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Relentless

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Extract

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Part One

SATURDAY

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I only heard the phone because the back door was open. I was outside breaking up a fight between my two kids over which one of them should have the bubble-blowing machine, and it was threatening to turn ugly. To my dying day, I will always wonder what would have happened if the door had been shut, or the noise of the kids had been so loud that I hadn't heard it.

It had just turned three o'clock on a cloudy Saturday afternoon in late May, and my whole world was about to collapse.

I ran back inside the house, into the living room, where the football was just kicking off on the TV, and picked up on about the fourth ring, wondering whether it was that perma-tanned bastard of a boss of mine, Wesley 'Call me Wes' O'Shea, phoning to discuss a minor detail on a client proposal. He liked to do that at weekends, usually when there was a football match on. It gave him a perverse sense of power.

I looked at my watch. One minute past three.

'Hello?'

'Tom, it's me, Jack.' The voice was breathless.

I was momentarily confused. 'Jack who?'

'Jack . . . Jack Calley.'

This was a voice from the past. My best friend when we were at school. The best man at my wedding nine years earlier. But also someone I hadn't spoken to in close to four years. There was something wrong, too. He sounded in pain, struggling to get the words out.

'Long time no speak, Jack. How are you?'

'You've got to help me.'

It sounded like he was running, or walking very quickly. There was background noise, but I couldn't tell what it was. He was definitely outside.

'What do you mean?'

'Help me. You've got to . . .' He gasped suddenly. 'Oh Jesus, no. They're coming.'

'Who's coming?'

'Oh Christ!'

He shouted these last words, and I had to hold the phone away from my ear momentarily. On the TV, the crowd roared as one of the players bore down on goal.

'Jack. What the hell's happening? Where are you?'

He was panting rapidly now, his breaths coming

in tortured, wailing gasps. I could hear the sound of him running.

'What's going on? Tell me!'

Jack cried out in abject terror, and I thought I heard the sound of some sort of scuffle. 'Please! No!' he yelled, his voice cracking. The scuffle continued for several seconds, and seemed to move away from the phone. Then he was speaking again, but no longer to me. To someone else. His voice was faint but I could make it out easily enough.

He said six words. Six simple words that made my heart lurch and my whole world totter.

They were the first two lines of my address.

Then Jack let out a short, desperate scream, and it sounded like he was being pulled away from the phone. There followed a succession of gasping coughs, and instinctively even I, who'd lived my life a long way from the indignities of death, could tell that my old friend was dying.

And then everything fell eerily silent.

The silence might have lasted ten seconds, but was probably nearer two, and as I stood frozen to the spot in my front room, mouth open, too shocked to know what to say or do, I heard the line suddenly go dead at the other end.

The first two lines of my address. The place where I lived an ordinary suburban life with my two kids and my wife of nine years. The place where I felt safe.

For a moment, just one moment, I thought it must have been some sort of practical joke, a cruel ruse to get a reaction. But the thing was, I hadn't spoken to Jack Calley in four long years, and the last time had been a chance meeting in the street, a snatched five-minute conversation while the kids – much younger then, Max just a baby – shouted and fidgeted in their twin pushchair. I hadn't had a proper chat with him – you know, the kind friends have – in, what, five, six, maybe even seven years. We'd gone our separate ways a long time ago.

No, this was serious. You don't put fear like that into your voice deliberately. It's a natural thing, something that's got to come from within. And this most definitely had. Jack had been terrified, and with good reason. If I wasn't mistaken, and I would swear to God that I wasn't, I'd just heard him breathe his dying breaths. And his last words were the first two lines of my address.

Who wanted to know where I lived? And why?

Let me tell you this: I am an ordinary man with an ordinary desk job in a big open-plan office, leading a team of four IT software salesmen. It's not a huge amount of fun and, as I've already suggested, my boss, Wesley, is something of an arsehole, but it pays the bills and allows me to own a half-reasonable detached four-bed house in the suburbs, and at thirty-five I've never once been in trouble with the boys in blue. My wife and I have

had our ups and downs, and the kids can play up now and again, but in general, we're happy. Kathy works as a lecturer in environmental politics over at the university, a job she's held for close to ten years. She's well liked, good at what she does and, although she probably wouldn't like me saying so, very pretty. We're the same age, we've been together eleven years, and we have no secrets. We've done nothing wrong; we pay our taxes and we keep out of trouble. In short, we're just like everyone else.

Just like you.

So why did some stranger want to know our address? Some stranger who wanted it so badly he was prepared to kill for it?

Fear kicked in, that intense terror that starts somewhere in the groin and tears through you like an express train until it's infected every part and is ready to develop into outright panic. The instinctive flight mechanism. The sick feeling you get when you're walking empty streets alone at night and you hear footsteps coming from behind. Or when a man smashes a beer glass on the corner of a bar and demands to know what the fuck you think you're looking at. Real fear. I had it then.

I replaced the phone in its cradle and stood where I was for a long moment, trying to think of a rational explanation for what I'd just heard. Nothing presented itself, and yet at the same time

even the most paranoid explanation didn't make sense either. If someone wanted to speak to me, then they presumably knew who I was. In which case they could easily have found out where I lived without asking a man who barely knew me any more. They could have looked in the phonebook for a start. But they hadn't.

'Daddy, Max just hit me for no reason.' It was Chloe coming back into the house, grass stains on the knees of her jeans, her dark-blonde hair a tousled mess. At five, she was little more than a year older than her brother Max, yet vastly more sensible. The problem was, he'd already overtaken her in bulk, and in the anarchic world of young kids bulk tends to win through in arguments. 'Can you go and tell him off?' she added, looking put out, as innocent of danger as all children are.

Someone was coming here. Someone who'd just killed my oldest friend.

The last I remembered, Jack Calley had been living five or six miles away, just outside Ruislip, where London finally gives way to the Green Belt. If he'd called me from near his home then the person he'd given my address to would be about a fifteen-minute drive away at this time of day. Maybe less if the traffic was quiet and they were in a hurry.

'Daddy, what are you doing?'

'Hold on a sec, darling,' I said with a smile so false it would have embarrassed a politician. 'I'm just thinking.'

It was two minutes since I'd put down the phone and I could hear my heart beating a rapid tattoo in my chest. Bang bang, bang bang, bang bang. If I stayed here, I was putting my family at risk. If I left, then how was I ever going to find out who was after me, and why?

'Hey, sweetie,' I said, keenly aware of the strain in my voice, 'we've got to go out now, round to Grandma's.'

'Why?'

I squatted down and picked her up. 'Because she wants to see you.'

'Why?'

Sometimes it's best not to get into a dialogue with a five-year-old. 'Come on, darling, we've got to go,' I said, and strode outside, carrying her in my arms.

I saw that Max had abandoned the bubble-making machine in the middle of the lawn and was now at the bottom of the garden, his head poking out of a makeshift, canvas-sided camp at the top of the climbing frame. I shouted at him to come out because we had to go. His head immediately retreated into the camp. Like a lot of four-year-old boys, he didn't like to do what he was told. Usually this wasn't much of a problem. I tended to ignore it

and let him do his own thing. Today it was a disaster.

Jack's words played over and over in my mind. 'Oh Jesus, no. They're coming.' The urgency in them. The fear. They're coming.

They're coming here.

I looked at my watch. 3.05. Four minutes since I'd picked up the phone. Time seemed to be moving faster than it usually does.

'Come on, Max, we've got to get moving. Now.'

I ran over to the climbing frame, still holding onto Chloe, ignoring her complaints. She tried to struggle out of my arms, but I didn't let go.

'But I'm playing,' he called out from within the camp.

'I don't care. We've got to go now.'

I heard a car pulling into the road out front. This was unusual. The housing estate we live on leads nowhere and is simply a horseshoe-shaped road with culs-de-sac sprouting off it. Drive along it and eventually you end up right back close to where you started. Our house was on the corner of one of the culs-de-sac, and a car came down it once every twenty minutes at most.

The car slowed down. Stopped.

I heard a car door shut, further down in the cul-de-sac. I was being unduly paranoid. But my heart continued to thud.

'Come on, Max. I'm serious.'

He giggled, blissfully unaware of my fear. 'Come and get me.'

I put Chloe down and reached inside the camp. Max retreated as far as he could go, still giggling, but his expression changed when he saw the look on my face.

'What is it, Dad? What's wrong?'

'It's all right, nothing's wrong, but we've got to go round to Grandma's quickly.'

He nodded, looking worried, and scrambled out.

I took them both by the hand and, trying to stay as calm as possible, led them through the house and out to the car. They were both asking questions, but I wasn't really listening. I was willing them to go faster. In the distance, I could hear the cars out on the main road. Above me came the steady roar of a passenger plane circling beyond the unbroken ceiling of white cloud. The neighbour's new dog was barking and someone was mowing their lawn. The comforting sounds of normality, but today they weren't comforting at all. It was as if I was in some sort of terrifying parallel universe where danger loomed on all sides, yet no-one else could see or understand it.

I strapped the kids into their car seats, then realized, as I was about to get into the driver's seat, that I'd better take some overnight gear for them, just in case they were out of the house for any length of time. I tried to think what I was going to

say when I turned up at my mother-in-law's with them. The best man at my wedding just phoned me for the first time in years; then, as we were speaking, he got murdered, and now his killer's after me. It sounded so outlandish that even I would have questioned my own sanity, if I hadn't been so damn sure of its authenticity. And Irene had never liked me much either. Had always thought her daughter, with her strong academic background and her Cambridge degree, was too damn good for a glorified computer salesman.

3.08. Seven minutes since I'd picked up the phone.

I was going to have to tell Irene that something had come up at work. That maybe it was best if the kids spent the night with her. And then what? What happened tomorrow?

I told myself to stop trying to analyse everything and to just get moving.

'Stay in the car, OK? I'm just going to get some overnight stuff.'

They both started to protest, but I shut the door and ran inside and up to each of their bedrooms, hastily chucking together pyjamas, toys, toothbrushes, everything else they were going to need, and shoving them in a holdall, knowing with every step that I was racing against time.

3.11. As I came running out of the house, I recalled the gurgling, coughing noise Jack had

made as he was being attacked. The sound of death – it had to be. But who wanted to kill a middle-of-the-road solicitor like Jack Calley, a man who was doing well but hardly setting the world on fire? And, more importantly – far more importantly – who wanted to find out from him where I, lowly salesman Tom Meron, and my family lived?

As I reached the car, I cursed. Both kids had unclipped their seatbelts and were fooling around. Chloe had clambered through the gap in the front seats and was now playing with the steering wheel, while all I could see of Max were his legs sticking up in the air as he hunted for something in the back. They were both laughing, as if there was nothing whatsoever wrong with their world – which there wasn't. It was just mine that was going mad.

I opened the door and flung the overnight bag past Chloe onto the passenger seat. 'Come on, kids, we've got to go,' I said, picking her up and pushing her back through the gap in the seats. 'It's very important.'

'Ow! That hurt.'

'Get back in your seat, Chloe. Now.'

I was sweating as I ran round to the back passenger door, pulled it open, yanked Max up and shoved him bodily into his seat. With shaking hands, I strapped him back in, then reached over and did the same to his sister.

'What's happening, Daddy?' asked Chloe. She looked frightened, not used to seeing her father acting so strangely.

I'm not a panicker by nature. There's not much in my life that would instigate panic, if I'm honest, which was why I was now finding it hard to stay calm. This all felt like a bad dream, something that should have been happening to someone else. An elaborate hoax that would end in laughter all round.

But it wasn't. I knew it wasn't.

I scrabbled around in my jeans pocket for the car keys, found them and started the ignition. The dashboard clock read 3.16, but I remembered that it was four minutes fast. Eleven minutes since the call. Christ, was it that long? I reversed the car out of the drive and drove up to the junction, indicating left in the direction of the main road. The relief I experienced as I pulled away and accelerated was tangible. I felt like I'd escaped from something terrible.

I was being stupid. There had to be some sort of rational explanation for what I'd just heard. There just had to be. 'Calm down,' I muttered to myself. 'Calm down.'

I took a deep breath, feeling better already. I'd take the kids to Irene's, drop them off, phone Kathy, then just drive back home. And there'd be no-one there. I'd look up Jack Calley's number, call and see if everything was all right. From the safe

cocoon of my moving car, I began to convince myself that Jack hadn't actually been hurt. That the ghastly choking hadn't been him dying a lonely death. That everything was fine.

A one-hundred-yard-long, relatively straight stretch of road led from the entrance of our cul-de-sac to the T-junction that met up with the main road into London. As we reached it, I slowed up and indicated right. A black Toyota Land Cruiser built like a tank was moving towards us down the main road at some speed. I could see two figures in caps and sunglasses in the front seats. When it was ten yards away, the driver slowed dramatically and swung the car into the estate, without indicating. I was about to curse him for his lack of courtesy, when I noticed that the side windows of the vehicle were tinted, and I felt a sense of dread. An unfamiliar car driving onto the estate only eleven minutes after Jack had called me. At a push, Jack lived eleven minutes away. The timing was too coincidental.

I watched its progress in the rearview mirror, a dry, sour taste in my mouth, fear causing my heart to rise in my chest. Our cul-de-sac was the third one down on the right, just before the road bent round sharply. The Land Cruiser passed the first cul-de-sac, then the second.

Fifteen yards short of ours, the brake lights came on.

Oh no, no. Please, no.

'Daddy, why aren't we moving?'

'Come on, Daddy. Come on, Daddy.'

The Land Cruiser turned into our cul-de-sac, then disappeared from view. I knew then as much as I knew anything that its occupants were coming for me.

I pulled onto the main road and accelerated away, the voices of my two children and Jack Calley – desperate, dying Jack Calley – reverberating around my head like distant, blurred echoes.