



A DARK TIME

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by Sophie Hannah

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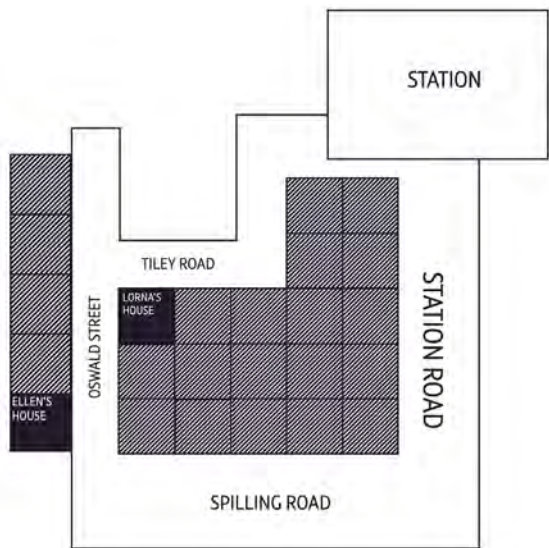
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Map of the neighbourhood

NOW

It's funny, the things you think in moments of shock. The first thing I thought, when I saw Lorna sprawled out on my kitchen floor, was that she looked all wrong lying there, not breathing.

She should be breathing. This shouldn't have happened.

If Lorna could breathe — if she were still alive instead of dead — then she wouldn't be lying on my newly-tiled floor, arranged in this particular position. She'd have stood up and said something, and then my kitchen would look the way it's supposed to look. I paid twenty thousand quid less than six months ago to get this room the way I'd always wanted it.

Not that it matters now.

Lorna is dead. I repeat the words to myself over and over, but they won't go in, somehow. There's a stronger voice in my head, drowning out the one that's trying to tell the truth, insisting, **no, she's not. She can't be. Lorna's fine. She must be.**

I know what I need to do. When you walk into your kitchen and find your best friend's lifeless body lying on the floor, you must call the police immediately. If Lorna and I hadn't seen so much of the police recently, I wouldn't hesitate; I'd just pick up the phone. As it is, I'm frozen with fear. That same sergeant will probably come back again: Charlie Zailer. She'll say what she said the last two times: 'This is one of the weirdest things I've ever seen.'

Lorna lying dead in my kitchen would be weird in any circumstances, but it's particularly odd now, after everything that's happened. I shake my head. It makes no sense to have a best friend all your life, from childhood, and then suddenly...

A tear escapes and rolls down my cheek. I wish I could talk to Lorna — not this horrible, changed Lorna but the old Lorna, the one I relied on for so much.

They say you shouldn't speak ill of the dead, which presumably means it's also illegitimate to be angry with them, but I can't help it. I can't help looking down at her and thinking, **screw you, Lorna. A true friend wouldn't have done this to me.**

It takes me nearly ten minutes to muster the courage to call the police.

TWO WEEKS EARLIER

Sergeant Charlie Zailer pretended to be looking at herself in the bedroom mirror. In fact, she couldn't have cared less what she looked like this evening, or whether her nightly make-up removal operation had been as thorough as usual. Instead of her own face, she was studying her husband, Detective Constable Simon Waterhouse, in the mirror. He was behind her — still in bed, still horizontal, still in the T-shirt that he'd worn in bed last night, still reading the same book Charlie had left him reading this morning. It was called **Massacre at Montsegur**.

She was going to have to ask him at some point, though she was dreading it. The chances of getting a helpful and straightforward answer out of him were less than zero.

'Good book?' she said lightly, wiping off the last traces of her foundation with a cotton pad.

'Bit depressing,' said Simon. 'It's about a massacre — the Albigensian Crusade.'

Charlie had no idea what that was, and felt certain that it would not improve her day if she were to find out. Why couldn't he ever read an easy, feel-good book, for God's sake?

'Pope Innocent the third versus Raymond of Toulouse,' said Simon, perhaps hoping to tempt Charlie into a discussion she had no desire to pursue.

'Have you been reading all day?' she asked lightly. If he had any sense, he would know what she was working up to asking him. A normal husband would raise the subject himself, but Charlie could hardly complain; she'd known when she married Simon that he insisted on doing everything he did in his own peculiar way.

'I haven't read that much at all today,' he told her. 'After you left for work, I sorted out the yard. Then I went into town to buy a new fridge: one that's not mouldy at the back. New one's being delivered on Friday, and they're taking the old one away.'

'Great, but...' Charlie turned to face him. 'You're still wearing the T-shirt you slept in last night and the same boxer shorts.'

Simon put down his book and gave her an impatient look. 'I didn't go into town like this — I put some jeans on.'

'Simon, you haven't worn that T-shirt apart from to sleep in for at least four years.'

'It's a T-shirt, Char. What's the big deal?'

'All right, what's going on?'

'What do you mean?'

'You're not ill, but you didn't go into work today. You went into town wearing your pyjamas, effectively —'

'Hardly.'

'Have you even had a shower today? You haven't, have you? Every day of your life, you have a shower in the morning. What's changed?'

'You're making a fuss about nothing.' Simon picked up his book with a sigh.

'Are you planning to go into work tomorrow?'

'Haven't decided.'

Charlie closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. 'Are you ill?'

'Nope.'

'Did you lie, then? Call in sick?' Like Charlie, Simon worked for Culver Valley Police. They both worked out of the same building — Spilling police station — but on different floors. Years ago, Charlie had been a detective, like Simon. She'd been his skipper, when he'd first started. He hadn't been any more cooperative then than he was now. Sometimes Charlie missed the high stakes and the buzz of major crimes, but the thought of having to deal with her husband during working hours as well as at home was enough to deter her from ever considering moving back over.

Not for the first time, Charlie wondered what life was like for those women she knew who had emollient, selfless, easy-to-live-with husbands. Her best friend Kim's husband, Niall, had given up his own career after they got married in order to become Kim's PA, chauffeur, unpaid therapist and general dogsbody. Did Kim realise how lucky she was? Almost definitely not — because Kim was The Difficult One in her marriage, just as Simon was The Difficult One in his and Charlie's. Difficult Ones rarely realise the extent to which their other halves pander to them, daily.

Charlie turned to face Simon, who still hadn't answered her question. 'If you and I ever split up, I'm never getting married again unless I can be The Difficult One.'

She waited for him to ask her what she meant, but he was reading his book. He didn't even look up.

'Simon! Did you pull a sickie today?'

‘No. No reason to lie.’

‘So what did you tell them about why you weren’t going in?’

‘Nothing. I just didn’t turn up.’

‘And they didn’t ring to see where you were? They must have.’

No response. Apparently, Simon was too engrossed in the battle between some old Pope and a French guy called Raymond to answer.

‘What’s going on, Simon?’

Charlie’s mobile phone began to vibrate on her bedside table. She walked over to it gratefully. Someone, at least, wanted to communicate with her.

‘Charlie Zailer.’

‘Sarge, it’s PC Holgate. PC Allen and me have just come out to the scene of a possible break and enter, and...well, PC Allen said not to bother you — and it’s nothing we can’t handle, but...I don’t know. I’ve just got a bad feeling about this one, for some reason. And I remembered you saying about that time you — ’

‘What’s the location?’ Charlie cut him off. If it was near enough, and would get her away from her infuriating husband for half an hour or so...She wouldn’t bother putting her make-up back on.

‘Corner of Tiley Road and Oswald Street, Rawndesley. Number 36 Tiley Road is the house. Belongs to a Lorna Bowers.’
Half an hour’s drive. Charlie sighed. Why couldn’t it be round the corner?

‘What’s giving you the bad feeling?’ she asked Holgate.

‘At first glance, Sarge, it looks like a case of burglars kicking in a gate, smashing a window, taking a pretty peng telly, then putting it back within twenty minutes.’

‘What’s a Peng telly? Is that a brand?’

‘No, sarge. Peng, y’know. Like, really nice bit of goods.’

‘Oh, I see — it’s part of your fourteen-year-old vocabulary. Got it.’

Holgate chuckled. Lowering his voice, he said, ‘Also, there’s a hysterical neighbour who won’t leave us alone. She’s the one who phoned it in — home-owner’s best friend, apparently. She’s absolutely beside herself, Sarge. Crying and everything. All that’s happened is her friend’s window’s been smashed and she’s acting like, I don’t know...the world’s ended or something. And she’s not, like, some feeble old granny. She looks like some kind of high-powered businesswoman, from her clothes.’

‘And you think high-powered business women wouldn’t normally

cry about their friends' houses getting done over?'

'Nothing's been taken, Sarge. Only thing we know was taken — and then put back, as I say — was this massive flat-screen telly.

'All right, I'm on my way,' said Charlie. She pressed the end-call button and reached for the uniform she'd only taken off half an hour ago.

'You're going out now? Seven thirty on a Thursday night?' Simon sounded disgusted by the idea.

'Uh-huh. Sorry. You'll have to find someone else to beg you to explain your mysterious behaviour. I've got better things to do.' She smiled at him on her way out of the room.

I try to calm down. Apparently someone more senior is coming to interview me — a woman, thank God — and I don't want her to think I'm as crazy as these two PCs have clearly decided I am. They can't understand why I'd get so upset when nothing's been taken. And of course, I can't say to them that something **has** gone — something infinitely more valuable than a television, something that can never be replaced, no matter how hard Lorna might try...

For the last ten minutes, I've said nothing at all. It's safer not to. If I try to speak, I'll start weeping again, and it's clear what these two young men think about weepy women. I'm sure they only summoned this female sergeant because of my crying. **Help, I can see tears — quick, radio for urgent back-up. Uncontrollable emotion has been detected in the area.**

It's a relief when the policeman with the beard tells me that his colleague is going to take me back to my house now to wait for Sergeant Zailer, while he stays at Lorna's to show her the crime scene first. All I want is to get out of here — out and away. At home, I can pretend more effectively that nothing has been stolen tonight; I might even succeed in convincing myself. At Lorna's house, surrounded by all her still-present possessions, I feel the change, the absence, so powerfully I can hardly breathe.

As we walk along Oswald Street, I ask the clean-shaven police constable, 'What about letting her know?'

'It's up to you,' he says. 'We'll take care of securing the window and cleaning up the broken glass. Your best friend's on holiday, you said?'

'Yes. She's in St Lucia. She was...' More tears threaten to spill over. I wait for the threat to subside, then say, 'She was so desperately looking forward to this holiday. Two weeks off after no days off at all, all year, until she flew out to St Lucia four days ago. I've been telling her for years that she works too hard. I mean, can you imagine? It's November! Imagine having not one single day off work from January to November. I work pretty hard myself, but Lorna's workload's just insane.'

I look at the young man who's walking by my side. He doesn't care, obviously. Probably thinks anyone who can afford to jet off to St Lucia doesn't deserve his sympathy. I don't care what he thinks, frankly. I just wanted to talk about Lorna, really. Say something about her — something to affirm that her holiday mattered to me as much as it did to her.

The security light outside my house comes on as the policeman and I turn into my driveway. As I pull my keys out of my handbag, I think about how Gran was after Dad died. She talked about him all the time — told anyone who'd listen that he used to hate to miss his Saturday golf, even if he had a temperature and should have stayed in bed. When someone's dead, the living like to keep their memories alive by...

For pity's sake, Ellen, get a grip. Lorna is not dead. She's alive and well, sunning herself in the Caribbean.

In my house, I make tea for me and the policeman. In my attempt to show him that I'm no longer a sobbing mess, I chat brightly to him about my new kitchen — how, when I bought the house, the kitchen was very shabby, having been put in more than twenty years earlier, and how, at first, I'd planned on installing a fully fitted kitchen, but eventually I decided that what I really wanted was a brand new version of the old kitchen — the same exact look, but without the shabbiness.

He nods along, not seeming as bored as I feared he might be — probably because, at last, I'm behaving more like he thinks middle-aged women should behave.

Around twenty minutes later, my doorbell rings. 'That'll be the sarge,' says the young man whose name, I've remembered now, is PC Allen. Idly, while I smooth down my hair in preparation for my first meeting with Sergeant Zailer, I wonder if there is a police constable anywhere in the country whose surname is World. PC World. That would be funny. All his or her colleagues would make endless jokes about wanting to buy laptops and computer monitors.

A tall, skinny woman with shoulder-length wavy brown hair walks into the kitchen. 'Hello,' she says. 'I'm Sergeant Charlie Zailer. I assume you're Ellen...you'd better do your surname for me. I often have to do mine for people — no one who sees it written down knows if it's pronounced Zylor or Zayler.'

'Escalante-Lewis,' I tell her. 'You can think of me as Ellen Lewis, if it's easier.'

'It's okay. I can handle a double barreller. My estranged sister has a double-barrelled surname — but you don't want to know about my tragic life!' She laughs. Her face is empty of make-up apart from bright red lipstick. There's a smudge of it below her lips, too, as if she's applied it carelessly.

I offer her a cup of tea.

'Thanks, that'd be lovely,' she says, sitting down at my kitchen

table. So far, I like her. I think I'll be able to talk to her more easily than to the two male officers.

She would understand, I think. Pity I can't tell her.

This makes me wonder, as I fill the kettle: could I tell her? In fact, I could; it would be the easiest thing in the world, if I truly wanted to. 'Can't' is therefore the wrong word. I don't want to tell her. It's strange: knowing that there's a crucial detail I'm going to be withholding makes me all the more determined to tell her the truth about everything I saw and heard when I got back from work: the horrible-looking men, the sound of glass smashing, Lorna's expensive new flat-screen TV being carried out of her driveway by the men and put in what was obviously their getaway car...

'Have you been to Lorna's house already?' I ask as I put her mug of tea down on the table. I didn't bother asking if she wanted a mug or a cup and saucer. No one in their right mind would choose to drink tea out of anything but a mug. There are no tea-cups in my new kitchen — a fact I'm probably more proud of than I should be. Lorna understands; no one else would. She knows and understands so much about me that no one else does, nor probably ever will.

I fight new tears, blinking furiously, as Sergeant Zailer says, 'Yeah, just been to have a look. You're absolutely sure nothing's missing from your friend's front room?'

'Positive. And not only the front room. I looked round the whole house. Lorna wouldn't mind. I've got a key of my own. I've been watering her plants. I know that house as well as I know my own — and everything in it. Nothing's been taken. Her computer and laptop are both still there. The TV...' I'm not sure what to say about Lorna's TV. I feel awkward talking about it: the stolen item that can't be stolen because it's still there, in the house. 'I mean, the window's smashed — I heard it smash and I **saw** the men who did it, it must have been them — but nothing's been taken. Even though I saw them taking the television. It makes no sense.'

'Okay, let's rewind a bit,' Sergeant Zailer says, producing a notepad and pen from her bag. 'Tell me from the beginning.'

'I'd stayed at work late. I work five minutes away, walking distance, which means I end up staying far too late far too often — downside of having no bus or train to make sure I don't miss. Plus, I live alone, so I know no one's waiting for me to cook them dinner.'

Except Lorna, sometimes. On week nights we're normally both

too busy to do any more than stick a ready-meal in the microwave, but on Friday nights I normally cook for her, on Saturdays she cooks for me, and on Sundays we go out for dinner to the nearest gastropub, The Horseguards.

Can that still happen, once Lorna gets back from St Lucia? This is too big and complicated a question for me to consider while answering Sergeant Zailer's questions.

'Where do you work?' she asks me.

'Waterfield, Tross and Yong, just round the corner. I'm a lawyer.' I point at the kitchen wall closest to my office. 'Opposite direction from Lorna's house. If you turn right out of my front garden, walk to the end of Oswald Street, then turn left and walk for about four minutes along the main road, that's where my office is.'

'By "the main road", you mean Spilling Road, yes?'

I nod.

She makes a note of this. 'Okay. Go on.'

'I was coming back from work — I think it was about ten to seven. I was absolutely knackered, having got up at 4am to finish drafting an urgent document — don't ask! — so I grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl and went straight up to bed, planning to sleep for as many hours as I could. I was drawing my bedroom curtains when I noticed two men hanging around outside Lorna's house.'

'How could you see them? Wasn't it dark?'

'Yeah, but there was loads of light. There are street lights, and also most of the houses round here have security lights. Some are so sensitive, they come on if someone just walks past along the pavement.'

'And PC Holgate says you were able to read the number plate of a car parked outside Lorna Bowers' house — is that right? The street lights and security lights were strong enough for you to read it?'

I feel a stab of impatience in my chest. If she doesn't believe me, she can go outside and check. If she walked in the direction of Lorna's house, most of the houses on Oswald Street would light up like Christmas trees. The glare from the street-lamps alone is enough to keep you awake, and there's one directly outside my bedroom window. I've had to put up black-out blinds as well as curtains so that I can ensure proper darkness at night.

'Yes, I could read the number plate easily. I know most of my neighbours' cars. This wasn't one I'd seen before, and it wasn't one I'd expect to see on my street: a show-offy personalised number plate like

that. This isn't a flash area. It's a nice area, but...the car just looked wrong. And one of the men was sitting on the bonnet.'

'Hold on — I'll come to the men in a minute. Let's stick with the number plate: it read "YES I WIN", is that right?'

'Yeah. The E was a pound sign and the S was a number 5.'

'Okay. So — the men?'

'They looked really dodgy. I can't describe them any more than that. Just...they were dressed like gangsters from a Netflix drama about drug dealers.'

'Young or older? White or black? Fat or thin? Hair colour?'

'Both young, both white. I didn't notice if they were fat or thin. Neither, I don't think. Just normal. One was wearing a black hat pulled down over his head. The other was bald — shaved head.'

'Great — this is all very helpful.' Sergeant Zailer looks up at me and smiles.

'I would have just drawn my curtains and got into bed, but...they looked as if they were trying to open Lorna's gate. Her house is on the corner, and the gate's on this side, on the Oswald Street side — so I could see them clearly. When the gate wouldn't open — '

'Why wouldn't it open?' Sergeant Zailer interrupts me.

'Oh — Lorna has a padlock on her gate. She got burgled a few times in her old house, so she's extra careful now.'

'How does the postman deliver her mail?'

'He throws it over.'

Sergeant Zailer frowns. 'Doesn't it get rained on?'

'Sometimes, yes. Better than getting burgled, though. Everyone's extra-careful round here. All the houses have garages, and driveways that lead round to back gardens that are generally pretty tree-covered and secluded. It'd be quite easy to burgle a house round here, unless the owner's taken precautions. I added on an extension to the side of my garage, and got rid of the path that led from my front garden to my back garden. Most people on Oswald Street have marked all their valuables with those security pens, fitted chains and deadlocks on their front doors.'

'As a police officer, I have to say, that's extremely gratifying to hear.' Sergeant Zailer smiles. 'One of my responsibilities is promoting community safety. It's nice to know people are listening to us. So, these men were trying Lorna Bowers' gate?'

'Yes. They didn't look at all like the sort of blokes she'd know.'

And then, when the gate didn't open, one of them started kicking it. It was horrible. They just...destroyed it. It wasn't a particularly strong gate. It was on Lorna's list to get a more solid one.'

'Didn't anyone see it? Two men kicking in a gate on a well-lit street?'

Impatience surges up inside me again. 'Yeah, I saw it. And I rang the police. I thought that was the safest thing to do. I didn't want to open my window and yell at them in case they turned round and shot me. They looked like the sort who might have guns.'

'Wait — immediately, you rang us? I thought you did that after you heard the glass smash? That's what PC Holgate told me.'

'No, I rang 999 as soon as I saw one of them put his foot though the gate. It took a few seconds for the operator to put me through to the police. In those few seconds I heard glass smash and I thought...well, I couldn't see, because Lorna's front garden and her front room window are round the corner, on Tiley Road, but I thought it was bound to be the two men I'd seen, smashing her window to get into the house.'

I realise I've forgotten to make myself a cup of tea, and put the kettle on again. 'I don't know why they picked Lorna's house in particular,' I say. 'Have there been any other break-ins reported, nearby?'

'Not immediately nearby,' says Sergeant Zailer. 'Though plenty of break-ins in the area in general. We're always busier after the clocks go back. Dark nights, you know.'

'I suspect they chose Lorna's house because she hasn't had her hedges trimmed for ages,' I say. 'She's been too busy with work.'

'What does your friend Lorna do for a living?'

The question makes me feel uneasy. 'What does that matter?'

'It doesn't. I'm interested, that's all.'

'She's also a lawyer, only a much more important and well-paid one than me. She's a senior partner at Cannon Phelps in London.'

'So you're best friends and you're both lawyers?'

'Yes. What's wrong with that?'

'Nothing at all. So...you think the burglars — I mean, they didn't take anything, but let's call them that anyway...you think the burglars picked Lorna's house because her tall hedges would provide them with cover?'

'Probably. I can't think of any other reason why they'd pick Lorna's house. It's by no means the biggest or most impressive looking. Oh — I've just remembered! Lorna's burglar alarm isn't currently working. Like the hedge-trimming, fixing it was on her to-do list for when work is

less frantic. But the burglars can't have known that, can they?'

'They could have, yes.' Sergeant Zailer takes a sip of tea. 'You knew. For all we know, Lorna's mentioned her non-working alarm to other people.'

'I doubt it.'

'**You knew.** She might have mentioned it to **other people** too.'

'Lorna and I are best friends. We know every single detail of each other's lives.' This isn't an exaggeration. I even know which seven books Lorna's taken to St Lucia, to read by the pool.

'People should be careful who they share personal information with,' says Sergeant Zailer. 'Anyway, we shouldn't have too much trouble tracing a car with the number plate: "Y£5 I WIN". PC Holgate's on the case already. So...okay. You heard the glass smash — which you mentioned to the police operator, who was still on the line — and then?' 'Then I saw the two men coming back out through the wrecked gate, which they must have unbolted from the other side, carrying Lorna's new TV. They opened the door of the car and...' I try to remember what exactly I saw. The opening of the door. Yes, I definitely saw that: one of them had to open it while holding onto the TV.

'I'm not sure if I saw them actually place it inside the car. I... by this point I was a nervous wreck. The police weren't coming and I couldn't hear any sirens to suggest they were on their way. I...I did something that was probably really daft: I ran downstairs to my garage to get a big spade, thinking that I could smash **my** window and set off my own alarm. Then I realised I'd have to set the alarm first and I was in such a state, I couldn't remember my code! I...I dropped the spade on the floor in the hall and ran back up to the bedroom and...they'd gone. The car was gone.'

'What time was this?'

'I've no idea. I was too worked up to think about noting the time. It was probably about three or four minutes after I called the police. Five, maximum.'

'All right, so about five past, ten past seven.'

I nod. 'I couldn't understand it. Where had they gone? Why wouldn't they have taken the computers, and Lorna's got all kinds of expensive jewellery lying around all over her dressing table: diamond earrings and rings.'

'That's not smart, to leave stuff like that lying around.'

‘Lorna’s the cleverest person I know,’ I say quickly. ‘She’s just busy, and exhausted most of the time.’ She’d leap to my defence equally quickly.

Would she?

Yes. Yes, she would. I have to believe that. Lorna loves me. Friends don’t often say they love each other, but that doesn’t mean they don’t.

If Lorna loves you, then why...

‘Fair enough,’ Sergeant Zailer interrupts my thoughts. ‘I don’t understand. You hadn’t left your house during this time, correct?’

‘Right.’

‘Then how did you know, when you saw the car had gone, that the thieves hadn’t taken computers and jewellery and the lot?’

‘There wasn’t enough time! I’d only been away from the window...I don’t know exactly how long it was, but it wasn’t long enough for them to look all round the house — it’s a three story house. Lorna’s computer’s in her converted attic office, her jewellery’s in her bedroom on the first floor — ’

‘All right, so you expected to see the car still there, and the men still loading stuff into it?’

I nod. ‘When I saw they’d gone, I assumed they’d only taken the telly. Then the police came — ’

‘That was at seven forty-five.’

‘Yes. It took them **ages**.’

‘Busy night, sarge,’ says PC Allen.

‘I went over to Lorna’s house with them, and...her TV was there. In the lounge, in the middle of the rug, just...standing there.’

‘The same TV you’d seen the two men carry out of the house and put in the car?’

‘Yeah. Lorna’s only got one. Even if I didn’t see the burglars putting it in the car, that was definitely what they were about to do when I ran to get the spade from the garage. Why else would they carry it all the way to car and open the car door?’

Sergeant Zailer makes a ‘beats me’ face.

‘So,’ she says, leaning back to look at her notes. ‘What we seem to have here is two men breaking and entering, removing an expensive TV, taking it to their car, then putting it back, and driving away.’

‘But why would anyone do that?’ I ask, my voice shaking.

‘Not a clue,’ says Sergeant Zailer. PC Allen shakes his head in agreement. He also doesn’t know.

‘What am I doing here?’ Simon Waterhouse asked, looking around him in disbelief. Charlie had to laugh. She’d brought him to a restaurant called Sesame, on Spilling Road in Rawndesley. It was barely a restaurant — more of a takeaway, with a small eat-in area attached. Six tatty plastic tables, four chairs at each, filled the small room. Apart from the one occupied by Simon and Charlie, the others were empty.

‘I thought it’d do you good to be forced to get properly dressed and leave the house. Also, I know how much you hate eating out.’

‘So you’ve dragged me out to eat?’

‘Yes, Simon. I’m going to make you do normal-person things for as long as I can. Also, we need to talk. You’ve now missed two days of work, and you still haven’t told me why.’

‘So we have to come to this shit-hole for me to tell you?’

‘Ooh, does that mean you’re going to? If so, then my Special Night Out plan will have worked. And no, if all I wanted was to persuade you to tell me, I’d have taken you somewhere nicer. The reason we had to come to this shit-hole is that it’s relevant to last night’s break in.’

‘The one where the telly got nicked, then put back?’

‘The very same. The house involved is a three minute walk from here.’

‘And what’s this place got to do with it?’

‘Ellen Lewis saw two burglars loading her friend’s telly into their car shortly after 7, right?’

Simon nodded. ‘Then a few minutes later, the car had gone. First officers at the scene found the telly **not** gone, but plonked back in the middle of the living room, as if the thieves had had second thoughts about taking it. Their car had a very trace-able number plate, which Ellen Lewis gave to the police operator over the phone: “Y£5 I WIN”.’

‘Dickheads,’ Simon murmured.

‘Yep. So, we contacted DVLA about the number plate, and today I interviewed the owner of that car — who matches Ellen Lewis’s description of one of the burglars she saw: shaved hair, dresses like a gangster in a Netflix drama. Dodgy as the day is long, for sure — though no priors. This guy doesn’t deny he and his mate were on Oswald Street last night, or that his car was parked there.

He **does** deny that they kicked in Lorna Bowers' gate, smashed her window, did anything to her telly. Says Ellen Lewis must be lying about that. I asked him what he was doing parked outside Lorna's house if he wasn't there looking for houses to rob and you'll never guess what he said.'

'I won't,' Simon confirmed.

Charlie sighed. 'He said he and his mate had booked a table for dinner nearby. Here, to be precise.'

'**Here?**'

'Uh-huh.' Charlie grinned.

'No way. No one on God's green earth would ever, whatever the circumstances, book to come here.'

'Well, I did,' Charlie told him. 'I booked this table for us, and at the same time, I asked the guy on the phone — I think it's him, the guy behind the takeaway counter with the Geordie accent...I told him I was police and asked if he'd had any tables booked for last night. He did, he said: 8 o'clock, table for two — and the booking was in the name of Mr YES I WIN.'

'Hang on — 8 o'clock?'

'Yes.'

'And did the two guys turn up then?'

'They did. They ordered food, ate it. Were here about an hour, apparently. Having a pretty gross, sexist conversation that offended our proprietor over there.'

Simon glanced over at the takeaway counter, where the man in question was busy arguing with a man who'd come in with a pile of election campaign posters advertising whatever political party he belonged to. The Geordie guy was yelling at him, saying that if he started to advertise his political views in the restaurant window, he'd soon lose half his customers, and even if he were inclined to do so, which he wasn't, he'd need to have a screw loose to want to put up a poster encouraging people to vote for 'your lot'.

The man with the posters looked crestfallen. He told the man behind the counter that there was no need to be so rude, and that he would be getting his takeaways from another establishment in future.

'You'd be the half he'd lose, if he did put up that poster,' Charlie whispered to Simon and grinned.

'Too bloody right. I'd have been ruder than him.'

'Yeah, well he's not equally in favour of all kinds of rudeness. He

took an instant dislike to Mr Y£5 I WIN and his mate because they were talking disrespectfully about a woman who...' Charlie stopped. Smirked.

'Do I want to hear this?' Simon asked.

'Unlikely though it seems, Mr Y£5 I WIN is some kind of...provider of sexual services.'

'How do you know?'

'He was bragging about some woman who was so desperate, she was willing to pay through the nose for it, and how he was hardly going to turn down good money. That sort of thing.'

'Well, you've already told me the guy's dodgy. But if he'd booked his table for 8 o'clock, why was he parked outside this Lorna woman's house from 7 o'clock?'

'Very good question,' said Charlie. 'He claims he likes to arrive everywhere early.'

'An hour early, for a meal in a shitty takeaway with a few plastic tables — which he's booked in advance for. Bullshit?'

'Yup. Particularly since, when PCs Holgate and Allen arrived at the scene, the car had gone. They were at the house at 8 o'clock — the time the booking was made for — and the car wasn't there.'

'Has anyone asked the guy about that — the car's owner?'

'Yes, and he says the car was there, and Colgate and Allen mustn't have noticed it. It's absolutely clear that he doesn't care whether the police believe him or not, because he knows we can't prove anything.'

'That's hardly new,' said Simon. 'Why'd they put the telly back, though?'

Charlie shook her head. 'Best guess? Someone — a witness — saw them putting the telly in the car. They didn't want her to be able to identify them, and their car, and say she'd witnessed a burglary, so they walked back into the house with the telly and put it back.'

Simon looked unimpressed. 'I don't buy it,' he said. 'Two men turn up in a car with the most attention-grabbing number plate it's possible to have, smash a window, nick a telly...These aren't guys who care all that much about being seen.'

'I agree. Weirdly, though, we've not been able to find anyone else who saw them apart from Ellen Lewis.'

'House-to-house turned up nothing?'

'Big fat zero. Oh, one interesting thing that I'm going to follow up. A man giving out leaflets about the election — actually, not leaflets.'

Posters, for people to put up in their windows, same as the guy in here a minute ago was giving out, except not for a party — he claimed he was walking along Tiley Road shortly before seven, but that he didn't see any men loitering, or notice the car. I suppose he might have been there a bit earlier, before the men arrived.'

'He might,' Simon agreed. 'Why do you sound as if you suspect him of something?'

'I don't know,' Charlie sighed. 'The posters he was giving out were for an independent candidate. I mean...I don't know. The posters had 'Your independent community candidate' written on them.'

'What's wrong with that?' asked Simon.

'Isn't it a bit weird? Walking the streets at night giving out campaign posters for just some random guy? Also, posters for that same independent candidate had **already** been given out on Tiley Road — Lorna Bowers had one up in her front garden, which is on the Tiley Road side, not the Oswald Street side. It was one of those rigid boards on a post — you know?'

Simon nodded.

'It was right outside her smashed window. I saw it on my way into the house.'

'It's possible they give out posters for windows on a different day from when they give out rigid boards for gardens, isn't it?'

'Yeah, I suppose. You don't think it's a bit weird, then, that this giver-out of posters on behalf of an indy candidate **just happened** to be on Lorna's road at almost exactly the same time as it was not-quite-burgled, and that Lorna just happened to have a board on a post in her garden advertising her support for this same guy?'

Simon narrowed his eyes for a second. Then he shrugged and said, 'I just don't know, Char.'

'Well, that's no use to me. Why don't you know? You always know. Ugh, I'm sick of thinking about it. Nothing even happened. A window was smashed. So what? Tell me about you.' The second the words were out, Charlie regretted them. Simon would now react as if she had launched a bid to seize control of his innermost soul and all his private thoughts. Whereas if she'd only thought for a second and said instead, 'Tell me why you've been hiding from work?', he might have answered. Now? Not a chance.

'Are there lots of posters up in this area, for the election?' he asked. 'Did you notice?'

'A fair few, yes.'

'Most for the usual suspects, presumably?'

'Yeah, exactly,' said Charlie, her unease starting to gnaw at her again. 'I've seen loads of Tory ones, a few Labour and LibDems, the odd Green one. But only one for this community candidate — and that was in Lorna Bowers' front garden.'

'Then dig into it a bit more,' Simon suggested. 'I would.'

'You wouldn't if you were avoiding your job and everything associated with it,' Charlie quipped. 'Oh, wait: you are. Why, Simon?'

He stood up. 'I'm going to go and get myself something to eat, since we're here. I don't think this is the kind of place where they come and take your order.'

The next day at 3 o'clock, Charlie was sitting in the office of Owen Timmer, the independent community candidate for the ward of Rawndesley East. Charlie was impressed that he had campaign office at all, even though it was only two small rooms with a little kitchenette above a chemist's shop.

'There's nothing unusual or mysterious about it,' Timmer was saying. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with fair hair and a mottled complexion. He looked as if he probably drank a fair bit. 'We'd given out the garden boards already, and we were just having another go with the posters. You never know your luck — you might persuade someone you didn't snaffle before to stick one in their window. I don't stand a chance of winning, but you have to try, don't you, or else why bother standing?'

'When you say "we"...were you also on Tiley Road that night, or was it just your colleague?'

'Oh, no, I was there too.'

'Right.' Charlie made a note of this. Why hadn't it been relayed to her already?

'Or, rather, I was on Oswald Street. Damian did Tiley Road.'

Damian was the man Charlie already knew about, who had been giving out Owen Timmer posters and had seen neither the two suspicious-looking men nor the car.

'I don't suppose you noticed a personalised number plate, did you: "Y£5 I WIN"?'

'I did, as a matter of fact.' Owen Timmer laughed.

‘Not exactly classy.’

‘Did you notice anything else about the car?’

‘Let me think.’ Timmer screwed up his face. ‘Actually, I think I did, yes. Two people were taking a television out, and delivering it to one of the houses, I think. I wasn’t paying much attention, I’m afraid.’

‘Two people delivering a television?’ Charlie struggled to keep the excitement out of her voice. Could Timmer have been the witness who was approaching and who made the two men change their minds and take the TV back to Lorna’s lounge?’

‘Yes, a man and a woman,’ said Timmer.

‘A man and a woman? Are you sure?’

‘Um...well, no, not really.’

‘Could it have been two men?’

‘Easily. As I say: I really wasn’t paying attention.’

‘Sarge?’

‘Who’s this?’ Charlie slurred, her mind lurching and tripping over itself. She’d been in a deep sleep, dreaming about eating a sandwich with way too much mustard in it. What a pathetic, lacklustre thing to dream about. Simon’s dreams were much more dramatic. His descriptions of them made them sound like action movies. They were usually about him having to run away from snipers intent on killing him, or swim for his life as submarine commanders plotted his destruction.

‘It’s Holgate, sarge. I didn’t wake you, did I?’

‘Only technically. I mean, I was asleep but I wasn’t supposed to be. I’m still officially up.’

‘I see.’ Holgate sounded confused. ‘Sarge, it’s happened again.’

‘What?’

‘Lorna Bowers’ house, corner of Tiley Road and Oswald Street. It’s been proper done over this time. Everything’s been taken, and they’ve trashed the place.’

‘So they came back,’ said Charlie slowly.

‘Yeah, but the weird thing is, this time the glass of Lorna Bowers’ front window has been smashed from the **inside**.’

‘Tell me in your own words, and whenever you’re ready,’ says Sergeant Zailer patiently.

We’re at Lorna’s. It’s nearly midnight. I wish we could go back to my house and talk there, but I’ve been told we can’t. Instead, for some reason, the powers that be have deemed it essential that we sit here amid the wreckage of what used to be my best friend’s lovely home. I’m doing my best to focus only on Sergeant Zailer’s face. It’s agony for me to look anywhere else. I can’t help seeing it through Lorna’s eyes, knowing exactly how devastated she’ll be, feeling her feelings as if they were my own. This is what happens when you know someone so well that you live in their head and they live in yours.

‘I came to check on the house, and found...all this,’ I whisper.

‘At what time?’

‘10.35.’

‘And you let yourself in with Lorna’s spare key that she’d given you for while she was away?’

‘No. I mean...**yes**, but not just for that. Lorna and I have had each other’s spare keys forever. Not just for holidays. And...I don’t know why it’s only just occurred to me, but she had other spare keys to her front door too — in a drawer of the cabinet that the TV stands on.’

‘Yes, PC Holgate told me.’ Sergeant Zailer sounds impatient. Like a strict teacher. ‘You didn’t mention this last time we spoke. After the first break-in here, you assured us nothing was missing.’

‘Nothing I could **see**. I didn’t open every drawer.’

‘So your security conscious friend who has a lock on her gate leaves spare front door keys in a drawer under her brand new expensive TV, for any burglar to make a bee-line for as soon as he gets inside the house? That doesn’t make sense.’

I start to cry. ‘Lorna thought her house was **safe**. She thought the gate and everything else was enough to stop anyone getting in. She never pictured intruders in her lounge.’

‘No one sensible leaves keys lying around in an obvious place,’ Sergeant Zailer mutters. ‘Speaking of outside...all the smashed pot plants in the front garden...’

‘Lorna will be devastated,’ I sob. ‘Her garden was her pride and joy.’ I’m terrified of ringing her to tell her. I wish I hadn’t promised to do it, and wonder if I can backtrack and ask one of the police officers to do it instead.

‘This is going to sound weird, but might Lorna have been mixed

up in something dodgy?’

‘No.’

‘It’s just that someone went to great trouble and lengths not only to rip out every single plant but also to smash every pot. That would have taken a while. Same with the Owen Timmer board in the garden — they could have just defaced it or pulled it out of the ground. Instead, they broke the wooden post into quarters. And all the plants in pots on windowsills, all round the house — they’ve been carefully and individually vandalised too.’

‘What do you mean “carefully and individually”?’ I ask her. ‘Thugs who trash houses aren’t careful.’

‘I quite agree,’ says Sergeant Zailer. ‘Normally, they’re anything but. Yet here we have a crime scene that looks almost as if an artist has meticulously created an artwork called “Vandalised House”.’

That will make Lorna feel better, I think. The mystery — she’ll be able to latch on to that, hopefully: that it wasn’t just a trashing, if care was taken.

Who am I trying to kid? She’ll be terrified. She’ll imagine that the men targeted her for some sinister reason she may never understand.

‘Did you say Owen Timmer, or did I imagine it?’ I ask Sergeant Zailer.

‘Yes.’ She looks at me sharply. ‘Why?’

‘What’s he got to do with Lorna?’

‘Do you know him?’

‘My mum knew a Christopher Timmer, when I was little. He...he had a son called Owen. Probably not the same one. Why did you mention his name?’

He’s standing in the by-election soon. Lorna had one of his ‘Vote for me’ boards in her garden.’

‘Oh. I didn’t notice.’

‘How long have you and Lorna known one another? Does she know Owen Timmer personally?’

I frown. ‘No. Even I didn’t know him personally. Like I said: my mum knew his dad.’ ‘You’re certain Lorna doesn’t know him?’

I think about this. ‘Well, no, I’m not certain. I suppose she might, but...I’m talking about when I was at primary school. That’s when my parents and his knew each other, assuming it’s the same Owen. Lorna and I only met when I started a new school aged eleven or twelve. Her family had lived in Edinburgh until that point. They moved to

Rawndesley just in time for Lorna to start secondary school. And Owen Timmer wasn't at our school — he went somewhere else.'

Why the hell is Sergeant Zailer so interested in this line of questioning? It makes no sense. There's an election coming up — loads of people have candidates' names on boards in their gardens, or on posters in their windows. Why is she treating it as if it's a clue? It's not as if the name 'Owen Timmer' has been found scrawled in blood on Lorna's wall.

'None of it makes sense,' Charlie told Simon later, having reported to him in pedantic detail — the only level of detail he would accept, when he was interested in something — what she'd found at Lorna Bowers' house and everything she'd managed to find out from those present at the scene. They were in bed, with the lights off, lying side by side.

'Tell me,' said Simon.

'Holgate was right. The front room windows had been smashed from the inside, for sure. Let's assume Mr Y£5 I WIN returned the TV to Lorna's house the other night because he feared he and his car had been seen. While inside, he opens a drawer near to the TV and finds a load of spare front door keys. He pockets one, planning to come back and empty the house some other time, when he won't be seen. So far, so good, right? Then he comes back a second time on a different night and lets himself in. This time, he doesn't have his attention-grabbing car. No one on Oswald Street saw it. He must have been in a different, less obtrusive car. He manages to get all the valuables out of Lorna's house — telly, jewellery, computers. But instead of driving off happily into the sunset with his haul, what does he do? Smashes a window he doesn't need to smash, from inside the front room. He then sticks around to destroy about a hundred individual potted plants and an independent candidate's election campaign poster board.'

'It's not that weird.' Simon yawned. 'Maybe Bloke 1 drove the goods away while Bloke 2 stuck around to mess the place up as pay-back. Maybe he was pissed off about having to make a return trip.'

'No. No one'd risk drawing attention to themselves by smashing glass if they didn't have to — if they had a key, which they must have.'

'Someone did, though,' Simon reminded her.

'Yeah. Owen Timmer, maybe. It's crazy, but that's who I keep

picturing. I didn't warm to him at all.'

'Still. It's a bit of a leap to assume it was him. There's no reason to think that, is there?'

'No,' Charlie conceded. 'But it's very weird. He and his henchman are on the spot for the first break-in, they're both useful-ish witnesses — they're the **only** useful witnesses, in fact.'

'What about Ellen Lewis? I'd say she's much more useful.'

'I suppose so, but...then it turns out Ellen Lewis knew Owen Timmer when they were kids. That on top of Timmer and his helper being right there the first time just makes me suspicious. It seems like a big coincidence.'

'Ellen Lewis didn't know Owen Timmer personally,' said Simon. 'You were the one who spoke to her. You should try remembering what she said.'

'All right, there's no need to be aggressive,' said Charlie.

'I'm not being. I'm being...emphatic. Think back over what Ellen Lewis told you. What you've just told me. You might find some answers.'

Charlie sat up and switched on her bedside light. 'Tell me what you mean, right now, or I might actually strangle you.'

Simon allowed himself a small grin. 'I'll give you a week to work it out, and if you haven't by then, I'll tell you.'

'Simon, I swear to God...'

'Look, I don't know anything that will help you that much, okay? The two guys Ellen Lewis saw doing the first break-in? They did the second one too. They're the ones who've got all the stolen goods. Go after them.'

'But how do you know that?' Charlie asked.

Simon rolled over onto his side. 'I'm knackered. I've got to get some sleep. Turn the light off.'

Three days later, Detective Sergeant Sam Kombothekra was pacing around the car park when Charlie arrived at work. He pounced on her as soon as she got out of her car. 'Where's Simon?'

'Your guess is as good as mine, Sam.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's decided to stop coming into work. I don't suppose you know why?'

'No. And now I can stop hoping that you might.'

'DI Proust's in the worst mood I've ever seen him in, and that's saying something. Still hasn't reported it up the chain, though.'

'Yeah, because he doesn't want to get Simon fired. Without Simon...'

Charlie tailed off, biting her lip.

'None of us would stand a chance of catching any criminals?'

Sam smiled sadly. 'Probably true.'

'No, it's not.'

'It's fine, Charlie. Situation's insane, though. Proust and all of us, we're hiding the fact that Simon's not there. Covering it up. Superintendent Barrow has no idea. And now there's been a possible murder, possible fight-got-out-of-hand. A suspicious death, anyway... Look, can you tell him we really need him to come back?'

'I'll do my best, Sam, but I don't know where he is at the moment. At first when he stopped going in to work, he was just staying in bed, but the last couple of days, he's been AWOL. Comes back in the evening looking as enigmatic as a sphinx.'

Charlie pulled her cigarettes out of her bag and lit one. 'What's this possible murder? Winstanley Estate again?'

'No. Oswald Street. Posh end of Rawndesley, insofar as it's got one.'

'Tiley Road?' Charlie's heart had started to pound.

'Yeah. Victim's a woman called Lorna Bowers.'

'Oh, my God. Sam, I...Oh, my God. She must be back from St Lucia.'

'How did you know that's where she was?'

'Was she killed in her home?'

'No. Friend's house, round the corner, on Oswald Street.'

'Ellen Lewis,' Charlie breathed.

'Ellen Escalante-Lewis, that's right. She found the body on her kitchen floor. Looks like a head wound from a kitchen counter corner, so it could have been a fight that got out of hand.'

'How come you know so much about this?'

'I don't know nearly as much as I want to know. And I probably know an awful lot that you **need** to know. Let's go in and we can get each other up to speed.'

Simon was fully dressed and perched on the edge of the sofa when Charlie got in from work that evening. Smartly dressed, too.

‘I already know,’ he said. ‘Lorna Bowers is dead. I should have told you.’

‘I knew before you did,’ said Charlie. ‘I was with Sam when he rang to tell you — when you finally deigned to answer your phone and stop acting like a spoilt two-year-old.’

‘That’s not what I meant,’ he said. ‘I should have told you what I knew about the break-ins and everything. It might have made a difference. Lorna Bowers would probably still be alive if I had. I just didn’t think...’ He covered his face with his hands.

‘You never learn, do you? You could be telling me **now**. Or telling Sam, whose job it is to investigate Lorna’s death.’

‘**I’ve** been investigating — what d’you think I’ve been doing the past few days? I was going to tell you.’

‘Then tell me. I’m listening.’

‘There’s no time. We need to talk to Ellen Lewis, soon as possible. With Sam too.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I can make her tell me the truth — by telling it to her first.’

‘About the break-ins? You’re not claiming to know who killed Lorna Bowers, I assume.’

‘Yeah, I know that too, and so I’m coming back. For now. But...I don’t know how long I can stay, Char.’

‘In the job, you mean? Simon, what else are you going to do? You’re a brilliant detective. No offence, but I’m not sure you’d be brilliant at anything else.’

‘Maybe not. But I want to be somewhere where I’m not surrounded by people going through the motions. That’s all they’re all doing these days, Char. Maybe that’s all they’re capable of. Don’t get me wrong, I like Sam a lot, but...he’s never going to make a great contribution to the world of ideas.’

‘Wow.’ Charlie laughed. ‘That sounds...really arrogant.’

‘Which is why I haven’t told you what I’m thinking until now. I knew you’d shout me down and make it about my arrogance. Fine, if that’s what you want to think — yes, I’m arrogant — but I’m telling you: there’s no vision, no energy, from any of them. And having to provide all the good stuff myself, it’s draining my energy. I can’t do it for much

longer. I'm going to end up in a state of terminal apathy, ground down by the mediocrity and lack of initiative all around me. I'd rather work alone — like I have been these past few days. It's been exhilarating, Char. I've felt like I used to feel when I first started in the job.'

'Do you think I'm mediocre?' Charlie asked him. 'I still haven't worked out whatever you think I ought to have worked out about the break-ins at Lorna Bowers' house, by the way. So maybe I am.'

'Everyone's mediocre in some area of their life. I'm a mediocre husband, probably. I'm only talking about work, nothing else. Sam's a better man than me, no question. So are you.'

'I was a good detective,' Charlie reminded him. If he was about to leave Major Crimes, would she feel differently about going back to it? **Yes. A million times yes.** A flicker of excitement stirred inside Charlie. Could this be...?

'We need to go,' said Simon, cutting off her train of thought. 'Ring Sam. This shouldn't take long to sort out.'

Two hours later, DS Sam Kombothekra, DC Simon Waterhouse and PS Charlie Zailer were in Spilling police station's largest interview room, sitting across a table from Ellen Escalante-Lewis, who had refused to allow the presence of a lawyer on the grounds that she didn't need one, and, besides, she was a lawyer herself.

'Why don't you tell us what you think happened to Lorna?' Simon asked her.

'It's obvious, isn't it?' she said.

'Not to me.'

'The men didn't only take Lorna's keys the first time they broke into her house — they took her key to my house too. And then, somehow, they lured her round to my house and killed her there.'

'Why would they want to kill her?' asked Simon. 'That first night you called the police, you said the two men looked like people Lorna wouldn't know or associate with.'

'That's true, but...I mean, how should I know why they wanted to kill her? Why don't you ask them?'

Simon stood up and walked over to the window. 'I could do that, it's true. Although...there's a drawback to taking that course of action.'

'What drawback?' Ellen Lewis asked.

'I'd be wasting my time. Because those two men you saw? Yeah, they

broke into Lorna's house that first time. And they were the ones who robbed all her stuff the second time too. But they didn't kill her.'

'How can you possibly know that?'

'Because I know who did.'

'You do? Who?'

'You, Ellen. You killed Lorna.'

Simon was expecting hysterics and anger, but she gave him neither. She simply sat and stared at him.

'Didn't you?' he said.

'No, I didn't.' She laughed bitterly. 'What a ludicrous suggestion. Is that the best you can do? Lorna was my **best friend.**'

'She **was**, yes. "Was" being the crucial word there. Did you still think of her as a best friend...let's see...the day before she died? I know you thought of her that way when you dialled 999 in a panic after seeing two dodgy-looking men outside her house...but then your thinking changed, didn't it? When the two men came back a second time and cleared the house of all its valuables...you hated Lorna by then, didn't you? To Sergeant Zailer here, and to PCs Holgate and Allen, you **pretended** you still loved your best friend Lorna, but that was a lie.'

Simon walked back to his chair and sat down. 'You see, Ellen? I know what I'm talking about. It must be clear to you by now that I know everything, so you might as well come clean. It'll help you a lot if you cooperate now.'

Ellen Lewis smiled. 'It's abundantly clear to me that you haven't got a clue what you're talking about, DC Waterhouse. You've just said that I loved Lorna the first time her house got broken into, but hated her by the time of the second break-in, and so I lied to PC **Allen**? Er, no, sorry. I've only met him once, and that was the night of the **first** break-in. I haven't seen him or spoken to him since.'

'Correct. But I'm still right,' Simon told her. By his side, Charlie muttered something under her breath. It sounded sarcastic. 'You lied to PC Allen on the night of the first break-in, pretending your feelings for Lorna hadn't changed — when in fact they had changed considerably between your initial call to the police and PCs Allen and Holgate arriving at the house. That's why Lorna's TV ended up back in her lounge, isn't it?'

Ellen Lewis swallowed hard. Simon loved this moment: when they realised that he really did know what he was talking about. 'So,' he said. 'Are you going to tell us?'

Silence filled the room.

'Someone tell me,' said Charlie flatly. 'I don't much care who it is, at this point.'

'Sergeant Zailer here is my wife,' Simon told Ellen Lewis. 'She described to me the conversation the two of you had after Lorna's house was broken into for the second time. She told you about the Owen Timmer board in Lorna's garden and you responded as if you hadn't seen it.'

'I hadn't. Lorna's front garden is round the corner from me, on Tiley Road. She could put an elephant in her front garden and I wouldn't be able to see it.'

'Not from your house, no,' Simon agreed. 'But after the first break-in at Lorna's, you went with the police to her house, didn't you? Walked in through the front door, which is also round that same corner and presumably very close to where the Owen Timmer board was?'

'Yes, but...I didn't notice it. I was too upset.'

'I might be able to believe that if you hadn't given yourself away,' said Simon. 'After the second break-in, Sergeant Zailer here interviewed you and she mentioned the Owen Timmer board in Lorna's garden. You expressed surprise — exactly as you might if you hadn't seen it — surprise because you knew a boy called Owen Timmer years ago.'

'No, I didn't know him, I —'

'You knew **of** him. Fair enough. But then you said to Sergeant Zailer that this Owen Timmer, the one standing in this ward as an independent candidate, was "probably not the same one". That was what first made me suspicious. Owen Timmer is hardly a common name. Hardly John Smith, is it? And, since you'd also told Sergeant Zailer that you and Owen Timmer both grew up round here, in the Rawndesley area, I thought to myself: why would she say he's probably not the same Owen Timmer, when it's highly likely that he would be? I could only think of one reason: clumsily and ineptly, you were trying to give the impression that a) you hadn't noticed that board in Lorna's garden, and b) you weren't sure it was the same Owen you once knew about. And if you weren't even sure it was him standing for election, well, then you couldn't possibly have any strong feelings about the Owen Timmer who was standing for election, could you? Strong feelings that might lead you to take drastic action.'

Ellen Lewis stared down at her hands. She said nothing.

'I've been doing a bit of research, Ellen,' said Simon. 'Into your background and past. You told Sergeant Zailer that it was when you

were at primary school that your parents and Owen's had known each other. Didn't you? I know you did, because I've read Sergeant Zailer's notes from the interview.'

'Yes, she did,' said Charlie.

'And yet she also told you that it was her mother and Owen's dad, Christopher Timmer, who had known each other. Earlier in your interview with Sergeant Zailer, that's what you said, Ellen: your mum and Owen Timmer's dad. Not "parents", plural. I wondered about that: was it your parents and his parents who were friends, or your mum and his dad? When I investigated, I found an interesting backstory.'

Simon turned to Sam and Charlie. 'Ellen's mum left her dad, and left Ellen, to set up house with a recently-widowed Christopher Timmer. Owen Timmer stole Ellen's mum, effectively — or at least, that was how eight-year-old Ellen must have felt. And it got worse for her, too. Her father committed suicide shortly afterwards. And did Ellen's mother come back at that point, to be a proper mum to her only child? She didn't, did she, Ellen?'

The woman sitting across the table from him had started to cry. She shook her head.

'She stayed in the Timmer household, preferring to be Christopher's wife and Owen's step-mum. Going home and being with her own daughter, who'd just lost her father, wasn't nearly as appealing a prospect. And Lorna knew all this,' she whispered. 'She knew what I'd been through, she knew everything about me. She knew the effect that just hearing the name "Owen Timmer" had on me. The boy who ended up with the mother I should have had.' She looked up. 'She's dead now. I didn't go to her funeral. Didn't even send flowers.'

Simon couldn't quite bring himself to look at her, so he turned away. Lorna Bowers might have known everything about Ellen Lewis, but there was no one in the world who knew everything about Simon Waterhouse. Charlie knew more than most, but even she didn't know the half of it. She had no idea, for instance, that Simon, as a teenager, had resented to the point of hatred the kids at his school who'd been abandoned by one or more of their parents. It was envy, plain and simple. Secretly, in those days, he'd furiously wished that his parents would disappear so that he could stand a chance of turning out halfway normal — though by then it was probably too late. The damage had been done.

None of this was Ellen Lewis's fault, and Simon knew perfectly well that, at his advanced and ever-advancing age, he ought not to feel,

still, a hot spurt of envy for anyone lucky enough to have been free of both parents at the age of eight. It was Sod's Law: those who desperately wanted to keep their parents lost them, and those who wanted to lose them were lumbered for life.

'Here's what I think happened,' Simon told Sam and Charlie. 'Owen Timmer and his friend who were handing out posters the same night as the first break-in at Lorna's — that was a coincidence. But nothing else was. Ellen saw suspicious activity at her friend's house, so she phoned the police. At that point, she hadn't seen the "Owen Timmer" board in Lorna's garden. Why would she? Her walk to work doesn't take her round that corner onto Tiley Road — she walks in the opposite direction to her office.

'Anxious that the police weren't going to arrive quickly enough, and desperate to stop the thieves making off with all Lorna's possessions, I think Ellen took a spade from her garage, as she told you she did, Charlie — and I think she went over there, to Lorna's house, herself. She went in through the broken gate and that's when she saw it: the board in the garden, telling her that her best friend who knew her history didn't give enough of a shit about it to refrain from voting for Owen Timmer — or from broadcasting to the neighbourhood the fact that she intended to do so.'

I liked the way Detective Constable Waterhouse put it: Lorna didn't give enough of a shit about my history to refrain from voting for Owen Timmer — or from broadcasting to the neighbourhood the fact that she intended to do so. And not only to the neighbourhood. To me. She knew I would be checking on her house once or twice while she was away. She was a disgusting coward.

I knew she cared passionately about the steep rise in local crime, which was Owen Timmer's big promise to prospective voters: that, unlike the political party candidates in the ward whose focus was more on national politics, his main focus would be on tackling crime in Rawndesley if he were to be elected. That's why Lorna felt she had to vote for him, on principle and in spite of my feelings about him. She tried to explain that to me, the day she died. She said, 'I'm sorry I wasn't brave enough to tell you myself, and instead let you find out from a stupid board in my garden. I've always been terrified of confrontation, Ellen.

You know that. You're not the only one with a painful past history. And...I hate to say this, and I've always been too scared to say it before, but... well, Owen Timmer himself is blameless. He was a child too. He didn't deliberately set out to steal your mother.'

Unforgivable. Did it not occur to her that she could have voted for him a million times, and I didn't need to know anything about it? If only she hadn't put that board up in her garden, I would never have known. I would still have a best friend, and Lorna would still be alive.

But, oh no, voting for Timmer wasn't good enough for her. She had to advertise her support for him. Why? A board in a garden never persuaded anyone to change their vote, as far as I know. All those election posters do is make people hate their neighbours. In fact, the police ought to add that to the security tips they're constantly pressing on us. 'Don't put an election poster up in your window, or a board in your garden,' they should advise us, 'or else here's what might happen...' And then they could describe what happened to Lorna's house and to Lorna, and all because she advertised her voting intentions, which is something that nobody ever really needs to do.

On the night of the first break-in, I called the police in a panic, just like DC Waterhouse said. Then, convinced they wouldn't arrive in time to do any good, I grabbed my spade and went over there myself. Caught them red-handed, trying to put Lorna's telly in their car, arguing about whether to put it in the boot or on the back seat. Through the broken gate, I saw the poster, and the name 'Owen Timmer', and my heart stopped. I said to the burglars, 'There's loads of extremely valuable jewellery in the house too. I can tell you where it all is. Except — not now, because the police are on their way.'

We quickly made a plan: they would put the TV back in the house, then disappear. Later, I'd take them back to the house, let them in with my key, and show them where they'd find items far more valuable than a state-of-the-art TV.

They didn't believe me. So I took a hundred pounds out of my wallet, which was in my jacket pocket, and handed it to them. 'Cooperate with me and I'll make it worth your while — starting with this,' I said.

When I told DC Waterhouse this part of the story, at the police station, Sergeant Zailer said to Waterhouse, 'That's what the two men must have been talking about at the takeaway, that the manager overheard: a woman so desperate, she was willing to pay him for it. Not sexual services, but a postponed burglary.'

The men took my hundred quid and agreed to cooperate. We took Lorna's TV back into her lounge. Me and one of the men carried it, while the other started up the car engine, ready to escape. Apparently, Owen Timmer saw me — well, he saw a woman and a man taking a television into a garden. Thank God I didn't see him. He might not still be alive either, if I had.

I rang up and booked the two men a table at the nearest place with tables. I'd already told the police operator about the 'Y£5 I WIN' number plate, so there had to be an official reason for the car to have been parked on Oswald Street. They drove off and parked it somewhere else, then walked back to the place where I'd booked the table and had what must have been a pretty crappy meal at my expense.

Then, later, the three of us returned. Different car this time — one belonging to the second man, with a normal number plate instead of a show-offy one. I let them in with my key and they took everything: all Lorna's worldly goods. Then they left, satisfied and even grateful, and I stayed. I wasn't prepared to leave Lorna's house in any kind of good state. I did as much damage as I could, and it made me feel better. Foolishly, as it turns out, I smashed the front window to make it look like a burglary. I honestly had no idea that anyone would be able to tell if a window was smashed from the outside or the inside.

Lorna knew it was me, of course. She told me so, the day she died — said she understood and she wasn't going to tell the police or anyone else. I think she expected me to be grateful. She kept trying to get me to open up and talk, and honestly seemed to think that everything that had happened — the board in her garden, what I'd done — needn't be the end of our friendship.

Deluded. Utterly deluded. She kept saying, 'Say something, Ellen. Say something.' I couldn't. Couldn't speak to her at all. In the end I just sort of lunged at her, and then it was physical from that point onwards, and then...

And then Lorna was dead. Is dead. And I'm dead inside.

It's funny, but I don't think the police realise that I'm grieving. I might be responsible for Lorna's death, and even glad about it, given how she betrayed me, but I'm still in mourning — for the old Lorna, or for the person I believed for so many years that she was.

And it was all so needless. So futile and...I don't know if ironic is the right word, but it's the one that keeps coming to mind. Lorna cared

so much about tackling the increase in crime in her area that she behaved in a way that caused new crimes, including her own murder.

I don't think I'm going to be charged with murder — I think they all believe me that it was a fight that got out of hand, but they're wrong. I hoped and wanted and tried to kill the new Lorna — the one who had killed the old Lorna, my best friend.

Hints and Tips from ADT

For protecting your home during the darker months

1. A working, well maintained, visible alarm keeps your home safe from potential intruders. Monitored alarms over bells only provide an extra deterrent as burglars know that someone else is ready to action an alarm if it is triggered

2. Fit outside security lighting to the front and rear of your home to put off potential intruders. These could be dusk-to-dawn lighting which turns on and stays on in the dark or motion sensor lighting which detects movement and then turns a light on, these also serve the dual purpose of lighting your path when returning home after dark, especially in winter

3. Install a CCTV system, people don't like to think they could be caught on camera when up to no good. You have to be careful that your cameras are placed correctly so that you do not overlook others properties. This could also extend to video doorbells or smart two-way intercom doorbells, many burglars will try knocking on a door to determine if someone is really home before attempting to break-in

4. Make sure your home looks occupied when you are out, use timers or smart lights to turn lights on when you are not home, leaving a radio on, asking someone to come in and pick up your post when you are on holiday

5. Don't leave expensive gadgets, jewellery and other valuables in plain sight whether at home, overnight or when away. This is an invite for a burglar to attempt to break in and swipe your prized possessions.

6. Fit strong locks, ideally deadlocks on doors, and a security chain to make entry to your property more difficult. Always make sure you fully close and lock windows and doors every time you leave the house, even if you are just popping out quickly

7. House and car keys should always be kept out of sight, away from the windows and doors and kept in a cupboard or drawer so that potential burglars can't 'fish' for keys from open doors, letterboxes or pet flaps.

8. Exercise great caution when sharing personal information about yourself, your purchases, and your whereabouts publically on social media, make sure you regularly check that your profile settings to ensure your information remains private and only available to your friends and people you trust

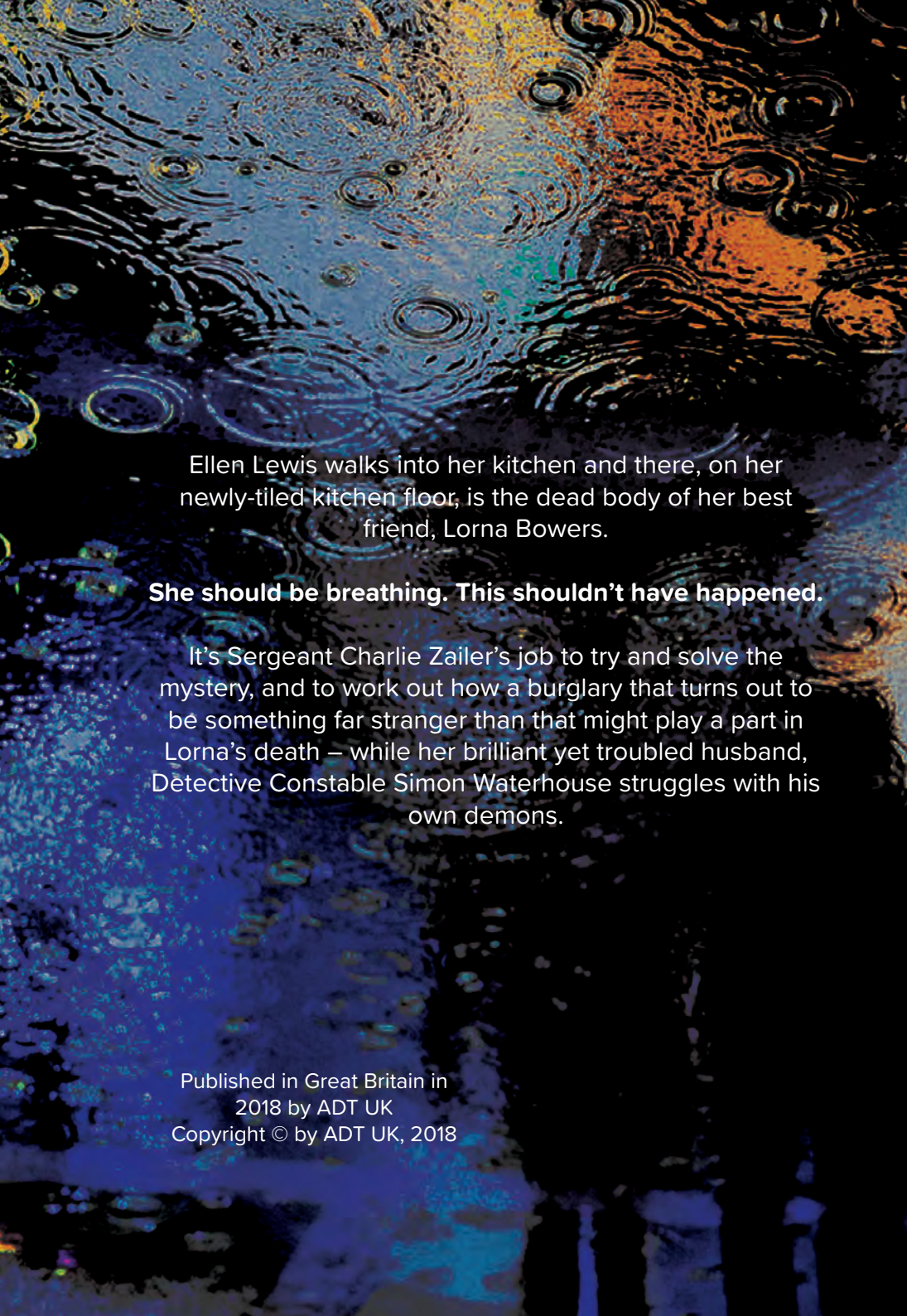
9. Use a security pen to mark valuables with your postcode, the ink is invisible to the naked eye but if your valuables are stolen there is a better chance that they can be recovered and returned to you.

10. Garden maintenance can also help keep away potential intruders, trim bushes and trees around your property so you always have a clear view to and from your property and reducing potential hiding spots for burglars. Trimming tree limbs and branches prevents burglars using these to gain access to your home via high windows and make sure you lock away tools and ladders that could be used to gain entry to your property if left lying around.

11. Gravel or shingle on paths and driveways will deter a potential burglar who risk making a noise on their approach to your home opposed to concrete or grass access routes.

12. Choosing strong, lockable and high gates and fences stop intruders creeping around to the back of your home. Fitting trellis on top of garden fences makes it more difficult for potential thieves to climb over and access back gardens.

Get in touch to share your home security tips, via **@ADT_UK** on Twitter



Ellen Lewis walks into her kitchen and there, on her newly-tiled kitchen floor, is the dead body of her best friend, Lorna Bowers.

She should be breathing. This shouldn't have happened.

It's Sergeant Charlie Zailer's job to try and solve the mystery, and to work out how a burglary that turns out to be something far stranger than that might play a part in Lorna's death – while her brilliant yet troubled husband, Detective Constable Simon Waterhouse struggles with his own demons.

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