearing, the English-cut tweeds beneath that formed his disguise, to the very marrow of his bones, Karl had been expecting a burst of enemy fire; a desperate battle to stay airborne followed by the inevitable, sickening plunge into the North Sea.

The respite from that paranoia was short-lived. Now came the nausea-inducing prospect of the jump. Karl had never parachuted before and, despite the training he had received for the job he was about to do, a trial run was deemed out of the question. Although he had lived by his wits for most of his forty-three years, leaping from an aircraft thousands of feet over a strange and hostile land in the middle of the night was not the sort of test of nerve Karl would have willingly challenged himself to.

As if reading his mind, the captain turned towards him, the traces of a smile on his features that was not reflected in the

cold blue of his eyes. Gartenfeld had had no say in the selection of this agent and it was obvious he resented it.

“About ten minutes until you make your jump, Kohl,” he said. “Let’s check through your kit once more, shall we? Make sure that everything is as it should be.”

Karl had been issued with a compass, a set of maps and codes; a wallet stuffed with over £400 in English notes, a bogus ID card and ration book; a revolver and box of ammunition; a helmet, torch and spade and an attaché case containing a wireless set powerful enough to transmit over 500 miles, which he would use to make contact with his accomplice once he had safely landed.

“Now, let’s make sure everything is secure,” the officer continued, as if addressing a small child. Her face flashed through his mind again as Gartenfeld redid the straps binding his kitbag to the front of him, the parachute to his back. He pictured her sprawled out on black silk sheets, the glow of candles on her naked skin, smiling her gap-toothed smile and winking at him. He saw the flash of a ceremonial dagger, the smell of burning hair and herbs, the ceremony she had performed to bind them together for eternity, back in Hamburg, back before the war...

It was no time to be having such thoughts. He blinked rapidly, forcing her image away, as the aeroplane began to descend, taking his stomach with it.

“All is good,” the captain nodded and consulted his watch. “Of course, you know what to do if you are captured, don’t you?” His eyes narrowed.

Before Karl could answer, there was a crackle of static and the navigator’s voice carried over the engines’ roar: “Approaching target, sir. Get ready.”

Gartenfeld moved swiftly to open the down-facing window. An icy blast rose up to meet them. As Karl knelt down before it, for the first time in many years, he found himself offering up a prayer to a god he had thought he had abandoned long ago and wondering if He had chosen to wash His hands of this sorrowful sinner now kneeling before Him. Karl could see nothing but blackness below.

“Now!” the captain commanded.

But Karl remained frozen to the spot, his gloved hands holding onto the bottom of the exit window for dear life. As if he had been expecting this, Gartenfeld gave him a hefty push. Karl lurched forward but managed to bend sideways, so that he was blocking the hole with the width of his own body. As he did so, his right foot caught against the side of the opening and twisted. A vicious stab of pain seized the joint and ran up his leg.

“*Dummkopf!*” the captain pushed again, forcing him to cleave into the gap while uttering increasingly vicious curses that were swept up by the wind roaring in Karl’s ears and up his nose, knocking the breath out of him. Gravity, abetted by Gartenfeld, did its work and he pitched forward.

“Don’t forget to pull the cord, Kohl,” was the last thing he heard before the captain closed the hatch doors and Karl plummeted into the blackness.

“Clara!” he screamed into the void.

When Karl opened his eyes again, he thought he was in heaven, surrounded by a bright, white light. Then the pain in his ankle coursed like wildfire up his leg and torso, through his neck to the receptors in his brain and he realised that the pure white waves billowing around him were actually the

silks of his unfurled parachute. He must have passed out the moment it opened, as he could remember nothing further than that point. It was only the kitbag strapped to his chest that was keeping his face from contact with the snow-topped furrow of hard earth on which he had landed.

Gingerly, he rolled onto his uninjured left side, trying to think what he should do next. His hands were stiff with cold but he could still move his fingers inside his gloves, so he set to the task of trying to unbuckle himself from the harnesses attached to his silk cocoon. In tight spots in the past he had found ways of blocking out pain when he had to, and so it was he began to murmur the words to *Ich bin von Kopf bis Fuß auf Liebe eingestellt* while he concentrated on this task. It wasn't until he had succeeded in freeing himself from his kitbag and the parachute that he remembered why he was singing it – the ballad she had been performing the first time he laid eyes on her. The realisation jolted him back to reality, and for a moment he thought he might pass out again with the pain. He shut his eyes, concentrating on his breathing, until he was back in control of himself.

Lifting his lids again, he tried to take stock of his surroundings. The yards of fabric were replaced by another layer of infinite whiteness – of snow-covered fields stretching into the wide, low horizon, broken only here and there by thin rows of trees and huddles of farm buildings. A red sun was beginning to emerge from behind that long line, winking its colour into the greyness of the sky. It was bitterly cold.

A skein of wild geese flew over him, their sudden caterwauling bringing a jolt of panic to his chest. The captain's words about being captured boomed back into his brain. He was a sitting target out here.

Gritting his teeth, he crawled onto all fours and tried to balance himself on his kitbag to see if he could stand. It was no good. Even if he could manage to get upright, there was no way he could walk on this ankle: a mere touch was agony. The best solution he could think of was to pack it with snow and see if that would numb it sufficiently so that he wouldn't feel it any more. But, by the time that happened, he would likely have died of cold.

A snowflake drifted down from the heavy clouds above and settled on his lashes. Karl made no move to cuff it away. Coming from the direction of the farmhouses to the east, he could hear a distant barking. As a second flake fell, and then a third and a fourth, he could discern the outlines of two figures coming his way.

He felt inside his coat for his revolver.

"He's found it," said Charlie Baldock, as the Jack Russell streaked down the lane in front of them, guttural curses flying from his canine throat.

"Whatever it be," replied Percy Clifton, the owner of Hollow Heap Farm, the collection of buildings that Karl had seen in the distance. Both he and his companion, from the neighbouring Froghall Farm, had been woken in the night by the alarm cries of cock pheasants echoing across the coppices that dotted the fens. Over the last six months they had come to recognise what this heralded. The pre-dawn chorus was a prelude to the throbbing *woom-woom* of Heinkel engines in the skies above.

The craft had passed over them without any attendant explosions, but that hadn't settled Percy's dog. At first light, the farmer and his neighbour strode off on reconnaissance, letting the terrier lead them to what had been worrying him.

“Oh, look at that,” said Charlie, straightening the twelve-bore he had been carrying cocked over his elbow.

The dog had gone straight underneath the gate. As the two men stared out onto the field, they could see a dark lump in the middle of the furrows. Only with the snow falling so thickly, neither of them could quite work out what it was.

Until the gunshot rang out.

Karl fell backwards onto the snow, tears rolling down his cheeks. In the end, he hadn't had the courage to put the gun to his own head and had fired it instead into the air so that the people he could see coming towards him would have no chance at all of mistaking him. Perhaps what the British would do to him now would be worse than the quick dispatch the captain had demanded of him. The blood-curdling sounds emitting from the small, brown-and-white dog hurtling towards him suggested that it would. But mercifully, he had blacked out again before the creature's hot breath touched his face.

“What d'you reckon that is?” Percy held the whimpering terrier back by his collar.

“That's a German, in't it?” Charlie considered, prodding the inert form with the barrels of his gun. “Must have dropped him over here last night, Perce. Looks like he's gone and broke his leg and all. That in't half at a funny angle.”

“What should I do then?” Percy considered. “Fetch the Home Guard?”

“That's right.” Charlie nodded. “Go down Dovehouse and get Harry Godfrey. He'll know what to do. I'll keep an eye on him 'til you get back.”