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Opening Extract from...

Apartment 16

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PROLOGUE

When he heard the noise Seth stopped and stared, as if trying to see through the front door of apartment sixteen, the teak veneer aglow with a golden sheen. Right after descending the stairs from the ninth floor and crossing the landing the sounds began. Same as the last three nights, on his 2 a.m. patrol of the building.

Snapping out of his torpor, he flinched and took a quick step away from the door. Looming up the opposite wall, the shadow of his lanky body stretched out its arms as if grasping at a support. The sight of it made him start. ‘Fuck.’

He’d never liked this part of Barrington House, but couldn’t say why with any certainty. Maybe it was just too dark. Perhaps the lights were not set right. The head porter said there was nothing wrong with them, but they often cast shapes down the stairs Seth was walking up. It was as if a person descending was being preceded by their shadow; the impression of spiky limbs flickering ahead of them before they appeared around a bend in the staircase, sometimes even convinced Seth he’d also heard the swish of cloth and the *pumpf, pumpf, pumpf* of determined feet approaching. Only no one ever appeared, and there was never anyone up there when he turned a corner.

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But the noise in apartment sixteen was far more alarming than any shadow.

Because during the early hours of the morning in this exclusive niche of London there is little to compete with the silence of night. Outside Barrington House the warren of streets behind the Knightsbridge Road are inclined to remain peaceful. Occasionally, out front, a car will drive around Lowndes Square. Or inside, the nightwatchman becomes aware of the electric lights in the communal areas, humming like insects with their black faces pressed against the recalcitrance of glass. But from the hours of one until five the residents sleep. Indoors, there is nothing but ambient sound.

And number sixteen was unoccupied. The head porter once told him it had been empty for over fifty years. But for the fourth consecutive night Seth's attention had been drawn to it. Because of the bumping behind the door, against the door. Something he'd previously dismissed as a random noise in an old building. One that had stood for a hundred years. Something loose in a draught maybe. Something like that. But tonight it was insistant. It was louder than ever before. It was . . . determined. Had been stepped up a notch. Seemed directed at him and timed to coincide with his usually oblivious passage to the next set of stairs, during the hour when your body temperature drops and when most people die. An hour when he, the nightwatchman, was paid to patrol nine storeys of stairwell and the ancient landings on each floor. And it had never before escalated into a sudden eruption of noise like this.

A clattering of furniture across a marble floor, as if a chair or small table in the reception hall of the flat had been knocked aside. Perhaps toppling over, and even breaking. Not

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something that should be heard at any hour in a place as respectable as Barrington House.

Nervous, he continued to watch the door, as if anticipating its opening. His stare fixed on the brass number 16, polished so brightly it looked like white gold. He dared not even blink, in case it swung away from his eyes and revealed the source of the commotion. A sight he might not be able to bear. He wondered if his legs possessed the strength to carry him down eight flights of stairs in a hurry. Perhaps with something in pursuit.

He killed the thought. A little shame warmed the aftermath of his sudden fright. He was a thirty-one-year-old man, not a child. Six feet tall, and a paid deterrent. Not that he anticipated doing anything beyond being a reassuring presence when he took the job. But this had to be investigated.

Struggling to hear over the thump of his heart in his ears, Seth leaned towards the front door and placed his left ear an inch from the letter flap to listen. Silence.

His fingers made a move for the letter box. If he knelt down and pushed the brass flap inward, enough light should fall from the landing to illumine some of the hallway on the other side of the front door.

But what if somebody looked back at him?

His hand paused, then withdrew.

No one was permitted to go inside sixteen, a rule pressed upon him by the head porter when he first began the night job six months earlier. Such a strict observance was not unusual for portered apartment buildings in Knightsbridge. Even after a reasonable lottery win an ordinary member of the public would struggle to afford a flat in Barrington House. The three-bedroom apartments never sold for less

than one million pounds, and the service charge cost an additional eleven thousand per annum. Many residents filled their apartments with antiques; others guarded their privacy like war criminals and shredded their paperwork for the porters to collect in bin bags. The same instruction forbidding access existed for another five empty flats in the building. But during his patrols Seth had not once heard noises inside any of them.

Maybe someone had been given permission to stay in the apartment and one of the day porters had forgotten to record the information in the desk ledger. Unlikely, as both day porters, Piotr and Jorge, had frowned with incredulity when he first mentioned the disturbances during the morning changeover. Which left one other plausible explanation at such an hour: an intruder had broken in from the outside.

But then an intruder would need to scale the exterior of the building with a ladder. Seth had patrolled the front of the building in the last ten minutes and there had been no ladder. He could always go and wake Stephen, the head porter, and ask him to open the door. But he baulked at the thought of disturbing him at this hour; the head porter's wife was an invalid. She occupied most of his time between duties, leaving him exhausted at the end of each day.

Lowering himself to one knee, Seth pushed open the letter flap and peered into the darkness. A shock of cold air rushed past his face and with it came a smell that was familiar: a woody-camphor scent reminiscent of his grandmother's gigantic wardrobe that had been like a secret cabin to him as a boy, and an aroma not dissimilar to reading rooms in university libraries or museums built by the Victorians. A trace of former residents and antiquity, suggesting vacancy rather than use.

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The vague light that fell past his head and shoulders brightened a small section of the reception hall inside the flat. He could make out the murky outline of a telephone table against one wall, an indistinct doorway on the right-hand side, and a few square metres of floor tiled in black and white marble. The rest of the space was in shadow or complete darkness.

He screwed his eyes up against the uncomfortable draught that swelled against the front of his face and tried to see more. And failed. But his scalp prickled on account of what he heard.

Squinting into the umbra, he could hear the suggestion of something heavy being dragged at the far end of the hallway; as if a significant weight wrapped up in sheets, or supported on a large rug, was being moved in short bursts of exertion away from the tiny slot of light he had made in the front door. As the sounds receded further into the far confines of the apartment, they lessened, then ceased.

Seth wondered if he should call out and offer the darkness a challenge, but could not summon the strength to open his mouth. Acutely, he now felt he was being watched from down there. And this sudden sense of scrutiny and vulnerability made him want to close the mail flap, stand up and step away.

He dithered. It was hard to think clearly. He was tired. Weary to the marrow, clumsy and confused, paranoid even. He was thirty-one, but working these shifts made him feel eighty-one. Clear signs of sleep deprivation common to the night worker. But he had never hallucinated in his life. There was someone inside flat sixteen.

‘Jesus.’

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A door opened. Inside. Down in the dark part he couldn't see. Must have been about halfway down the hallway. It clicked open and swung wide on its trajectory, emitting a slow creak until it banged against a wall.

He did not move or blink. Just stared and anticipated the arrival of something from out of the darkness.

But there was only expectation, and silence.

Though not a total absence of sound for long. Seth began to hear something. It was faint, but closing, as if travelling towards his face.

It grew out of the hushed unlit interior of the flat. A kind of rushing sound not dissimilar to what he'd heard inside large seashells. A suggestion of faraway winds. He had a curious sense of a great distance existing at the other end of the hallway. Down there. Where he couldn't see a damn thing.

The breeze thickened where he crouched and peered. Carrying something with it. Inside it. A suggestion of a voice, far off, but still keen to be heard. A voice that sounded like it was moving in a circle miles away. No, there was more than one, there were voices. But the cries were so distant no words could be understood.

He moved his face further away from the door, his mind clutching for an explanation. Was a window open in there somewhere? Could a radio be muttering, or was it a television with the volume turned low? Impossible, the place was empty.

The wind swept closer and the voices grew louder. They were gaining a precedence in the movement of the air. And though they failed to define themselves, their tone was clear, filling him with a greater unease, and then with horror.

These were the cries of the terrified. Someone was screaming. A woman? No, it couldn't be. Now it was closer

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it sounded like an animal, and he thought of a baboon he had once seen in a zoo, roaring with scarlet lips peeling back from black gums and long yellow teeth.

It was swept away, the scream replaced by a chorus of moans, hapless in their despair but competing with each other in the cold wind. A hysterical voice, relentless in its panic, swooped closer, dominating the other voices that suddenly retreated as if pulled back by a swift tide, until he could almost hear what the new voice was saying.

He let the letter flap slam shut and there was an immediate and profound silence.

Standing up and stepping away he tried to gather his wits. Disoriented by the hammering of his pulse, he wiped the moisture from his brow with the sleeve of his pullover and noticed the dryness of his mouth, as if he had been inhaling dust.

He desperately wanted to leave the building. To go home and lie down. To end this strange sensitivity and the rush of impressions that accompanied lack of sleep. That's all it was, surely.

Taking the carpeted stairs two at a time, he fled down through the west wing to the ground-floor reception. He quickly walked past his desk and left the building through the front doors. Outside, he stood on the pavement and looked up, counting the white stone balconies until his eyes reached the eighth floor.

All of the windows were closed, not open, not even ajar, but shut tight and flush within the white frames, and the interior of apartment sixteen was further sealed by thick curtains; drawn day and night against London, and against the world.

But his scalp stiffened beneath his hair, because he could

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still hear, above him, or even inside his head, ever so faintly, the far-off wind and the clamour of unrecognizable voices, as if he had brought them down here, with him.

ONE

Apryl went straight to her inheritance from the airport. And it was easy to find, direct from Heathrow on the navy blue Piccadilly Line to the station called Knightsbridge.

Swept up the concrete stairs by the bustle and rush of people about her, she emerged with her backpack onto the sidewalk. She'd been on the subway for so long the steely light smarted against the back of her eyes. But if the map was right this was the Knightsbridge Road. She moved into the push of the crowd.

Buffeted from behind, and then knocked to the side by a sharp elbow, she immediately failed to move in step with the strange city. She felt irrelevant and very small. It made her apologetic but angry at the same time.

She shuffled across the narrow sidewalk and took shelter in a shop doorway. Knee joints stiff and her body damp beneath her leather jacket and gingham shirt, she took a few seconds and watched the shunt, race and break of the human traffic before her, with Hyde Park as a backdrop, a landscape painting dissolving into a far-off mist.

It was hard to concentrate on any particular building, determined face, or boutique window around her, because London was constantly moving before and about every static feature. Thousands of people marched up and down the street

and darted across it whenever the red buses, white vans, delivery trucks, and cars slowed for a second. She wanted to look at everything at the same time, and to know it, and to understand her place in it all, but the sheer energy sweeping up and down the street started to numb the workings behind her forehead, making her squint, like her mind was already giving up and thinking about sleep instead.

Looking at the map in the guidebook, she peered at the short and simple route to Barrington House that she must have looked at a hundred times since leaving New York eight hours earlier. All she needed to do was walk down Sloane Street, then turn left into Lowndes Square. A cab couldn't have dropped her much closer than the subway. Her great-aunt's building was somewhere on the square. Then it was just a case of following the numbers to the correct door. A good sign and one that infused her with relief; the frustration of trying to read road signs and figure out which direction she was heading on streets like this would have been paralysing.

But she would need to rest soon. The prospect of visiting London, and of seeing whatever it was that Great-aunt Lillian had bequeathed her and her mother had disrupted her sleep for over a week and she'd not managed so much as a micro-nap on the plane. But when could a mind ever rest in this place?

The short walk from the station to Lowndes Square confirmed her suspicions that Great-aunt Lillian had not been poor. On the map, the very fact this neighbourhood was so close to Buckingham Palace, and Belgravia with all those embassies, and Harrods, the store she had heard of back home, made her realize her great-aunt had not spent the last

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sixty years of her life in a slum. But that knowledge was still no preparation for her first sight of Knightsbridge: the tall white buildings with their long windows and black railings; the plethora of luxury cars gleaming at the kerbs; the thin blonde English girls with clipped accents, teetering about in high heels and clutching designer handbags that made her backpack feel like a sack of shit. With her biker jacket, turn-ups and Converse boots, and with her black hair styled like Bettie Page, she felt the tension of discomfort bend her head forward with the shame and diffidence of the miscast.

At least there weren't many people out in Lowndes Square to see her in this state: a couple of Arab women alighting from a silver Merc, and a tall blonde Russian girl talking angrily into a phone clamped to her ear. And after the melee of the Knightsbridge Road, the elegance of the square was soothing. The apartment buildings and hotels formed an unbroken and graceful rectangle around the long oval park in its centre, where short trees and empty flower beds could be seen through railings. The unlaboured harmony of the mansion blocks stilled the air and deflected the noise elsewhere.

'No way.' She and her mom now owned an apartment here? At least until they sold it for a stack of cash. A thought that immediately rankled. She wanted to live here. It kept her great-aunt here for over sixty years and Apryl could see why. The place was classic, flawless, and effortlessly exuded the sense of a long history. She imagined the polite but indifferent faces of butlers behind every front door. Aristocrats must live here. And diplomats. And billionaires. People unlike her and her mother. 'Shit, Mama, you're just not gonna believe this,' she said out loud.

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She'd only ever seen one photo of Great-aunt Lillian, when Lillian was a little girl. Dressed in a curious white gown matching that of her elder sister, Apryl's grandmother, Marilyn. In the picture Lillian held her big sister's hand. They stood next to each other with sulky smiles in the yard of their home in New Jersey. But Lillian and Marilyn were closer at that time than they ever were after. Lillian moved to London during the war to work for the US military as a secretary. Where she met an English guy, a pilot, and married him. She never came home.

Lillian and her granny Marilyn must have exchanged letters or cards because Lillian knew when Apryl had been born. She used to get birthday cards from Lillian when she was little. With beautiful English money inside. Pounds. Really colourful paper with pictures of kings and dukes and battles and god knows what else on them. And watermarks when you held them up against a light that she thought were magical. She wanted to keep them, not cash them for dollars, which looked like toy money in comparison. It always made her want to visit England. And here she was for the first time.

But Lillian went quiet on them a long time ago. They even stopped getting Christmas cards before Apryl was ten. Her mother was too busy raising her alone to find out why. And when Granny Marilyn died, her mother wrote to Lillian at the address in Barrington House, but there was no response. So they just assumed she'd died too, over in England, where she'd lived a life they knew nothing of, the weak connection with that generation of the family finally severed, for ever.

Until two months back, when a probate lawyer sent a letter to inform the last surviving relatives of their inheritance following the 'sad passing of Lillian Archer'. She and

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her mother were still in a daze. A death, occurring eight weeks previously, and leading to the bequest to them of an apartment in London. Knightsbridge, London, no less. Right here where she was standing, outside Barrington House: the great white building seated solemnly at the foot of the square. Rising up, so many floors dignified in strong white stone, the classicism tempered with slender art-deco flourishes around the window frames. A place so well-proportioned and proud, she could only feel daunted before the grand entrance, with its big, brass-framed glass doors, its flower baskets and ornamental columns either side of the marble stairs. ‘No way.’

Beyond her reflection in the pristine glass of the front doors she could see a long, carpeted corridor with a big reception desk at the far end. And behind it she received an impression of two men with neat haircuts, each wearing a silver waistcoat. ‘Oh shit.’

She laughed to herself. Feeling ridiculous, as if ordinary life had suddenly transformed into cinematic fantasy, she checked the address on the papers they had received from the lawyer: a letter, with a contract and deeds that would get her the keys. To this.

No doubt about it. This was the place. Their place.