



**WHISPERS
OF MURDER**

T. L. NORTON

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No, it wasn't possible. Leonard Hobson reeled, he needed to sit down. He reached for the castored office chair and lowered himself carefully onto it. Not murder, not Russell, impossible.

Mr Greaves was a hateful man, but Leonard couldn't just stand by and see him murdered. His thoughts slipped to Mr Greaves' gloating face, he was a cruel man who delighted in subduing his employees and watching them grovel, especially Leonard, but surely he didn't deserve to be murdered.

However, Leonard had seen Russell's face reflected in the darkened glass and the poison in his hand. He had heard the whispered words, whispers not meant for Leonard's ears, whispers that still boomed around his head, whispers of murder.

At first Leonard hadn't believed it. Russell couldn't do it. He was a good man with no evil in him. Someone you couldn't help liking and admiring, always perfectly in control, forthright and bold, nothing fazed him. But, gradually, the truth settled like dust in Leonard's mind. Unless he did something about it, Mr Greaves would die.

Leonard had known Russell Maitland for about a year and they were very close. He was the exact opposite of Leonard, sophisticated, cool, determined, courageous and successful. So successful it made Leonard ache. They were like the two sides of an argument but they worked well together, they fitted. Since Russell had come into his life, Leonard had felt happier, more confident and secure.

Rachael liked him too. Leonard had noticed the subtle changes in his wife when he took Russell home with him. It pleased Leonard to see her so happy. It bothered him too, that she found Russell the more attractive man. However, knowing Russell as he did, Leonard knew it was harmless, maybe even beneficial. Russell would never do anything to hurt his best friend, he just wasn't the type and, even though Russell was more Rachael's type, more any woman's type in fact, she couldn't be blamed for his own inadequacies.

Leonard sighed. That was how it had all come about in the first place. When Leonard had been at his very lowest ebb, when he had finally declared himself an utter failure in all aspects of life.

Leonard had reached a crisis point, when something had to happen. Suicide had crossed his mind, but he couldn't quite allow himself to succumb to that most ultimate of failures, and there was Rachael to consider. He had to find another way to cope with it all.

Then Russell Maitland had made his appearance at the office, swiftly taking over as Leonard's friend, mentor and saviour, always there to offer any help and advice needed, making life, once again, bearable for Leonard. Leonard had never imagined it could come to this. Murder!

There was only one solution. He would have to have a serious talk with Russell, dissuade him from this venture. They were close, who else knew Russell the way he did? Who else would Russell listen to? Of course Russell would heed him.

It wasn't easy getting time alone, face to face with Russell, at the office. The right time, that was, to discuss the impending murder. But eventually it happened, and Leonard faced Russell silently as he frantically searched for the right approach. It was going to be difficult, he dared not fail this time.

Russell sensed his unease and smiled his familiar reassuring smile, "What's wrong Lenny? Something worrying you? Something you want me to fix?"

"Well, y, yes there is."

"Go on then, spill it. Don't be afraid to ask a favour. We're best mates, right?"

"Right." Leonard gulped. Russell knew. Well he was bound to really. The same way that Leonard knew about the murder, reflections were reciprocated. So why did he have to play it this way? Leonard wanted it straight, he didn't want to play games, Russell was better at them.

"Well?"

"Don't kill Greaves."

"Why?"

"Just don't do it Russell."

"Why not?"

"I don't want you to kill Greaves." Leonard's voice rose and sweat oozed from his forehead.

"It's what you wanted Lenny. Your idea." the cool countenance wavered for a second and Leonard felt a mixture of relief and apprehension.

"Well I admit I'm not too fond of the man, but I never thought about killing him."

"It's your wish Lenny. I'm simply doing as you asked. Like I said before, whenever you need any help" Russell pressed on patiently.

"No. No I never suggested"

"You hate him Lenny." Russell had regained his calm air, in perfect control again, only this time Leonard began to feel like the subject, even victim, of that power rather than the benefactor. "Admit it to yourself Lenny, you want him dead. I know you as well as you know me, remember."

"No Russell."

"Yes Lenny."

"This time you're mistaken."

Russell's face was closer now and his voice more persuasive, pressing Leonard to give up his stand.

Leonard had to stand strong. He must not fail again.

"With Greaves out of the way you'll have a chance. He's holding back your career Lenny. He's keeping you down."

"No Russell, with Greaves out of the way, it's you who'll go up, you whose career will benefit." Leonard felt his control returning.

He must not fail.

"I go up, you go up Lenny." Leonard's momentary strength was countered by Russell, his face hard with determination.

"It's gone too far Russell. I never meant it to. It has to stop now damn it."

Must not fail.

"Think of the way he treats you Lenny. You're his bug to tease and goad and toss back in the jar when he's had his fun. One day he'll crush you."

"There are other ways, you don't have to kill him for goodness sake."

Not fail.

"He's seeing your wife Lenny. Our shit of a boss is having an affair with Rachael. But you know that, don't you. You're just too weak to do anything about it."

"No. It's not true." Leonard gulped. He began to tremble, his control was sliding. How had he let himself be cornered by Russell like this. He stared back at the glassy eyes that held him in their grip of iron.

"You see now that he has to go, don't you Lenny? It's the only way to be free of him once and for all."

"No."

"Your career, your future's at stake Lenny and Rachael." the face in front of Leonard was suddenly predatory. It wasn't often that he got to look Russell straight in the eye this way. "It's time to man up Lenny and, as always, I'm here to help you." Normally they co-existed harmoniously, sharing so much at work and at home. Confrontations were rare.

Now aspects of Russell's personality, that had so far remained hidden, were suddenly very apparent to Leonard and he was afraid.

"You do value your job don't you Lenny? And your self esteem? I do." Leonard said nothing. "And Rachael, do you want to lose her to that creep? I don't Lenny." Russell's voice had dropped to a whisper, at once both threatening and promising. "You'd rather it be me than Greaves wouldn't you?"

A few moments ago Leonard would have said yes, now he wasn't so sure. He was beginning to see the truth or, perhaps, to accept the truth. Maybe he had known it all along. Allowing Russell Maitland into his life wasn't so good after all. Greaves wasn't the only one Russell wanted out of the way.

Leonard wasn't stupid, he simply blinkered himself to certain things. He knew Russell had no further use for him, he had become a liability. His demise had been inevitable from the start.

The only reason Russell had bothered to grace him with this conversation was to press home Leonard's last great failure. To see him plead and squirm this last time before snuffing him out forever.

All Leonard had wanted was someone to lean on, a friend, someone with all the qualities he didn't possess. Courage, determination, confidence, ambition and charm. He'd wanted to be just like Russell Maitland.

Now it seemed that Russell had other characteristics lacking in Leonard, violence, ruthlessness and selfishness. And Russell was the dominant personality. Leonard couldn't possibly maintain control. He had been mad to try. Then, of course, he was mad. This would never have happened if he hadn't been mad.

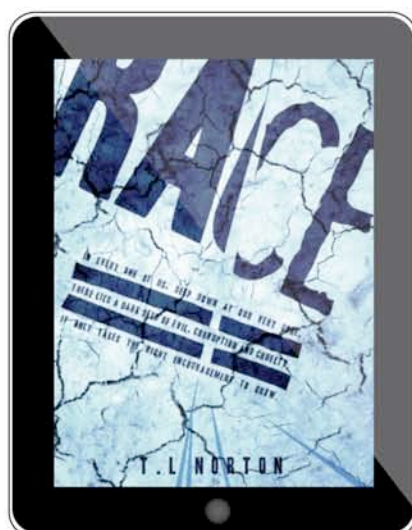
"Well Lenny, you'll have your last wish. It will be me."

"Fail."

Leonard regarded the face in the mirror. A distorted image of his own. Two personalities had shared one body for long enough. Leonard Hobson was fading into oblivion, Russell Maitland had taken over.

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