

**THE
RESIDENT
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VIPER

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Monday, June 3. 11.49 PM

They're here! They've come for us!

Not possible. How could they know?

Who cares? They know. What else could this be?

Brogan stared wide-eyed at the flashes of blue light bouncing crazily off the windows of the houses. No sirens, just the lights. They wanted to catch him by surprise.

We have to go. NOW!

Brogan raced back to the dining room. He grabbed his backpack and turned to the couple seated at the table.

'It's been a pleasure staying with you,' he told them. 'Thank you for your hospitality.'

He didn't wait for a response. He moved swiftly to the kitchen, slid open the patio door and stepped into the night's embrace.

He could hear urgent whispers and footsteps in the neighbouring garden to his left. He went right, hopped up onto a wheelie bin, then swung over the fence.

A torch beam sliced through the blackness and picked him out.

'He's here!' yelled a voice. And then: 'Police! Stay where you are! Down on the ground!'

Brogan knew that the copper was expecting him to either obey or flee. He did neither.

He ran straight at the approaching police officer, who yelped in surprise. Brogan kicked out, slamming his foot into the man's chest, and sending him hurtling into the wall of the house behind. As the officer rebounded, Brogan drew back his fist. He did not pause to think, *This is a policeman, and if I hurt him I will be in deep trouble.* He didn't worry that the man might

have a wife or kids. He knew only that the uniform in front of him represented an obstacle to freedom.

And so Brogan let his fist fly, right into his opponent's throat. Hit it so hard that it seemed the man's windpipe was crushed against his spine.

As the officer collapsed to the ground, clutching his neck and spluttering, Brogan set off again. The voices were growing louder, closer. A noose was tightening around him.

He scaled the next fence with ease. Then the next, and the one after that. Lights came on. Dogs began barking. At one house, a man in pyjamas came out to see what the commotion was. He took one astonished look at Brogan and scurried back indoors.

Brogan kept going. He was fit and he was strong, and he didn't worry about consequences. They would catch him one day, he knew that.

But maybe tonight would be his lucky night.

Tuesday, June 4. 1.46 AM

He stayed away from the main roads, knowing that they carried the most risk. But he also knew he couldn't keep roving through the city's capillaries for much longer. The police would be out in force, armed with his description and now a grudge for the harm done against a fellow officer.

The problem was where to hide. The Carter house had been perfect. They didn't get any visitors – hardly any phone calls, for that matter. He was able to keep them company for days. Not that they appreciated it. A lodger like Brogan was the last thing any sane person wanted.

He wondered how the police had cottoned on to his presence. What error had he made?

I think it was the noise. You had that music system turned up really loud, you know.

Yeah, well, there was a good reason for that.

The stutter of helicopter blades yanked him back to the present. He looked skywards and saw the machine hovering overhead.

They're looking for us.

Yes, yes, I know.

We need to find cover. Once they spot us, it's over.

I know, damn it! Let me think.

He changed direction, seeking an escape from the centre of police activity. He didn't know where he was. All the houses looked the same: row after row of small terraced properties, sleeping while swirls of rubbish danced on the pavement in front of them. The occasional shuttered pub or corner shop. Graffiti on the walls.

And then he saw it.

The abandoned end house, its windows and doors boarded up as if to reassure Brogan that it was willing to turn a blind eye and say nothing.

Brogan crossed the street and entered the alleyway adjoining the house. He scanned the area to make sure nobody was observing him from a window, then he leaped, clamped his hands onto the top of the wall, and pulled himself up.

He dropped down into a yard that had been concreted over many years ago. Now the surface was marbled with cracks, and waist-high weeds had shouldered their way up through them.

He made his way to the back door of the house and studied it in the weak moonlight. The boards covering it were made of plywood that had been screwed to the frame.

He slipped off his backpack and felt around inside. He had items in here that most people would never dream of toting around with them. He rejected a crowbar as being too noisy, and instead brought out a screwdriver. He spent the next few minutes carefully unscrewing the board covering the lower half of the door, dropping each screw into his pocket in case anyone should search the area. He liked to be thorough.

When he moved the board aside, he saw that the door itself looked sturdy enough, but that its lock was cheap and primitive. He took out his set of picks and had the door open in no time.

He left the upper boards in place, and ducked under them to enter the house. When he was inside, he pulled the lowermost board back into position and closed the door.

The darkness was total. Brogan slipped his hand once more into his pack, and pulled out his torch. He flicked it on and played its light over the door. He saw that it had hefty bolts at the top and bottom, and he slid both into place.

He turned, and saw that he was in a bare kitchen. There were no appliances here now. Just a sink, a few battered units, and a single wooden chair. He tried the light switch, but nothing happened. No surprise there. No gas either, probably. But what about water?

He walked to the sink and turned on both taps. Nothing, not even a single explosive spurt.

He searched the cupboards and drawers, and found some scouring pads, a half-empty bottle of bleach, a plastic jug with a crack running down its side, a rusty can-opener and a tin of nails and screws.

Great. All the things a man could ever want.

He found the stopcock beneath the sink, and tried opening it up, but his efforts were in vain. The water had obviously been disconnected at the mains in the street.

He did a quick survey of the rest of the house. He found a living room, dining room, bathroom, and two bedrooms. The only thing to get excited about was an old mattress left on one of the bedroom floors. Somewhere he could get some sleep. He suddenly realised how exhausted he was.

You can't sleep yet.

Why not?

Your arms. Look at your arms.

Brogan rolled back his sleeves, then sighed.

He headed back downstairs. In the kitchen he turned off his torch, then opened the back door and moved away the board so he could clamber outside.

The air smelled sweet. In the distance he could hear the helicopter hunting for him. He would be safe here for a while. The danger would come when he needed to go in search of food and drink.

He followed the wall to the rear corner of the house. There

was a rainwater barrel here – he had noticed it when he arrived. He leaned over and peered inside. The disc of the pale moon stared back at him from the still surface of the water. He doubted it would be safe to drink: the stagnant smell told him that much. But that wasn't why he had come out here.

He plunged his arms into the water. Dark tendrils curled away from his flesh and swirled across the face of the moon as he washed off the blood of the couple he had murdered.

Tuesday June 4, 8.07 AM

He didn't know what made him wake up, or even whether it was a time he wanted to be awake. It was so black in here.

He reached out an arm and swept it across the carpet, which felt distastefully hard and sticky. His fingers found the torch, and he grabbed it and turned it on. The blaze of light blinded him, and it was a while before his eyes could adjust enough to read his watch. He saw that it wasn't long after eight. He debated whether to get more sleep, but he started to notice how musty the mattress smelled, and his mind began to race with thoughts of what tiny creatures might be living in its damp, fungus-ridden interior.

He sat up, shone his torch around the room. In several places the flowery wallpaper had peeled away, revealing in one corner a patch of mould in the shape of a smiley face, beaming happily at him.

'Morning to you, too,' said Brogan. 'What's for breakfast?'

Who're you talking to?

You, I suppose.

I don't look like that. Is that how you imagine me?

Well ...

Don't answer that. And in response to your question, the answer is nothing. There is nothing for breakfast. You should have been better prepared. I told you to fill the bag with food for this kind of emergency. But would you listen?

Brogan's stomach issued an angry growl.

See? Even your internal organs agree with me.

Brogan's mouth was dry, too. He needed water even more than he needed food. A cup of freshly ground coffee would be even better. That, and a full English breakfast.

His stomach rumbled even more loudly.

He stood up. Was it sunny outside? Overcast? It didn't sound like it was raining.

He couldn't live like this for long. Not in permanent darkness, with no food. He would either starve or go insane.

Insane. Some would say he had ticked that box a long time ago.

Maybe they're right.

It's all relative. One man's normal is another man's looney-tunes.

But that's what makes the world go around, right? Variety is the spice of life. And death. Yup, a death or two certainly relieves the boredom.

The police would have discovered that for themselves in the past few hours. Their night would not have been without a substantial amount of stimulation. They would have looked down at the lifeless, blood-drenched bodies of the Carters and wondered what the hell had gone through the mind of their killer.

Let them wonder. We don't owe them any explanations. We do what we do, and that's that.

Brogan went on another tour of the house, hoping that he'd missed something of value the previous night. On the landing, a wooden ladder lay along the wall. He wondered why the previous occupants hadn't taken it with them, but on closer inspection he realised it was old and rotten. It would probably snap as soon as anyone put a foot on it.

He went into the front bedroom. Just a wicker chair here, with a huge hole in the seat. In the bathroom, a cabinet fixed to the wall contained a manky toothbrush and a half-empty bottle of Listerine.

Back downstairs, he realised that the living room and dining room had been completely stripped. Not even carpets left.

Sullenly, he walked to the kitchen. He switched off his torch and stared into the blackness while trying to imagine the humming of a fridge, the sizzling of sausages in a pan, the bubbling of a kettle coming to the boil.

Don't torture yourself. We'll get through this. We always do.

Yeah, sure.

He switched the torch back on, then sat down on the only chair. He knew he couldn't go out yet, not in broad daylight. He'd be easy pickings. He'd have to wait until nightfall. Swap one darkness for another. And that was a long time off.

Let's play a game.

What kind of game?

Celebrity kill-off. We each choose a celebrity we'd most like to kill, and how they should die. The most fitting ending wins.

Nah, I don't want to play that.

Suit yourself. Just trying to pass the time.

He turned the torch off again to save battery, then sat there for what seemed like a whole morning. When he finally checked his watch, he found that less than an hour had passed.

Shit.

He went upstairs to the bathroom and voided his bladder noisily but didn't bother to flush. In the unlikely event there was still water in the cistern, it would be worth saving.

He went back out onto the landing. His torch alighted on the ladder again.

Why the hell was it here anyway?

Hey, genius, what do you think a ladder's for? You go up them, stupid.

Brogan raised the beam of light. There, in the ceiling. A hatch.

What the hell. Anything to pass the time.

The ladder creaked and shifted in his hands, as if it was

about to fall apart. He carried it over to the alcove behind the stairwell, then used its upper end to poke the hatch cover open before levering it into position.

He shone the torch up through the hatch. Little to see but rafters and the underside of the roof tiles.

Here goes nothing.

He started climbing. One rung, then a second. Pausing, he rocked the ladder from side to side to check it would hold his weight. It felt rickety, but it stayed in one piece.

He kept going. Up and up, until his head and shoulders were in the roof space. He scanned the attic with the torch, and realised he had almost certainly wasted his time. The only thing up here was a single cardboard box.

In for a penny ...

He climbed to the top of the ladder and stepped into the loft. Moving around wouldn't be easy: there were no floorboards, so he'd have to keep his feet on the joists if he didn't want to go crashing through the plaster into the room below.

Carefully, he made his way across to the cardboard box. He so wanted the box to be heavy, and when he reached out a hand and pushed it, he willed it to offer some resistance.

It moved easily. Too easily. It was just an empty box.

What did you expect? The crown jewels?

I don't know. Just ... something. Anything.

Life doesn't work like that. The only stuff people leave behind is the crap they can't be bothered to carry. Unless they die, that is.

Brogan's shoulders slumped. Sometimes, he thought, it would be nice to have a pleasant surprise.

A few more of those might have convinced us to spare a life or two.

He sighed, then took a final look around before heading back to the ladder.

And that's when he realised something.

Well, will you look at that?

At the far end of the attic, the wall separating this house from the adjoining one wasn't whole. Presumably to save on bricks, the builders hadn't built it all the way up to the roof's ridge, and through the gap he could see the neighbouring space beyond.

Brogan felt a surge of excitement. It wouldn't be too difficult to climb through that gap and make his way into the attic of the next house.

What are you waiting for? Get yourself in there.

He stepped from joist to joist, until he reached the wall. The bricks stopped at chest height, and although his torch revealed that the next attic was as empty as this one, he didn't despair. Below that attic was a house, and in that house could be all manner of interesting things. Perhaps even people. Someone to play with.

He put the torch down on top of the wall, then clambered over. Once on the other side, he retrieved his torch and made a fuller examination. The layout seemed very much like the previous one, but what made it even more thrilling was that it also allowed passage into the next house in the terrace.

Jesus, this is a goldmine. Looks like we can get into every house on the street!

We're in no hurry. One house at a time. Spread the fun out a little.

He made his way to the ceiling hatch, then lay down across the joists and put his ear to the wooden cover. No sounds reached him.

He opened the cover a fraction, to test the quietness of its hinges. When they didn't complain, he raised it a little further, then inched forward and peered down.

As in the first house, the hatch was situated above an alcove behind the staircase. There was no loft ladder here, but a chest of drawers stood in the alcove, providing him with a handy stepping stone.

He listened some more. Heard only the ticking of a loud clock. He began to think the house was empty. Perhaps the occupants had gone to work.

He started to raise the cover to its full extent ...

And nearly dropped it when he heard his own name.

Tuesday, June 4. 9.02 AM

‘Thomas Brogan was last seen in the Mayhill area of the city, and police are advising that he should be regarded as extremely dangerous.’

Brogan smiled, partly in relief at the realisation that the voice was coming from a radio, but also from pride at his new-found fame. It was amusing to have achieved celebrity status due to multiple homicides.

‘Although police officials have not explicitly identified Thomas Brogan as their chief suspect in the murders of Mr and Mrs Carter, it is clear that he is linked to the killings. Mr Brogan was already on their wanted list following the discovery of the dead bodies of his parents over two weeks ago. There are also reports that Mr Brogan may have been involved in a series of similar murders across the city, although police have refused to confirm this.’

Brogan’s smile broadened. It was clear that the police were panicking, while simultaneously trying not to alarm the public.

The cops know exactly what you did.

I know.

They know who, and how many.

I know.

Took them a while, though, the stupid bastards. They probably still wouldn’t have a clue if you hadn’t killed your parents.

Yeah. Wait – are you trying to blame me for something?

No. Not at all.

Because it was your idea, as I recall.

Absolutely. I wasn’t trying to pass the buck. Your parents’ card was always marked. It was just a question of when.

Brogan suddenly became aware of another voice – a real one this time, almost drowned out by the radio.

‘Elsie! Elsie!’ A woman’s voice, coming up the stairs.

Brogan lowered the hatch cover into position, then scooted across to where the sound of the radio was loudest beneath him.

‘Elsie! Turn that down. You’ll disturb the neighbours.’

Brogan heard another voice, weaker and more croaky than the first, but couldn’t make out the words.

The radio was suddenly silenced, and then the first voice spoke again. ‘What were you saying, Elsie? I couldn’t hear you with that racket.’

‘What?’

‘I said— Never mind. Here, let’s sort you out.’

The conversation stopped for a minute. Then: ‘There. Can you hear me now?’

‘I could hear fine before.’

‘Only because the radio was at full volume. You can’t keep doing that, Elsie. You’ll annoy the neighbours.’

‘They’re miserable buggers, anyway.’

‘I’m not surprised. I’d be miserable if the lady next door to me kept making so much noise. Why don’t you like putting your hearing aid in?’

‘I told you. It keeps whistling at me.’

‘You should be grateful. I can’t remember the last time anyone whistled at me.’

She broke out into raucous laughter at her own joke, but Elsie didn’t seem to appreciate the humour.

‘All right,’ said Elsie’s visitor. ‘Come on, let’s get you washed and dressed. What do you fancy for breakfast?’

‘Cornflakes.’

‘Okay. Have you got any?’

‘No.’

Brogan smiled again. He was taking a liking to this old dear. He followed the voices to the bathroom, then back to the bedroom. He delighted in the fact that he could spy on them so easily, and yet remain completely invisible. Less detectable even than the proverbial fly on the wall.

He learned much from the conversation. Elsie was eighty-nine years old and lived alone. The visitor’s name was Kerry, and she was Elsie’s carer. She came twice a day, morning and evening. The only other regular caller was Reg, the Meals on Wheels man. He was, according to Elsie, another miserable bugger.

Brogan heard the front door shutting when Kerry left the house. A minute later, a car was started up and driven away. Elsie was alone again. Or so she thought.

What do you think? Shall we go down there?

No. Not yet. It’s too soon.

The woman’s eighty-nine. It’s not too soon for her.

If I kill Elsie, we’ll have to leave. Besides, I kind of like her.

Really? I didn’t know you went for the more mature ladies.

Don’t be gross. That’s not what I mean.

So what do we do now, then?

In response, Brogan shone his torch towards the attic of the third house in the terrace.

He stood up and made his way to the wall, once again careful to put his feet only on the wooden joists. He scaled the wall as easily as he had the first, then dropped lightly to the other side.

Another dismal void. No floorboards or lighting. Not even a cardboard box. But what of the home below?

As he had done in Elsie’s house, he spread his weight across the joists and put his ear to the hatch. He could hear two voices, a male and a female, and it sounded like they were bickering.

He raised the hatch cover slightly and peered down. No sign of a ladder or even a piece of furniture below. Getting in and out of this house could prove tricky.

The voices were loud. Brogan could tell the couple were downstairs, but even from this distance he could make out the conversation.

‘She’s a bloody nutcase,’ the male was saying. ‘I don’t know why you listen to her. She’s not a doctor. The closest she’s ever come to medical training is putting on a plaster.’

‘She looked it up on the internet,’ said the woman.

‘Oh, the internet. Well, she must be right, then. We all know how reliable the information is on the internet.’

‘She said it could be a ruptured disc, and that you should go back for a second opinion.’

‘Barbara Lewis has given me enough opinions to last me a bloody lifetime. Do you know who her latest target is?’

‘No. Who?’

‘Ralph.’

‘Ralph? What’s wrong with Ralph?’

‘Exactly. According to Barbara, he’s severely obese and in danger of having a coronary.’

‘He’s not overweight. He’s just ... big-boned.’

‘That’s what I said, and that’s why I don’t trust the advice of Barbara bloody Lewis. I don’t need to go bothering the doctor again. I’ve put my back out, that’s all. It’ll be better in a few days.’

‘Well, I hope so. It’s hard enough getting all the housework done without having you under my feet all the time. But anyway, to be on the safe side, I’ve made you an appointment.’

‘An appointment? Who with?’

‘What have we just been talking about? The doctor, of course.’

‘Pam! I’ve just told you, I don’t need—’

‘I don’t care. You’re going.’

‘When?’

‘Tomorrow. Three o’clock.’

‘Well, you’ll have to take me. With this back, I can’t—’

‘Yes, Jack, I know all about your flipping back. I’m sick of hearing about it.’

‘Charming. Word of advice, Pam: don’t go into the nursing profession, will you?’

Brogan continued to listen. He learnt eventually that Jack worked for the city council. Pam had long ago abandoned her job as a dental receptionist, and now occasionally helped out at a charity shop. They’d had kids – at least two – who were grown up and had fled the nest. Brogan guessed the ages of Jack and Pam to be about fifty.

He closed the hatch again and considered his next move.

I don’t like it up here. It’s stuffy and uncomfortable, and those insulation fibres stick in the back of the throat. They can probably give you cancer, you know.

One more house, and then we’ll go back.

As it turned out, the fourth house was the last one he could get to. As he dropped into it, he saw that the far wall had been built up to the roofline, making further passage impossible.

This attic looked more promising, though. Loose wooden boards had been laid across half the floor space, making it easier to traverse, although most were covered with boxes, suitcases and items tightly wrapped in bin-bags. Brogan decided he would rummage through them at some point, but of far more interest now was the fact that a proper collapsible loft ladder had been installed. Getting in and out of the house below would be a breeze.

Yet again, Brogan listened for a while at the hatch, then lifted the cover slightly to take a peek at what might await him.

The hall and stairwell below had been recently decorated in bright, neutral colours. In the corner of the alcove rested a pole for opening the hatch and pulling down the ladder.

It's like everything has been laid on for our personal convenience. It would be rude to disappoint them.

The house was deathly quiet. No voices, no animals, not even a ticking clock. Didn't mean it was empty, though. It would be safer to gather more information before descending. Forewarned is forearmed, and all that.

He closed the hatch again, then sat up and pulled his knees into his chest.

So, which one's it going to be? Who's our first customer? Eeny-meeny-miny-mo ...