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They killed her as soon as she opened the front door.

It was all very easy. Bull was dressed in a navy blue Royal Mail cap and sweater, with a blue shirt underneath, looking just like any ordinary postman, and he was carrying a mid-sized empty box with the Amazon logo on the side in front of him, so the girl didn't suspect a thing.

Fox was standing just out of sight. He was dressed similarly to Bull, and was wearing a backpack. He also had a semi-automatic pistol with a suppressor attached down by his side, so that no one walking past the front gate would see it. Not that they would have been able to see much anyway, with the huge laurel hedge in the way. He brought the pistol up as the girl came into view, and before she had a chance to acknowledge his presence, he pulled the trigger, shooting her in the temple at point blank range. The

gun kicked in his hand, but thanks to the suppressor the noise it made was little more than a loud pop. The girl fell back against the doorframe, blood pouring down the side of her face, and Bull dropped the empty box and caught her under the arms as her legs gave way.

Moving past him, Fox produced a balaclava from his back pocket and pulled it over his head as he walked through the cluttered hallway, the still-smoking gun outstretched in front of him. He was making for the back of the house where he could hear the noise of a family breakfast time. Behind him he could hear Bull dragging the dead girl into the hallway and closing the front door.

'Who is it, Magda?' a male voice called out from the kitchen.

'Nobody move,' said Fox, striding into the room as if he owned the place, which right then he pretty much did.

A well-built middle-aged man in a shirt and tie sat at the table holding a mug of tea. Opposite him were a boy and a girl in different school uniforms. The kids were twins but they didn't look much alike. The boy was tall for fifteen, with the same broad shoulders as his father, and a shock of boyband blond hair, while the girl was small and dumpy, and looked much younger. All three of them stared at Fox with shocked expressions.

'I'm afraid Magda's dead,' said Fox, pointing the

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gun at the father, his hand perfectly steady. 'Now, everyone needs to cooperate, or they die too. And that means stay absolutely still.'

Nobody moved a muscle.

Bull joined him in the room. He was wearing his balaclava now and he stood near the doorway, waiting for orders. As the name suggested, Bull was a big guy. He was also dim-witted and did what he was told without question, which was why he'd been chosen for this particular job. That and the fact that he didn't seem to possess any obvious compassion for or empathy with his fellow human beings. Fox glanced at him and noticed there was a dark smear on his shirt collar where Magda had bled on him.

'Please,' said the father, meeting Fox's gaze and keeping his voice calm for the sake of the children, 'take what you want and leave. We haven't got much.'

Fox glared at him. The father had been a police sergeant for seventeen years before being invalidated out when he'd been stabbed on duty three years earlier, and he was therefore used to being in control of confrontations, which made him potentially dangerous. Fox's finger tightened on the trigger. 'Don't say another word or I'll put a bullet in your gut. Understand? Nod once for yes.'

The father nodded once, slowly placing his mug on the table and giving his two children a look of reassurance.

'Stand up, turn round and face the wall.'

'Don't hurt my dad,' said the boy, who Fox knew was called Oliver. His voice was deep and irritatingly confident.

'No one gets hurt if you all do as you're told.' Fox's tone was cold but even. He knew it was essential that he didn't give off any sign of weakness, but also that he didn't do anything to panic the prisoners. It was all a very delicate balancing act. For the moment, they had to be kept alive.

'We're not going to offer any resistance,' said the father, getting up and facing the window. 'But can you tell me what this is all about?'

'No.'

'We're just an ordinary family.'

Well, you're not, thought Fox, otherwise we wouldn't be here. But he didn't say that. Instead he said, 'Because it's early in the morning, I'm going to pretend that you're still only half-awake and didn't hear me the first time. If you talk again, I will shoot you. I'd prefer to have three of you alive, but I can just as easily manage with two.'

That was when the father belatedly seemed to realize that he was dealing with professionals and fell silent once again.

Fox slipped the backpack off and threw it to Bull, who unzipped it and pulled out plastic flexi-cuffs and ankle restraints. With Fox covering him, he went over to the father, pulled his hands roughly behind his back and started to put on the cuffs.

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This was the dangerous part. If the father was going to try anything, it would be now.

'I'm not pointing the gun at you any more,' Fox told him, moving his gun arm a few feet to the left, 'I'm pointing it at your son's head. Remember that.'

The father stiffened, and seemed about to say something, then settled for a simple nod.

'Where's your phone?'

'In my pocket.'

'Thank you. If you'd be kind enough to get it, Bull.'

Bull nodded, fastened the father's ankles, then did a quick search of his pockets, coming up with an iPhone 4 which he handed to Fox.

'What's the code to unlock it?'

The father told him. Fox pocketed the phone and wrote the number down on the inside of his forearm.

'Right, kids, your turn. Up against the wall, next to your dad. We're going to put restraints on you as well.'

The father started to look round, wanting to say something, but was sensible enough to hold his tongue.

For a few seconds the twins didn't move. The girl – Fox had been told her name was India – was staring down at the table, as if by doing so she could make this whole thing go away, while Oliver was breathing heavily and clenching and unclenching his fists. He got up first, giving Fox a defiant look, before going over to stand to the right of his dad. Fox admired his

guts. It took something to pull a face at a man who's pointing a gun at you, especially when you're only fifteen. India was a different story. She remained glued to her seat, and Bull had to lift her to her feet and shove her bodily against the wall.

When all three had been restrained and were standing in a forlorn row with their backs to him, Fox took out the father's iPhone and took a photo of them. Then he told them to turn round and took another one. India was looking weepy; the father was looking scared but in a manly, lantern-jawed way; Oliver was still glaring from beneath his blond hair, as if he was some brave superhero who'd been caught unawares by the dastardly villain and was now plotting his revenge. Well, too late for that, boy, thought Fox. You had your chance.

He got them to turn round again so they were facing away from him, and handed the gun to Bull. 'Cover them,' he said. 'Anyone moves, shoot them in the leg.' Fox knew he wouldn't have to do it, but it was worth ramming home the penalty for non-compliance. Subtlety really isn't a useful trait in hostage-taking.

Pulling off his balaclava, Fox went back out towards the front door, stepping over Magda's body, which Bull had propped up against the wall, walked out of the house and down to where he'd parked the van.

The street was fairly quiet. It was an affluent area of detached 1950s homes built when space wasn't so