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RALPH

—Yes, we're aware that someone's been killed, of course we are. What a terrible way to die, absolutely horrific. My wife was one of the first on the scene. She's over the road right now at number two, Sissy Watkins' house – Naomi Morgan, she's called, you've probably spoken to her already?

—I personally wasn't here, no, I was playing tennis at the club on the other side of the high street. I must've left here at about eight.

—Yeah, it all looked normal on the corner when I left. The usual scrapheap. Piles of rubble everywhere, cars wedged in like some crazy 3D jigsaw. A total disaster zone. Listen, I don't mean to do your job for you, but you'll save yourself a whole lot of legwork if you forget the rest of us and go and ask him how this happened.

—Darren Booth, of course, who do you think I mean? The man responsible for this tragedy! And

while you're at it, maybe you should find out from the council where they've been while all of this has been going on, eh? If you ask me, they've been completely negligent these last few months. These budget cuts have gone way too far and all it takes is one character like him and suddenly we're living in the Wild West.

—My relationship with him? Mutual hatred, I would say. I recognized his type straightaway. Doesn't give a shit what anyone else thinks. Uncivilized, basically. I remember the first conversation we had – if you can call it that – the weekend he moved in. He almost came at me with a hammer . . .

MR RALPH MORGAN, 7 LOWLAND
WAY, HOUSE-TO-HOUSE INQUIRIES BY THE
METROPOLITAN POLICE, 11 AUGUST 2018

Eight weeks earlier

The first clue that something was amiss that Friday evening was that the parking space outside his house was occupied by a filthy white Toyota so decrepit it was bordering on scrap. Certainly not the vehicle of choice of anyone *he* knew on Lowland Way.

If you entered the street from the park end, as Ralph generally did when he drove home from his warehouse in Bermondsey, you proceeded along a sliding scale of house sizes – and prices – from pretty workmen's cottages through narrow three-storey terraces to the large detached Victorians

at the Portsmouth Avenue end. These were indisputably the best properties, their old brick glowing furnace-red in spectacular contrast to the green of the elms that lined the road.

Ralph and his family had occupied number 7 for over fifteen years, while, right next door at number 5, his brother Finn and his family had been in residence for twelve. It was as good as it got, the brothers agreed, and for half the price you'd pay in some parts of London.

Parking was the big compromise. The front gardens were too shallow for off-street parking and the street bays were unrestricted by the council, which effectively meant a free-for-all. Hence the occasional intruder.

Nosing past the Toyota, he became aware of his wind-screen blurring. It took him a second or two to register that the wall of number 1 was being smashed to smithereens by some barbarian workman, a dust cloud drifting into the road. Nearby, a white-panelled van hogged the spaces of two cars, which explained the parking disruption.

'What the hell ...?' Ralph pulled over, wound down his window, and called to the builder: 'Excuse me, what's going on here?'

The guy didn't hear him. Under his grey overalls, his physique was unexpectedly slight given the dirt tornado he'd produced single-handedly.

Ralph raised his voice: 'Hey! Can you please stop!'

This time, the worker halted, remaining for a second or two with his back to the street, to Ralph's car, with a stillness that struck Ralph as a little sinister. Then he turned and approached, lump hammer in hand. His face was smeared with dirt, his expression casually defiant.

‘Can I ask who hired you to knock down this wall?’ Ralph said.

‘You can *ask* what you like, mate.’ The accent was standard South London, not Eastern European as Ralph had naturally expected, and the mild tone made Ralph’s own sound peremptory, officious.

‘Was it the council? Because they’ve got no right to demolish it. This wall is one hundred per cent the property of number one, I’ve seen the documents with my own eyes.’

Occupying a generous plot next to Finn’s house, semi-detached numbers 1 and 3 were the only pair of post-war houses on the street and, set back far enough to allow a short, shared drive, the only ones with private parking. The high wall on the corner, all that remained of the original Victorian villa that had been flattened in the Blitz, had in recent years been under threat by the council, who wanted to widen the left turn from Portsmouth Avenue – basically turning Lowland Way into a rat run. Supported by the owner of number 1, Old Jean, the Morgans had led the campaign against – and won.

Since late December, when Jean had passed away, the house had stood empty, the wall forgotten. Ralph had taken his eye off the ball, evidently.

A new thought struck him. ‘Unless . . . wait, is there a new owner? Is that who hired you?’

‘There *is* a new owner, yeah.’ There was a malevolent swagger to the way this guy gripped his hammer, Ralph’s open window just swinging distance away. How easily he could bludgeon Ralph’s skull if he chose!

Ralph’s fingers hovered over the window controls. He was

experiencing a primitive antipathy towards this person, as if encountering a member of a rival tribe who'd entered his settlement without permission. He jerked his gaze back to the man's face, tried to size him up. He must be, how old? Mid-fifties? He had a large bald patch, pink from sun or exertion, and deep facial lines mortared with dirt: older than Ralph, certainly.

Ralph coughed, the dust catching in his throat. 'Can I have his number? I'll fill him in on the situation.'

'Another time, mate,' the builder said. 'I'm in the middle of something here.' And returning to the wall, hammer raised, he smashed it with an unrestrained violence that made Ralph brace in his seat.

Plucking lines from his anger-management toolkit – *Breathe out more than in ... Repeat to yourself: you are perceiving a threat that may not be there* – he sealed the window shut and reversed down Lowland Way and into the first available space, all the way back at number 19. He was normally very skilled at parallel parking, but this evening it was necessary to make several adjustments before he finally turned off the ignition.

Checking his phone, he saw, too late, a missed call from Naomi, followed by a text:

New neighbour at No. 1, looks tricky! Come straight home and let's discuss.

Oh, fuck.

Letting himself in, Ralph struggled to reconcile his horror at the wall demolition with the nervous exhilaration of renewed battle.

‘You seen what’s going on out there, Nay?’

‘I certainly have.’ Naomi was in the kitchen at the back of the house. The co-founder of a website for mums of preschoolers – ‘curator, not editor,’ she would correct Ralph – she was based at her partner’s live-work unit a twenty-minute power-walk away and usually had dinner underway by the time he arrived home (Ralph prided himself on taking over the cooking at weekends). Lean in grey activewear and tall even in black ballet pumps, she looked like a wife and mother in a commercial as she stood at the marble-topped island, tossing the glistening leaves of a salad; as usual, she scooped the cherry tomatoes to the top in the hope of hoodwinking the family’s lettuce-haters.

At his approach, she turned, tongs raised. A strand of dark hair – long and smooth, policed regularly for grey – drifted into her eye and she used an elegantly bent wrist to dislodge it. ‘I’m as appalled as you are, darling, believe me. But it’s too late to save the wall, so there’s no point getting into a row with the new owner tonight. I thought we’d go and introduce ourselves to him in the morning when the dust’s settled – literally. Find out his plans, stop him from doing anything else crazy.’

As if by his master’s voice, Ralph was soothed. There was a lifetime of confidence in Naomi’s well-formed vowels, the conviction that she would not just meet your expectations but blow them out of the water. ‘What makes you think this bloke is the owner? I thought he was just the builder.’

‘I checked the Land Registry website and it’s showing someone called Darren Booth. I googled him and found a photo. It’s definitely the guy who’s smashing the wall.’ Finished with the salad, Naomi opened the fridge and handed

Ralph a beer. Friday was one of their four permitted drinking nights, with the declared long-term aim of shrinking it to two. Though the kitchen doors were fully open to the garden, there were enough appliances humming to obscure any building noise three doors down.

He took his first swallow. Okay, so he'd made a mistake, that was not the way he should have handled interaction with a new neighbour. No need to bore Naomi with the details. 'There isn't any preservation order, so I suppose there's nothing to stop him replacing it if he doesn't like the style,' he conceded.

This they knew only too well. As a community, the residents took great pride in their street and had gained modest celebrity with Play Out Sunday, their initiative to clear the street of traffic so the kids could play outdoors the old-fashioned way (Naomi's brainchild; she'd been given an award by the mayor). Aesthetically, however, each household was free to make its own decisions, thanks to the council's irritating tolerance on building permissions.

'Do we know anything about him?' he asked. 'Where he's come from?'

Naomi began laying out plates and pairing cutlery. 'He's not on Facebook or Twitter, so I don't know anything personal, but he came up in recommendations for car repairs in Forest Hill – that's how I identified him. Sissy's doing some digging. She doesn't recognize him, but he must be a relative of Jean's to have inherited the place.'

'I think you're right,' said Ralph. The house had not been listed for sale and when the neighbours at number 3, Ant and Em Kendall, had rung the solicitor to enquire, they'd been told probate was proceeding at a standard pace – butt

out, in other words. ‘Even in the state it’s in it must be worth seven hundred thousand. There’s no way someone like him could’ve found the money to buy it.’

Someone like him: this was rich coming from a self-made man like Ralph, who grew up on a council estate in Kent, but perhaps it was also the reason he was qualified to generalize. He understood first-hand the limited routes available for success.

In his case, it was raw talent that had propelled him to his status as sole proprietor of a wholesale business specializing in small leather goods. Manager of a staff of twenty. Owner of a riverside warehouse now worth ten times what he’d paid for it, thanks to the gentrification of Bermondsey in the noughties that made the rise of Lowland Gardens look sluggish.

He was making short work of the beer. ‘It’s bad news for the Kendalls. The dust is terrible.’

‘They’re on holiday, so hopefully they’ll miss the worst of it.’ Naomi put on oven gloves and transferred a large Le Creuset casserole from oven to table, calling for the kids, who were upstairs in their individual chambers, doubtless getting post-school fixes of their chosen digital poison. Ralph imagined them with their heads tipped back and eyes half-closed, like the junkies in *Trainspotting*. (There was no Play Out Friday, evidently.)

‘Where’re the dogs?’ he asked.

‘Tess is walking them for me. I must remember to return the favour sometime.’ Naomi pulled a face. ‘God knows when.’

The kids arrived, lethargic at first but soon out-bellowing one another with their news; Libby was twelve, Charlie

seven, but the age gap did nothing to temper their rivalry. The subject of Darren Booth was dropped. Naomi didn't agree with slagging people off in front of the kids; it set the wrong tone. Never underestimate appearances, her mother had taught her.

Fuck what anyone else thinks, Ralph's father had taught *him*.

Oh yeah, and also, *Defend your turf*.

As usual, his wife's instincts were impeccable, Ralph noted with satisfaction. Declaring it tactically smarter to welcome the newcomer as a group, she summoned Sissy and Finn and Tess to join them for the meet-and-greet.

Finn arrived while Naomi was out delivering the kids to their Saturday morning activities, entering through the bespoke steel-framed glass kitchen doors that had cost an arm and a leg ('Return on investment, babe,' Naomi had argued, quoting house prices; she knew exactly how to sweet talk him). The brothers' houses had free access to each other's at the rear, the fence between the two gardens having been removed when the kids were very young – which was, in case anyone wanted to know, *completely* different from this new guy's butchery. They'd returfed the communal garden to create a space wide enough for a game of football or badminton and now their kids were growing up with the equivalent of a small park for a garden eight miles from the centre of London – who wouldn't feel like a smug bastard about that?

'I've come to join up,' Finn said, helping himself to coffee with the strong, oversized hands that reminded Ralph of his brother's spell labouring on a building site one summer in

his twenties. Two years younger than Ralph and arguably more handsome (thicker hair, bluer eyes, whatever), Finn was, however, neither as rich, which everyone said was the most important thing, nor as tall, which everyone *knew* was the most important thing.

‘Good man,’ Ralph said. ‘I’ve got a bad feeling about this Booth character.’

‘Is that what the invader’s called?’

‘According to Nay. She’ll be here in a minute. Where’s Tess?’

‘Doing the swimming run. She said to go without her.’

No matter. Tess was no pushover, but she didn’t have her sister-in-law’s talent for first impressions, a fact demonstrated when Naomi sailed back in, dynamic in blood-red ribbed top and vintage jean skirt, legs still tanned from their Easter holiday in Dubai. Her hair swung free the way Ralph liked it.

‘Hi, Finn, ready for the charm offensive? Sissy says she’ll join us over there.’ She swept up the tin of biscotti she intended to give the newcomer. ‘I’m guessing he’ll invite us in for a coffee?’

I wouldn’t count on it, Ralph thought. This guy wouldn’t know biscotti if it pounded him from the sky in a blizzard.

The child-free window being narrow, the three set off at once. Since the Kendalls had revived number 3 with fresh paintwork and palm-print roller blinds, number 1 had been a drab counterpart to its twin, but the contrast this morning was more pronounced than ever. The wall was completely eviscerated, or rather, redistributed into a mountain of bricks and rubble on the lawn, and the effect on the house was to make it look far more desolate than when it had been unoccupied. The white van had been moved into the drive, parallel

with a ten-year-old Ford Focus parked partially on the grass, and bumper to bumper with a Honda, which hung off the bottom of the drive and blocked the pavement. The Honda was raised by a professional-looking hydraulic jack and under its chassis lay Booth, his face just visible.

‘Hello again,’ said Ralph. ‘I think we got off on the wrong foot yesterday.’ Perhaps it was his choice of words, perhaps the shattered remains of the wall in his peripheral vision, but he had the sudden hooligan impulse to step forwards and stamp on the man’s head.

Don’t be a nutter. Breathe more out than in.

‘Any chance you could come out from under there for a minute?’ Naomi called, pitch-perfect breezy, and Booth duly slid out and sprang to his feet, unsettlingly agile.

Devoid this time of dust and dirt, his features were clearer to see – a bulging forehead and flat boxer’s nose; a relaxed, almost gentle mouth that was at odds with the insolence of his pale-eyed gaze.

Was it insolence or was that Ralph’s own projection? He wasn’t so egocentric as to not suspect that the others’ instincts might differ from his. *They* might like him.

‘We wanted to welcome you to the street,’ Naomi said, warmly. ‘I’m Naomi Morgan and this is my husband Ralph and his brother Finn.’

Booth glanced from Ralph to Finn, settling on Ralph. ‘What is this, the return of the Kray twins?’

Naomi smiled gamely. ‘They’re not twins, no, but they are next-door neighbours. We’re at numbers five and seven.’

Booth screwed up his eyes like this was hard to process. ‘You’re *brothers*, living *next door* to each other?’

‘Yes,’ Naomi said. ‘We’re lucky, it’s a very happy arrangement. You’re probably wondering who lives next door to you?’ She gestured to number 3 and Booth glanced over his shoulder as if only now noticing his new house had another one attached to it. ‘Ant and Em Kendall, a lovely couple with a gorgeous baby boy. They’re on holiday at the moment, back next weekend, I think.’

Poor buggers, Ralph thought. ‘I didn’t catch your name yesterday?’ he said. He knew it, of course, but he didn’t want the guy to know they’d been checking up on him like the secret police.

‘Darren.’

‘Well, full disclosure, Darren,’ Naomi said, her voice conspiratorial. ‘It’s disappointing for us to see the wall taken down because we campaigned to save it three years ago, when the council wanted to widen the road. It was blatant land grabbing, completely illegal.’

‘You need to make sure you rebuild on exactly the same boundary, otherwise they’ll be straight back in there,’ Finn advised.

‘He’s right,’ Ralph said. ‘That’s why I was so shocked yesterday. I’m sorry if I was a bit abrupt.’ He was aware that the apology didn’t sound sincere – it wasn’t – but the sight of Sissy crossing to join them inspired fresh bonhomie: ‘Ah, Sissy, come and meet our new neighbour, Darren!’

‘Morning, everyone,’ said Sissy, in her pleasant, unassuming way. She held a bunch of crocuses, hand-tied with green ribbon. ‘I’m very pleased to meet you, Darren. I see you’ve already been busy ...’

Destroying a historic part of our street, Ralph finished,

silently. To him – to all of them – Sissy was a touchstone of old-school decency. Solidly built and direct of gaze, she always kept her silver-streaked hair pinned from her face as if to display the full force of her integrity. Today she was dressed in a well-pressed skirt and blouse, which probably meant she had B&B guests, as she often did at weekends. Breakfast must have been served by now and the guests packing or already on their way. Lowland Way was wide, wide as an avenue, but Ralph didn't envy her the direct view she had of the tip Booth had created in less than twenty-four hours.

'Are you related to Jean?' she asked Darren.

'She was my mum's half-sister. We weren't close.' Even though it was Sissy who'd asked the question, Ralph noticed that Darren eyed *him* when he answered.

'She was a lovely lady,' Sissy said. 'I'm sorry for your loss. Are you new to the area? Where did you live before?'

Again, he directed his response at Ralph. 'Loughborough Estate.'

Quite an upgrade then: the Loughborough Estate was a few miles north and not without its share of crime and deprivation.

'Is it just you or do you have a family?' Naomi asked.

'Just me and my other half.'

'Is she in? Busy unpacking, I expect. I'd love to give her these.' Sissy raised the flowers. 'They're from my garden.'

'She's still in bed, I think,' Darren said.

Ralph didn't need to look to know that both Sissy and Naomi would be suppressing raised eyebrows at this. It was ten thirty; the families on the street had been up since seven.

'This house has got so much potential, hasn't it?' Naomi

said. ‘Seventies houses are really in vogue right now. Have you had an architect in?’

‘An architect?’ Darren sniggered, scornful, as if she’d suggested getting the Historic Royal Palaces people in to advise on his moat. ‘I’m doing all the work myself, love.’

All the work?

‘That sounds ambitious.’ Naomi cocked her head. ‘Have you applied for permission to extend, then? I don’t think I’ve seen the notice up.’

Ralph smirked. Nobody did it better than Naomi, that easy reminder that there were rules (even in this council) and they’d all get along just fine if Darren remembered to follow them.

Darren shrugged. ‘Need to have a proper look at the place first. New bathroom for starters and the roof needs fixing.’

Neither of which required permission, Ralph knew.

‘What d’you do for a living?’ Finn asked.

Darren gestured to the tools at his feet. ‘I’m a mechanic, aren’t I.’ As if it were a totally moronic question.

Ralph remembered what Naomi had said about the repairs recommendation and his gaze swept past the three vehicles in the drive to a Peugeot parked in the street, its bonnet open: if that was Booth’s as well, that made five including the van. *Five!* The van was presumably a repository of tools, though Ralph stopped short of opening the doors and inspecting its contents. ‘Where’s your garage based?’ he asked, then, when there was no response: ‘You’re not thinking of working from *here*, are you?’

Darren looked from brother to brother with the same mocking expression as before. ‘What is this, the Spanish

Inquisition?’ But Ralph knew a deflection when he heard one. You needed a licence to run a business from residential premises and he had a strong hunch this guy didn’t have one.

He met Darren’s eye. ‘So these vehicles are all for your personal use, are they? All taxed and insured?’

‘Ralph,’ Naomi said, mildly, ‘we don’t want to jump to—’

‘Keep your fucking nose out, mate,’ Darren snapped at Ralph, interrupting her, and there was a collective intake of breath.

‘I’m really not sure that’s how you want to be speaking to your new neighbours,’ Ralph began, and he felt his wife’s fingers on his arm, steering him backwards. As if in counterbalance, Finn took a pace forwards to stand shoulder to shoulder with his brother.

‘Well, I’m sure you’ll love it here,’ Naomi told Darren, as if the scene had not taken an unpleasant turn. ‘We’d love you and your wife to come over for a drink sometime, wouldn’t we, boys?’

‘Yeah,’ Ralph said, though to his knowledge no man of Booth’s charmless ilk had ever crossed the threshold of number 7, not unless he’d come to read the meter.

Having presented the biscotti and flowers, Naomi and Sissy turned to leave. Finn, fixing Darren with an unimpressed last stare, followed them. Only Ralph lingered, he and Darren regarding each other in silent dialogue.

You’ve been warned, Ralph’s stare said.

And Darren’s responded: *I see who you think you are, but I know you’re no better than me.*

Suppressing a shudder, Ralph retreated. Some of the rubble from the wall had spilled across the shared drive to Ant and

Em's side and he spent a moment or two toeing the stones back across before joining Finn and Naomi on the pavement. Sissy was already through her own gate at number 2, rows of bays in tall pots like staff lined up to greet her.

'I have two words,' Naomi told the brothers as they walked back.

'What?' Ralph said. 'Complete Twat?'

Loud enough, maybe, for Booth to hear.

'No,' Naomi said. 'Open Mind. And don't even *think* about going near those cars. I know what you two used to get up to back in the day.'

The brothers had done their share of keying cars and letting down tyres as kids, edited highlights of which Ralph had shared with his wife. She was happy to joke about juvenile delinquency, sure, but he was under no illusion that she'd have been repelled if she'd known him growing up. If she'd looked at him at all it would have been with pity, perhaps while helping in the community as part of her Duke of Edinburgh award or whatever. Lucky they'd met in their twenties, then, when Ralph was a reformed specimen, already twice promoted by a big importer based in Battersea and researching start-up costs for his own business. He'd flat-shared in Clapham with a young colleague and barfly, and Naomi had been among the many attractive female graduates who'd gravitated to the area's drinking holes in the late 1990s.

Back then, they wouldn't have cared about someone like Darren Booth. They wouldn't have cared about old walls or cars being repaired in neighbours' front gardens.

Well, they cared now.

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