

1

Intruders

The glass cutter made a soft scratching sound. Slowly Cal dislodged the panel with the tips of his gloved fingers and reached in to undo the window catch. His companion's lanky frame hovered awkwardly on the sill as he swung his legs over. A flash of torchlight revealed they were in a kitchen.

'Hungry?' Ray grinned and nodded at a packet of chocolate hobnobs beside the kettle. Cal put his finger to his lips. Ray instantly froze, his eyes wary. The distant hum of a car was carried in on the breeze from the open window. Inside the house all was quiet. They made their way into a broad hallway. Cal squinted up at his companion, then turned and led the way up the stairs.

Silence.

They went into a study. The beam from Cal's torch hovered over a desk. Ray seized a digital camera and shoved it into a khaki bag slung across his shoulder. The top drawer of the desk was locked. Cal bent down and picked at the catch with practised fingers. It slid open with a click.

'Jackpot,' he whispered with barely concealed excitement. He drew out a leather jewellery case and opened the lid. They caught a glimpse of stones, glittering red and green and white.

'Is it the real thing?' Ray's hood had fallen back to reveal a mess of sandy coloured hair above bulging watery eyes.

'Let's get it home for a closer look.'

As they made their way back to the stairs, Ray grabbed Cal's arm.

'What?'

‘Thought I heard footsteps.’ They stared at one another, straining to hear. The house was quiet. They edged forwards. The bag jingled softly on Ray’s back. They reached a bend on the landing, and a voice startled them.

‘Elliot? Is that you, Elliot?’

At the same time, the overhead light flicked on, making them blink. An old lady was standing in front of them, her figure silhouetted in an open doorway. She gasped audibly as she took in the two figures staring at her across the landing. ‘Who are you?’ she rasped. Her eyes glared wildly at them. One hand was pressed against her chest, the other pushed at the door. Cal leapt forward and seized the old woman by the arm. ‘I’m calling the police,’ she faltered, but her legs buckled.

‘Shit,’ Ray cried out. ‘She’s seen us. Let’s get out of here.’

‘First things first.’ Cal lifted the woman off her feet. Shouldering Ray to one side, he strode past, and hurled his burden with a grunt. They watched her crumple and disappear backwards down the stairs.

A few muffled thumps.

Silence.

‘What did you do that for?’ Ray’s face was rigid with terror.

‘Stupid cow shouldn’t have put the light on. Don’t worry,’ Cal grinned. ‘She can’t identify us now. Come on, retard, let’s get out of here.’

A shudder ran through Ray’s long frame. He leapt forward and bounded down the stairs. His boot accidentally kicked the woman who lay, motionless, at the foot of the stairs. Her body jolted at the impact. Charging down behind Ray, Cal almost tripped over her inert figure. Struggling to regain his balance, he knocked into Ray. The bag slipped from Ray’s shoulder. It fell with a clatter that seemed to reverberate around the walls. Gold chains and coloured jewels spewed out of it.

Their feet thumped on the carpet. Ray reached the front door first. He twisted the handle. The door didn’t budge. It

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was double locked. He kicked at it and swore aloud. They turned and ran back along the hall, across the kitchen and out of the open window into the cool of the night air.

When they reached home Brenda was awake, shaking, in her chair.

‘Make us a mug of tea,’ Cal grunted. Brenda scurried to the kitchen, head lowered, shoulders hunched. Cal turned to Ray and held out a hand. Cal’s face darkened and seemed to swell.

‘I don’t know what happened, Cal. I was scared. It must’ve slipped off my shoulder back in the house, when we were doing a runner. I reckon I dropped it in the hall, when... the old woman...’

‘You left it behind? All that gear?’

‘I’d have gone back for it if I’d known.’

Cal’s voice was low, measured. ‘You retard,’ he said. ‘Was there anything in the bag could be traced back to you?’

‘No.’ Ray’s face shone, sweaty. ‘I swear it, Cal. I picked it up at the market like you said and I never touched it, only with gloves on. I did everything just like you said, Cal.’

‘Like I said?’ Cal was yelling now. ‘If you’d listened to me, you wouldn’t have just lost us a small bleeding fortune.’

Brenda came in and set two steaming mugs down on the table. ‘Give it a rest, Cal,’ she said.

Cal spun round. ‘Or what?’ he roared. Brenda cowered away and sat down. ‘You still here?’ Cal turned his attention back to Ray. ‘We’re finished.’

‘Give us another chance,’ Ray pleaded. ‘Just one more chance.’

‘Another chance?’ Cal mimicked. ‘He wants another chance, Bren.’

‘He can piss off,’ she replied. Ray’s eyes met hers in a cold stare. Her head drooped. She stared down at her fingers, picking uncontrollably at her sleeves.

Cal turned back to Ray. ‘You want another chance,’ he sneered. ‘Who do you think you are? I’ll tell you. You’re a fucking retard. That’s what you are. Ray the retard.’

Ray stepped forward, fists clenched, then subsided, muttering.

‘What’s that you said?’ Cal asked.

‘I said you can leave it out.’ Ray flinched as Cal lit a cigarette.

‘Supposing I was to give you another chance,’ Cal said slowly. ‘How do I know you’re going to keep your head this time?’ Ray kept his eyes fixed on Cal who flicked the lighted match at Ray’s face. Ray jerked his head to one side. The match fell harmlessly to the floor. ‘The thing is,’ Cal went on, ‘that was a balls up. What was it?’

‘A balls up,’ Ray repeated, scowling at the floor.

‘Right. And do you know why?’ Ray shrugged, staring at his large scuffed shoes. ‘Panic,’ Cal answered his own question. ‘You panicked. You forgot the exit plan. The first rule. The first thing we do next time, soon as we’re in, we find the back door. That was your job, retard.’ He stood up and pointed his cigarette at Ray who took a step back. He stared at the dusting of dandruff on Cal’s shoulders. ‘First we unlock the back door, then we look about us and see what we can find. That way, we can split, no sweat. No flapping about. Next time we might not be so lucky. We’ve got to be careful. Got it?’

Ray nodded in relief. ‘I’ll make it up to you, Cal. I promise I’ll make it up to you.’

‘We were lucky to get out in time,’ Cal went on.

‘Yeah,’ Ray agreed. ‘We were lucky.’

‘But we’ve been clever too,’ Cal added.

‘Yeah, we’ve been clever.’

‘We’re going to do one of the big properties up on the top of the hill,’ Cal was suddenly brisk. ‘You with me then, retard?’ Ray nodded. ‘Those big white houses at the top of the hill.’

‘Must be loaded,’ Ray said slowly. His bulging eyes lit up. ‘Let’s do it.’

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‘Do you think you ought?’ Brenda asked. ‘They might have a dog. What if they’ve got a dog, Cal?’

‘What are you on about, you stupid cow? We’re just going to relieve those rich bastards of some of their dosh. They’re so loaded, they don’t know what to spend it on next.’ Cal laughed loudly. He turned on Brenda. ‘Why don’t you keep your nose out of this, you stupid bitch? Go to bed.’ He cuffed her on the side of the head as she walked past. She stumbled at the blow but recovered her balance and continued on her way without demur.

Ray laughed nervously. ‘What’s she on about, what dogs?’

Cal turned. ‘You got a problem?’

‘No, nothing Cal,’ Ray muttered. His ears went bright red. ‘I wonder why she stays with you, that’s all. You’re a vicious bastard.’ The words burst out of him. He stood, mouth slack, his long legs tensed for flight.

To Ray’s relief, Cal sat down and took a long drag of his cigarette. ‘I’ll never understand it myself,’ he agreed. He leaned back and blew ragged smoke rings at the ceiling. ‘A looker like Bren. She could have anyone.’ He squinted sourly up at Ray. ‘Don’t you go getting any funny ideas.’ Ray shook his head. There was no need to explain what he thought of Brenda. He had seen the filthy smack head naked, walked in on her in the bathroom by mistake and recoiled at the sight of her scraggy tits and white belly. She hadn’t even known he was there. Cal was barking if he thought Ray fancied Brenda. Might as well shag a dead fish.

‘She’s out of my league, Cal,’ he lied with inspired cunning. ‘Too good for me,’ he added, making sure.

Cal grunted and tossed his cigarette on the floor. ‘We’re agreed then,’ he said treading the stub into the carpet.

‘It won’t happen again. I won’t let you down again,’ Ray babbled. ‘It was only a bag. I’ll get another one.’

‘It’s only a bag,’ Cal mimicked him. ‘Retard.’

‘I’ll make it up to you,’ Ray muttered, under his breath. He had a plan. He was going to surprise Cal by pulling off a job all by himself.

‘What are you grinning at?’

‘Nothing, Cal. I was just thinking about those houses on Harchester Hill.’ Ray hung his head, hugging his secret to himself. He would show Cal. He could be clever too. He didn’t know how he was going to do it, but he’d think of something.

Elliot Green checked on his mother three times a week. Mrs. Green was mobile, but it had become a major excursion for her to leave the house. Elliot tried to be a good son. He always brought her food and small toiletries so she didn’t have to go out if she was feeling tired. It was heartbreaking when she was housebound, worse when she went out. Several times neighbours had found her wandering in the street, unable to remember where she lived. There wouldn’t always be responsible people around when she got lost. But if Elliot was anxious about his mother going out, he was also concerned about her being alone in the house.

‘It’s a nightmare,’ he confided in his business partner. ‘I have to take care of everything. Pay the bills, the cleaner, the gardener, everything.’

‘You ought to move her into a home.’

‘I know. I’ve tried, but she refuses to leave the house. She’s lived there over sixty years.’

His partner whistled. ‘Bloody hell. Even so, you ought to move her. For her own good.’

Elliot sighed. ‘I wish I could, but... you don’t know my mother. You can’t tell her anything. God knows, I’ve tried.’

On Friday morning, Elliot was late. He barely had time to call on his mother and almost gave it a miss. He cursed when

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she didn't answer the door. He had to fish in his wallet for the key. It turned stiffly in the lock.

His mother lay sprawled in a heap at the foot of the stairs. Strings of fake pearls and diamonds were tangled together across her torso, a gold chain straddled her face.

Elliot felt his legs trembling as he approached and stared down at her.

'Mother?' he whispered. 'Mother?' He crouched down. He didn't want to touch her. She lay, rigid, her legs splayed, her head twisted at an awkward angle so her glassy eyes appeared to be staring straight at him in blind accusation. There was nothing he could do. Nothing anyone could do. He reached out and touched his mother's eyelid. No response. He wondered if medical attention might help but sat on his heels for what felt like hours, unable to move.

When he finally stood up, he noticed a blood stain on the carpet. A wave of nausea hit him. He turned and hurried back down the hall, and threw up over the front step.

2

Funeral

Geraldine glanced around the kitchen.

Hannah bridled, misunderstanding the expression on her friend's face. 'There's no need to look so disapproving,' she snapped. 'Not everyone's as anal as you.' Geraldine smiled as Hannah seized a damp rag and swiped at a patch of butter on the table, smearing crumbs. 'Oh sod it. Let's go in the other room.' As though that would be any better.

Over the years Geraldine had grown used to the chaos that surrounded Hannah. Looking around at the jumble of clothes, children's books, toys and women's magazines, Geraldine remembered her surprise the first time she had walked into Hannah's bedroom after school.

'No wonder you keep losing your homework,' she had said, staring primly at the clutter that covered every surface of her friend's room.

'I know, I'm hopeless.' Hannah had shaken her head until her ponytail wiggled. 'My mum goes spare.' That was how their friendship had begun. Geraldine lost count of the number of times she saved Hannah from detention by lending her friend books, PE kit, or homework to copy.

'So what's the problem this time?' Hannah asked. She swept a pile of towels off a chair so Geraldine could sit down. 'I thought you were going to Dubrovnik with Craig. I thought you said it was all booked.'

'It was. It is.'

'So...?'

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Geraldine shrugged. 'I'm not sure I want to go away right now.'

Her friend let out an exaggerated sigh. 'It's a bit late to be having second thoughts, isn't it? I thought you liked this boyfriend. Why did you agree to go away with him if you don't like him?'

'Of course I like him. I really like him. But –'

'But what?'

'I've already had to take time off –'

'For your mother's funeral. That's hardly a holiday. And in any case, one thing's got nothing to do with the other. If anything, it's even more reason for you to go away. Look, you've booked this trip to Dubrovnik, haven't you? You've paid for it. For goodness' sake, give yourself a break. You're entitled to a holiday. We're not getting any younger. And it's not healthy to be so obsessed with your work.'

'I'm not obsessed with my work. I happen to believe it's important, that's all.'

'Self-important more like.'

'That's not fair. Police murder enquiries protect everyone.'

'Oh cut the pompous crap. So you're a detective inspector. Well, good for you. You work on a Murder Investigation Team. You make a difference to people's lives and help to make society better for everyone. I'm not saying you don't. But what about *your* life? You've finally met someone you like. At least give him a chance. It'll be a break if nothing else. You need to get away. You look terrible. Understandably. You have just lost your mother.' She patted Geraldine's hand sympathetically and Geraldine sighed. She couldn't even tell her oldest friend how she felt about her mother's death.

From an early age Geraldine had been aware that her sister, Celia, was very close to their mother. As they grew up, her sister's life followed a similar pattern to their mother's. Geraldine, independent, ambitious, hadn't married

or produced precious grandchildren. Her mother had never openly criticised the life choices Geraldine made, but nothing Geraldine achieved ever seemed to please her. Her mother had greeted the news of Geraldine's promotion to detective inspector with congratulations but she was more interested in hearing about her granddaughter.

'I'm a detective inspector, mum,' Geraldine had wanted to shout. 'I've worked hard for this. It means something. It matters.'

But her mother was speaking to Chloe. 'You're going to learn the flute? How wonderful!'

'How wonderful,' Geraldine had echoed, smiling at her young niece.

When Geraldine's mother died unexpectedly, Geraldine felt crushed by regret that she had never tried to improve their relationship. Now it was too late. The funeral passed in a blur. A chill wind gusted across the cemetery making Geraldine's eyes water. She glanced around the drab assembly of mourners. Celia, black coated, leaned on her husband, shaking with grief. Unmoved, Geraldine watched the wooden casket disappear from view. Her sadness had given way to a dull anger. Her mother had never really cared for her.

The ceremony over, the mourners went to Celia's house. Time gathered dust while Geraldine engaged in small talk with vaguely familiar relatives.

'You remember me, don't you, Geraldine?'

'Yes, of course,' Geraldine lied.

'Your poor mother.'

Geraldine circulated, clutching a glass of wine.

'Wasn't it a lovely funeral?'

'Didn't Celia do everything beautifully?'

'Those lilies.'

'You know she saw to everything herself?'

'Well, you couldn't expect Geraldine to —' Catching sight of Geraldine, the speaker pressed thin lips together. Geraldine turned away, pretending she hadn't heard.

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‘Thank God they’ve all gone,’ Geraldine exclaimed when she finally fell into an armchair and kicked her shoes off.

Celia burst into tears. ‘I’m sorry,’ she mumbled, dropping her face into her hands. ‘I miss her so much.’

Geraldine wondered if working with other people’s anguish had dulled her capacity to experience it first hand. While Celia was inconsolable, Geraldine felt only a guilty impatience to return to work. ‘When’s Chloe coming back? I’m –’ She almost said she was dying to see her niece. Celia had decided that her daughter was too young to attend the funeral. ‘I can’t wait to see her.’

Celia blew her nose. ‘Yes, it’s been a while since you were here. You won’t believe how much she’s grown. Seven going on seventeen. You will stay here tonight, won’t you? I know you’re busy, but it would be nice to see more of you, and I’m not saying it just for my sake. I know Chloe would like to spend more time with you. She’s growing up so fast.’

‘Yes, I’d like that. I know I’ve been preoccupied with work lately, but I will make more of an effort.’ She studied her sister. Other than their pale complexions, they weren’t alike. Geraldine had always envied Celia her ash blonde hair, fine and naturally wavy. Geraldine’s hair was coarse and straight, so dark it was almost black.

‘We’ve only got each other now,’ Celia said.

‘I’ll change.’ Geraldine promised out loud. ‘I want to spend more time with you.’

‘Yes, this makes you think, doesn’t it? None of us know how much more time we’ve got.’ Celia sniffed.

Chloe’s return lightened the mood. She came running in, pigtails bouncing, and flung herself at Geraldine. ‘Are we going shopping, Aunty Geraldine?’

Geraldine smiled. ‘Not this time, Chloe. But soon, I promise.’

‘Don’t pester Aunty Geraldine or she won’t buy you any more presents,’ Celia scolded.

Chloe snuggled down on the sofa beside Geraldine and prattled about her best friend. She kept up her chatter throughout supper. When Chloe finally went to bed Celia broke down in tears again. Geraldine reached for another bottle of wine.

‘You’ll regret it in the morning,’ her sister warned her. ‘Haven’t you had enough?’

‘I’m not driving, and it’s not as if I’m on duty.’

‘Your all important duty.’

‘Here, let me,’ Geraldine’s brother-in-law seized the corkscrew from Geraldine.

‘You need some coffee,’ Celia snapped. ‘For God’s sake, Geraldine, we buried our mother today. Show some respect.’

‘Respect the dead.’ For the first time that day, Geraldine felt like weeping. ‘That’s all I ever bloody do. I spend my whole life respecting the dead.’

‘Coffee,’ her brother-in-law said firmly. He stood up and took the bottle from Geraldine.

‘You’ll feel terrible in the morning,’ Celia said. She was crying again.

‘I feel terrible anyway.’ Geraldine felt queasy, yearning for a grief she didn’t feel.

‘Your mother’s dead, you unnatural bitch,’ she muttered to herself as she climbed into bed. In her mind, a small voice answered. So what?

When Geraldine opened her eyes the next morning, her head felt as though someone was thumping it with a bottle. Groaning, she rolled out of bed and kept her eyes shut as she felt around for her clothes.

‘So I did suffer when my mother died, after all,’ she thought sourly.