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Opening extract from

Louder Than Words

Written by

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EGMONT

Our story began over a century ago, when seventeen-year-old Egmont Harald Petersen found a coin in the street. He was on his way to buy a flyswatter, a small hand-operated printing machine that he then set up in his tiny apartment.

The coin brought him such good luck that today Egmont has offices in over 30 countries around the world. And that lucky coin is still kept at the company's head offices in Denmark.

RAFAELA

When I grow up I'd like to be a writer. I guess a lot of people my age say that and I also guess they're told that fourteen isn't old enough to know what you want to do with your life. That might be correct for most people, but not for me – I do know and it's a really important deal for me.

I love words. I love the patterns they form on a page, the rhythms, the way they dance into formation: a ballet in one book, hip hop in another, or tap, jazz, all different. I love finding new words. To find a word I didn't know before, a word that perfectly describes something that I never even knew there was a word for, that gives me such a buzz.

Words on a page . . . they're beautiful, powerful. They blow me away.

Words in my mouth . . . they don't work. They're the barrel of a gun, the point of a dagger held to my throat. They choke up inside me and won't come out.

My pen has a freedom my mouth has never had.

Sometimes Silas sneaks into my room when I'm reading and I don't hear him. I'm locked away in my own space in time. And he stands there watching me with what I call his big brother grin. When I finally feel his eyes on me and look up, I know he's

caught me mouthing words soundlessly to myself again.

'One day, Rafi,' he'll say as he bounces on to the bed next to me and musses my hair. He never says more than that, but I know what he means all the same: one day he'll walk in and hear me *say* the words, maybe only in a whisper, but he'll really hear me say them.

I don't know if that will ever happen. I don't know if I'll ever talk again, even in private. The worst part is I'm not sure any more that I want to.

Some days I do and I want to be just like everyone else at school – I can't wait to get back after the weekend to trade gossip, chattering away, forgetting how loud I'm being. Maybe even squealing a bit like the other girls in my class do when they get overexcited, making the quiet boys who sit near the door wince when they hear them.

But when I think about all the nasty, aggressive stuff that people use their words for it makes me not want to speak at all. Ever.

It didn't start that way. When it began I wanted to speak. I wanted it desperately. I just couldn't. The very thought of forcing words out made the strangled feeling in my throat stronger so my vocal cords tightened over the sounds and nothing, *nothing* would come out.

The last person I spoke to was my brother Silas, and I was six. Even then I think it was only a whispered, 'No.' Since then, not a word.

Silas says he'd give anything to hear me speak again.

Strange now how I sit here and think the same thing about him.

I've gone on and on about me when really this story isn't about me at all. It's about Silas. I'm just the pen on the page telling his story now that he can't speak either.

When I wiped Silas's computer clean as he asked me to, I found some emails he'd saved in draft. He wrote them to Dad when I guess there were things he needed to say that he couldn't say to me. Of course he couldn't send them because he hasn't got Dad's contact details either. But those emails are important. I cried when I read them for they're the only words he has.

This is my brother's story and it might be the most important story I ever write.

RAFI'S TRUTH BOOK

It is the little rift within the lute,
That by and by will make the music mute,
And ever widening slowly silence all.
(Alfred, Lord Tennyson)

CHAPTER 1

It all started that Wednesday on the school bus, if you can ever pinpoint a moment when something like this begins.

We were on our way home. I was tucked next to the window beside Silas on the long back seat with a bunch of his sixth-form friends. Occasionally I listened to whatever they were talking about, but mostly I stared out of the window unless one of them spoke to me directly. Not that I wasn't interested in what they were saying, but it wasn't fair to my brother otherwise. His friends didn't want to be stuck with a fourteen-year-old, but Silas wouldn't leave me sitting on my own so this was my compromise – I sat with them, but didn't bug them by listening in to conversations like I was part of their group. Silas said they wouldn't mind if I did, but nobody else's little sister sat back there with them and I didn't want things to be different for him because of me.

For instance, today his friend Toby was spreading a rumour about a girl from another school and it was obvious I wasn't supposed to hear any of it. It's funny how being mute has that effect on some people – they behave as if you're deaf, even when they know perfectly well that you're not. I get that a lot. It isn't really Toby's fault – I can do such a good impersonation of being

totally oblivious to everything around me that Silas's friends sometimes forget that I can hear them.

'So what Josie did, right, was to . . .' Toby glanced over at me and then got his phone out to show them. '. . . totally strip off and beg Lloyd to take pictures of her. Look at her, she's loving it. What a slut!'

'OMG! She is such a tramp.' The girl next to Silas sat back in disgust. My brother, I noticed, didn't even look at the phone.

Another girl, Rachel, began arguing with Toby.

'That's so harsh,' she said. 'If those pictures had been of a guy then you'd be different about it, but because it's a girl you're being a sexist pig and calling her names.'

The other girls laughed. 'Are you having one of your Feminazi moments again?' her friend said to her.

Rachel wouldn't back down though. 'No, I am right about this. If a guy did that, waving his dick about and grinning, then they'd all be laughing with him and saying what a great lad he was. You know they would. But because she's female, she's a slut. It's not fair.'

The other girls stopped giggling.

'It's such double standards. It doesn't matter whether she should have posed for those pictures or not. What matters is that if it was a boy nobody would be bothered. They can do whatever they want, sleep around as much as they want, cheat, and nobody ever calls them out on it. I can't believe we're in the twenty-first

century and we've got no further than when our grandparents were our age!'

There was a pause, followed by the girls collectively rounding on Toby.

'Rachel's right, Toby. You're being so sexist and you know it.'

'It's not even like that girl did it herself. It was her ex who posted those pictures, wasn't it?'

'So what she's actually guilty of is having bad taste in boys! What names are you going to call him now?'

'Rach is totally right and you don't want to admit it. You're all so twentieth century in your attitudes towards women. Except Silas.'

'Oh yeah, except Silas.'

The boys pulled faces. And whined, 'Yeah, except Silas,' in chorus.

My brother just grinned. If the other boys had a dig at him because of what the girls said, he never cared. I couldn't imagine what it must feel like to be so self-assured and together that you weren't bothered what others thought of you.

'People make mistakes,' he said easily. 'And we don't know both sides of the story.'

Even Toby shrugged, with a grin, and nodded. 'Yeah, well, her boyfriend *is* a complete loser.'

'How do you know this Josie?' Silas asked.

'I don't *know* her. I've met her once for about five minutes.

Her dad's a mate of mine's – both in the force.'

Silas raised his eyebrows. 'So her loser ex decides to mess with a policeman's kid? Is he dumb or what?'

Toby laughed. 'Her dad's an inspector, so yeah, he must be dumb. But then he probably knows she'd never tell her dad cos he'd go insane at her for letting Lloyd take those pictures in the first place.'

One of the girls shuddered. 'Yeah, your topless photo on the internet is not something you'd ever want your dad to know about.'

'Oh, our stop!' Silas got up and I shuffled out behind him. 'See you!'

As they said goodbye to us, I gave them a quick smile without directing it at any face in particular and we hopped off the bus at the corner of Edgecombe Road.

Edgecombe is a long, broad residential road on the outskirts of our town that leads down to a footpath out into open countryside. It's tree-lined on both sides and the houses are mostly large Victorian or Edwardian villas, often behind heavy laurel hedges and tall gates. There's the odd new-build where someone has sold off part of their garden, but even Mum acknowledges they've been designed to tie in with the surrounding houses – she tends to get on her artistic high horse over things like that.

We set off down the street – our house is right at the bottom backing on to the fields – but we'd only gone a couple of houses

when Silas nudged me and nodded towards a figure standing ahead of us on the pavement, dressed in the green uniform of the church high school on the other side of town.

I looked up at him questioningly.

'I don't know – didn't a new family move into the Claxtons' old house?'

I frowned and nodded – I thought so.

'Maybe she's one of them. Doesn't look very happy, does she?'

This was a definite understatement. As we got closer it was clear the girl was in tears, and not just a few, but great big heaving sobs. She'd dropped her school bag by her feet and covered her face with her hands, and now she stood there, shaking and sobbing.

I shrugged at my brother. What did we do? We couldn't just walk past and leave her there.

Silas looked like most seventeen-year-old boys would if faced with a crying stranger. Or he did for about five seconds, then he squared his shoulders. 'Come on, we'd better see what's up.'

This is one of the reasons why I love my brother. He won't walk past on the other side of the road. Even when that leads him places he doesn't want to go. Sometimes I wonder in retrospect whether I wish he had ignored her that day, despite what it would have cost me if he had, but then if he had he wouldn't be Silas.

I trailed after him, determined to be supportive.

'Excuse me, are you OK?' He stood a careful distance from the girl. She started at the sound of his voice and looked up, her

face streaming with tears that she just couldn't stem.

'Are you OK?' he repeated while I smiled what I hoped was a comforting smile. I was quite amazed at myself for being so brave.

'What are you laughing at?' she snapped through the sobbing. 'Get lost. Leave me alone!'

'She's not laughing at you,' Silas said gently. 'She's trying to be nice. She can't speak.'

'Oh!' The girl stopped as she was halfway through turning away from us. She looked at me and I dredged up the remains of my shattered courage to smile again. 'S-s-sorry.' She took a big sniff and scrubbed her hand over her face to dash away as many of the free-flowing tears as she could.

'Look,' said Silas, 'you're obviously not all right and I don't want to interfere, but . . .'

'I'll be fine,' the girl said quickly, rubbing her hands over her face again. I ferreted inside my bag for a tissue because her nose was streaming too. I felt for her, confronted by a strange boy with snot and tears all over her face. 'Thank you.' She took the tissue from me. 'I'm sorry I was nasty. I've . . . I've just had a bit too much today of people laughing at me.' Her eyes began to water again.

I nudged Silas. 'Oh, don't worry. She hasn't taken offence,' he said on my behalf. 'She's more concerned about whether you're going to be OK.'

The girl blew her nose hard. 'I'll be fine. I had a bad day.'

Silas smiled at her as she bit down on her bottom lip to stop it shaking. 'Must have really sucked.'

She managed a weak laugh. 'Yeah, it really did.'

'I'm Silas and this is my little sister, Rafaela, but we all call her Rafi. We live down there in the house round the bend. Are you from The Poplars?'

'Yes, we moved in a couple of weeks ago. Um, is your sister deaf?'

'No, she can hear perfectly well. She's mute – she used to talk, but she stopped when she was little. Why is quite complicated, but basically she doesn't speak at all now.'

You could see the girl didn't know what to say. People never do. In the end she probably got it as right as anyone can, by just saying, 'Oh, OK then . . . hi, Rafi, I'm Josie.'

I saw my brother stiffen slightly out of the corner of my eye at the exact same time I froze my face so the girl – Josie – couldn't read it. Because right then we both knew why she was crying. It couldn't be a coincidence. Josie wasn't that common a name. And she was about the right age – sixteen – and from that school . . .

'Some days do stink more than you think possible,' Silas said lightly, nodding in the direction we'd been walking.

She fell in beside us. 'Yup.'

'Rafi says – oh, not in words,' he added when he saw Josie's look of confusion. 'Rafi tells you what she means in other

ways . . . that on a day that stinks the answer is always chocolate. Don't you, Raf?'

Josie smiled at me. 'Lucky there's some in my fridge, then.'

She was prettier than I'd first thought, though it's hard to say when someone's cried as much as she had. Her brown eyes were still raw-rimmed and her face was blotchy, marring what looked like very clear and soft skin, the colour of milky coffee under normal circumstances. Her crinkly black hair was twisted up into a knot on the top of her head – the severity would have looked terrible on me, but she had a softness around her cheekbones that could take it. Yes, a pretty girl. Not stunning, not breath-taking, but a girl a lot of boys would look twice at.

We stopped when we reached her house.

'I hope you are all right,' Silas said, looking completely unconvinced.

'I will be,' Josie said with a sad twist to her mouth that I doubt she knew was there.

'You should come round and talk to Rafi if you're not. She's a good listener,' he said. I practically dropped dead there on the spot, but the girl was looking at me so I faked it and nodded as enthusiastically as I could given I'd nearly expired with shock and the need to freak out. Had my brother gone mad? Come round and talk to *me*!

Josie looked genuinely pleased. 'Oh, thank you,' she said directly to me. 'That's so nice of you.'

I rummaged in my bag again for a Twix I'd had there since break and not got round to eating yet. I put it in her hand with trepidation.

She managed a little laugh. 'You're great, you know that?'

'If you do come round, the name of the house is Elands. So you know you've got the right one.' Silas gave her a last smile and she slipped inside the heavy gate with a final thanks and a little wave.

'That was so weird,' he said, once we were out of hearing. 'Toby tells us about this girl and then . . .' He looked down at me. 'I feel so sorry for her. She's in bits.'

And that's my brother again. He doesn't care if he's supposed to feel sorry for her, whether that's a 'boy' thing to do. He just does, so that's it. All the same I glared at him for that trick of inviting her round.

'Don't look at me like that. I hope she does come round to see you. From what Toby said nobody in her school is speaking to her any more, especially the other girls. You know how mean girls can be about things like that and she looks like she could use a friend.'

He didn't add that I could too.

Back at home, my mother was nowhere in sight and there was a note on the fridge. 'Back at seven. Make food. Seeing a gallery about a sculpture.'

Silas sighed and opened the fridge. 'What do you fancy for

dinner? I could do pasta and meatballs. Needs to be something quick – I've got an essay to write for tomorrow.'

That was fine with me so he whipped up some food while I sat at the dining table and got my homework out of my bag. It was typical of Mum to disappear off to London without telling us this morning. She was quite capable of simply forgetting to communicate things like that.

Silas threw a quick bowl of salad together as well as the pasta and sat down with me to eat while he read through the text he had to write the essay on. He had a frown crease between his eyes so I left him to get on with it and flicked through a magazine while I ate. The food tasted good – he wasn't a bad cook when it came to simple stuff. Much better than me anyway. And better than Mum.

Sitting round this table, that was my first real memory of my family. I must have been about three because Silas looks around six in my mind. We were all sitting down for Sunday lunch. The others were still at home then: my oldest sister Carys, who played the flute so well that she'd be off to a specialist music academy soon and then on to a glittering international career as a soloist; Gideon, who inherited Mum's artistic talent and had already had his first exhibition, aged twelve; Kerensa, who did her maths A level before she was ten; and Silas, who was flicking peas at me when Mum wasn't looking.

Silas at six was beautiful. So much so that people stopped

Mum in the street to tell her. He had dark hair that waved a little, but was cropped short enough so that no one mistook him for a girl, eyes the blue of the Mediterranean Sea when it's painted by the light of a summer sky – a colour I would kill to have – with curling black eyelashes so long they looked as if they'd rest on his cheeks when he was asleep. I don't of course remember these details from when I was three. I've seen the photos and at seventeen he's sickeningly unchanged. I do look a little like him, people say, but what they mean is, if he's a painting, I look like a practice version that's had water spilled on it and is left washed out and smudged.

But I didn't know any of this in the memory. What I knew then was that Silas had just hit me in the face with a pea and it was funny. About two seconds later, when Mum noticed the gravy stain on my clean T-shirt, she found it less funny and exploded into one of her legendary rants. The family stopped eating and winced, and Silas burst into tears.

I didn't like the shouting and the big, fat, salty drops rolling down my brother's cheeks so I started to cry too. Dad stormed from the table, shouting, 'Is there never any peace in this wretched house?' and another Ramsey family lunch was ruined.

Mum didn't have any more babies after me because not long after that Sunday lunch, Dad left us. He ran away with an ordinary woman who didn't stress about gravy stains on a child's T-shirt and he didn't see us any more. Silas told me he'd wanted

to, but Mum wouldn't let him so that was that. Dad didn't fight for us, but then Mum says he never fought for anything except to get away from her.

I wonder if I'd have become mute if he'd still been around. Probably. I don't think him abandoning us had too much to do with it. Except he was more ordinary than the rest, like me, so maybe it would have been easier for me if he'd stayed – that would have made two of us the boring ones among the exceptional Ramseys.

JOSIE'S PINTEREST BOARD

Making a hundred friends is not a miracle. The miracle is to make a single friend who will stand by your side even when hundreds are against you.