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*To Alison Graham*



# 1

London looks so different in the daylight. Undressed somehow, indecent. And that's before you count the people, those who belong here and the ones who never will, the lost and the found.

I'd been watching the street for over an hour when I saw her, coming out of the house. I hadn't even known there was a house here – thinking it was all offices, restaurants and coffee shops. When last night I'd followed Joe only to lose him on this street, I'd said to myself he must have slipped into a late-night restaurant, expecting the bill to be paid by the stranger who'd picked him up earlier in the evening. Joe always attracted strangers. I'd said to myself they were hungry – Joe was always hungry – and they'd stumbled on this strip of West London with its bright lights and dirty pavements, the hot smell of cooking from kitchens. In daylight, it all made another sort of sense.

The street looked grey and tight-lipped. The girl leaving the house was the only colourful thing in it; so colourful, she hurt my eyes. I watched her swaying down the steps from the house, yellow pigtail bumping at her shoulder. Twenty-three or so, in a lilac coat and scarlet jeans, an easy smile on her lips. One of those

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world-at-her-feet girls, every birthday with a cake baked and candles burning, unwrapped presents lying in a welter of red ribbon. No one had ever abandoned her, or turned their back. She'd never know loneliness, never find herself without friends or hope. Hard not to feel a sharp little stab of anger at her complacency. Her life was so easy and she didn't even know it, how suddenly the world could cave at your feet, swallow you whole.

I wondered what had happened inside the house to put that smile on her lips. Such a strange house to find hidden away here, so narrow it was nearly invisible. Three storeys of brown brick with a white wreath moulded to its door below a window of wrinkled glass. No bell to be rung; she'd raised her fist to knock. I hadn't seen who opened the door since a lorry blocked my view, as it had last night. But now I'd seen the house, it seemed obvious to me that this was where Joe had disappeared last night. The woman who'd picked him up – she must live here. They'd been hungry, I'd got that much right, but it wasn't food they'd wanted. In the nightclub, she'd singled Joe out, imagining he was alone. Well, he was. I'd been there in the background, but we weren't together. Joe hadn't noticed me following him to the club. He hadn't noticed me in days. As for the woman, she'd had eyes for no one but Joe. The girl coming down the steps from the narrow house could be her daughter, they were so alike, each so blonde, like an over-exposed photograph. Joe's woman had worn a belted black satin coat and high heels, showing enough skin at her throat to make you wonder whether she was wearing clothes underneath, her hair pinned up out of the way. This girl wore a pigtail tied with a black bow. She'd spent half an hour inside the house; I'd noticed her going in, and I'd seen her coming out. Six shallow steps led up to the front door. More steps

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led down to a basement but that was hidden behind railings, hard to see from a distance.

I'd had time to study the house from my seat in the window of the coffee shop that called itself a diner. Hungry's, the name painted above an ancient awning. The faces of celebrities stared from the walls, actors and singers who'd gorged here on toasted sandwiches and lemon meringue pie. I couldn't afford the pie or even a plate of toast. I'd scraped together the last of my loose change for the cup of tea I was sipping as slowly as I could. The diner was warm and greasy, smelling of bacon fat and coffee grounds. They let me sit in the window undisturbed. It's possible they thought me a good advert with my grumbling stomach and pinched face, the face of Hungry's. Traffic trundled past the window, indifferently. I might have been invisible for all the notice anyone took. I was used to that, it didn't bother me, but the street did.

This street and I were old enemies. I'd walked it many times but never spied the narrow house, too busy being the eyes in the back of Joe's head as he scored whatever he needed to get through another night, or another day. He couldn't stand to be cold, he said, as if what he was scoring was a woolly scarf rather than a Class A drug. We'd been homeless for six weeks. It'd been all right while the summer lasted, but the year was turning and Joe with it, turning away from me. We were sleeping on the Embankment, not far from this street which was home to dealers and addicts, and well-heeled West Londoners. I'd thought it had no houses, only places to eat and work, like the restaurant with its mirrored tiles, the office block with its smoked-glass windows. Between these two, the narrow house was slipped like a lover's note, long forgotten. It must have been a listed building to have survived the surrounding

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development. Five ornate plaster letters ran across its face, 'Starl', edited by the loud red front of the restaurant where last night I'd expected to find the woman in the satin coat buying Joe his supper. But it was the house that had swallowed them. Last night, after I'd given up searching, I'd retreated to our spot on the Embankment, missing Joe's warmth at my back. This morning, I'd gathered the last of my change and come here to keep watch for him, not knowing what else to do. I was responsible for Joe, that's how it felt, that's how it was. And he was in the narrow house across the street, I was sure of it. But just as sure he wouldn't want rescuing, not by me who hadn't the cash for a second cup of tea, let alone whatever was on offer across the road.

The girl with the pigtail was coming towards me, swerving through traffic. Away from the house, towards the diner. My teeth twinged from the tea. I had to steady my hand on the cup.

She dragged the door open, letting in a lick of wind and litter.

She was younger than I'd thought, acne spoiling the beige mask she'd made of her face, and achingly pretty with big blue eyes and a plump pink mouth sitting open over white teeth. At the counter, she ordered a skinny latte in a sleepy voice. Did anything ever put a crease in her nose, or make her curl her hands into fists? Did she sit up in the night as I did, icy sweat on her shoulders, straining to see in the darkness whatever it was that'd scared her awake? I couldn't imagine it.

Her coffee was served in a takeaway cup. She sat at the table next to mine and took out a phone, pecking at it with painted fingers, her free hand stroking her throat. 'It's me.' She stretched the personal pronoun to two syllables. 'I got it, but I turned it down . . . No, listen, it was weird. Like the whole set-up, just really weird.'

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She was talking about a job. In the narrow house, across the street. Could this be my way in?

‘Dr Wilder.’ She lowered her voice to a lazy purr. ‘Robin.’ A pause, her fingers walking up her neck, before she laughed. ‘God, no. He’s ancient!’ More laughter. ‘Later, okay? Yes, yes I will.’

I stood as she ended the call, cocking my head. ‘I couldn’t help overhearing,’ I said.

‘Excuse me?’

‘I work for Gazelle, the recruitment agency? Our offices are just up the road.’ I gestured vaguely then gave what I hoped was a conspiratorial smile. ‘I’ve sneaked out for a coffee break!’

She blinked to bring me into focus. Girls like her never noticed me unless they made a special effort. I had a useful face, the kind that gets me out of trouble, now. When I was younger, it gave me away, over-sharing my sadness or rage. My face left me nowhere to hide, that’s what Meagan Flack said. But I’d trained it to be a good face, a mirror face, giving back what people wanted to see.

‘Oh . . .’ The girl perked her lips into a smile. ‘Sorry, are you recruiting on your coffee break? Only I’ve just turned down a job offer. I need some time to regroup.’

‘Of course. But you did say Dr Robin Wilder? From—’ I nodded towards the narrow house.

‘Starling Villas,’ she supplied. ‘Yes. Why?’

She was frowning finally, the smallest dent in her self-confidence. Had she taken the trouble to study me, she might have questioned my alibi. For one thing, my hair needed washing and my teeth a good brushing. But she didn’t take the trouble. I calculated she didn’t need the job she’d been offered in Starling Villas; she’d walk into another easily enough. I indicated we should sit, making a



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gesture of confidentiality of the kind I'd seen from social workers, and the police.

'I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but we've had a little trouble over there.' I lowered my voice, forcing her to lean into me. 'Dr Wilder . . . Let's say he isn't the kind of employer I'd want for my sisters.' I was going to say *for myself*, but judged *sisters* to be better.

Her face stayed smooth, untroubled. 'Why not?'

'He can be a hard taskmaster.' She remained blank so I tried, 'He's not the best boss. He doesn't always pay his bills.' I was warming to my theme. 'And he has a temper. We've had . . . complaints.'

I put a pause there, for her to fill in the blank.

She blinked her indignation. 'They didn't say anything about any of that, at my agency.'

I sipped at my cold tea. 'He's clever at covering his tracks.'

'I still think they should've said something. I was alone in the house with him. I mean, he *said* he was alone.'

'You didn't see anyone else in the house?'

She shook her head. Had I made a mistake?

'I felt I had a duty to speak up when I overheard you on the phone.' I looked her over, taking care to be impressed by what I saw. 'You know, my agency has a lot of good vacancies for young professionals.'

'Oh, it's not that.' She tossed her head. I'd always imagined that was an expression people used in books, but she actually did it. 'It's not like I'm desperate.'

'That's what I thought. Let someone else be the one he pushes around and doesn't pay!'

'You should tell the police what he's like.' She sipped at her

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coffee. 'Seriously. I knew it was weird but not everyone has my instinct.' She was psychic, on top of everything else.

'The job offer. Was it for . . . ?'

'PA. He has like a ton of boxes and books. He said it needs sorting out but frankly it's a mess in there.' She inspected her glossy fingernails. 'I'm going to make a complaint to my agency. They said it was different to an office job as he's working from home or whatever, but they didn't say anything about him being a pervert, or not getting paid.'

Nor did I say anything about him being a pervert. She'd made up a story in her head, admittedly with my help, a tale to tell her friends. She was shiny with it. I'd given her something better than a boring job shelving books and sorting boxes, ruining her nails into the bargain.

'I'd rather you didn't say anything to your agency.' I frowned, as if thinking it over. 'I mean, you could, but my agency is working with the police and HMRC to gather evidence. I'd hate anything to get in the way of that.'

'Oh, right.' She nodded, bored with me now. 'I wish I'd known about all this when I was over there, that's all. I'd have told him where to stick his job.'

'I thought you did tell him.' I switched on a big smile then dimmed it to a frown. 'Are you sure he understood you turned it down?' Had she lied about it, told him she'd think about it? Under the table, my feet danced with impatience.

'I'll make it clear to him now.' She tossed her pigtail over her shoulder, reaching for her phone.

I listened while she made the call in a freeze-dried version of her voice, all the warmth iced out of it. The voice she used to break

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up with men. She'd broken up with plenty of men, I could tell. She took pleasure in disappointing Dr Robin Wilder, killing whatever hope he'd had of her accepting his job offer. She'd be dining out on my story for months.

We left Hungry's together, the girl sipping her coffee as she swayed towards the tube station. I waited until she was out of sight before I crossed the road to Starling Villas, climbing the six steps to the door with the plaster wreath.

Setting my nylon rucksack at my feet, I lifted my fist and knocked. I told myself this was it, my one chance to get inside the house which had swallowed Joe last night. I knocked and then I stepped back with the morning's traffic running behind me, waiting for him to answer.