

A short story featuring characters from
THE SUDDEN DEPARTURE OF THE FRASERS



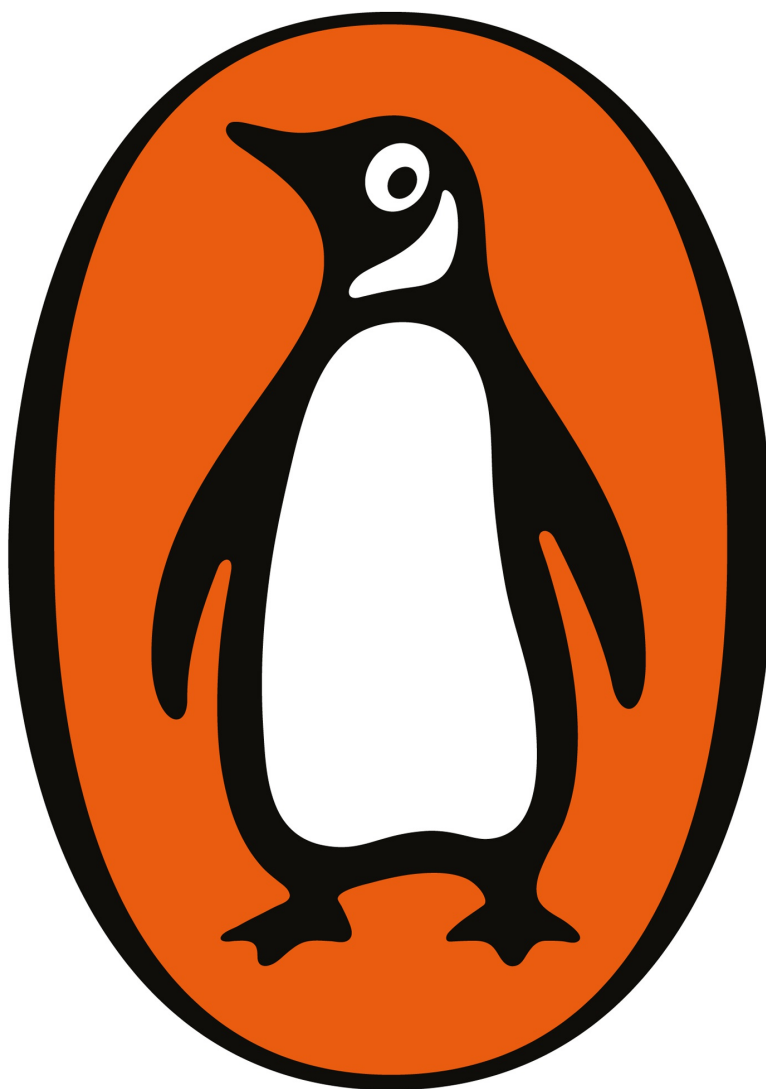
The
INTRUDER
at
NUMBER

40

Including an
exclusive extract
from the new novel

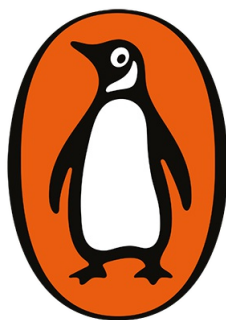
*THE
SWIMMING
POOL*

LOUISE
CANDLISH



Louise Candlish

THE INTRUDER AT NUMBER 40



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On a pleasingly sharp blue day in May, Ryan Steer let himself into a vacant house on Vale Road in Lime Park. He was happy to see among the scattered post on the doormat the package he'd taken the liberty of ordering in the owner's name.

Not to mention without the owner's knowledge.

Of course, as precautions went, it was hardly worth the padded envelope it was written on: a child could trace the order back to Mr R. Steer, negotiator at Lime Park Estates, sole agency for the sale of the property in which Ryan now stood. But, still, it seemed necessary to make a token effort to cover his tracks. To commit a crime in plain sight was disrespectful to all concerned.

He stored the unopened packet in his work bag, piled the rest of the post on the hall radiator cover and took a quick look about the place before leaving. He agreed with his manager Deborah's appraisal that it wasn't going to get anywhere near the full asking price in this half-furnished state. People couldn't visualize, which was why the owner needed to bite the bullet and pay to have it staged. The Frasers' interior-designer totty – Hetty was her name – could probably organize that, and it would be Ryan's pleasure to supply her details.

Vale Road was on the outer reaches of Lime Park near St Luke's Primary (another mark against it) and it was a good twenty-minute amble to the north-eastern edge of the park, where he found a free bench and settled to open his package. He was careful to keep the item screened from the passing school-run mums and dog walkers – not that they'd have any reason to doubt that it was anything other than what it appeared to be, but he didn't want anyone noticing even that much.

What it appeared to be was a regular household smoke alarm, mains-operated (that was important: he wouldn't be in a position to recharge batteries). What it in fact *was* was a concealed camera, with no smoke detection capability whatsoever. It was one of the more expensive versions on the market, not MI5 level – no doubt the spooks had their own suppliers at prices to make your hair curl – but costly enough to have put back his personal flat hunt a couple of months. His girlfriend, Julie, had really been the one to suffer: she'd wanted a Tiffany charm bracelet for her birthday and had got a market knock-off, which probably explained why they hadn't had sex since.

She was petty, Julie, and he didn't like pettiness in a woman.

From where he sat he had a clear view of the rear aspect of Lime Park Road, each pair of villas a solid brick square, the sashes satisfyingly uniform thanks to the street's conservation restrictions. His gaze kept straying to the top floor of the building he knew to be number 40, where a light at the window suggested that the new owners continued to base themselves in the upper rooms of the house while their builders invaded below.

Tucking his purchase safely in his jacket pocket, Ryan tore the envelope and delivery note into small pieces and disposed of them in a nearby bin. The portion with the address on it he screwed up and swallowed.

Since he was in the park, he couldn't resist a detour through the south gates and down Lime Park Road and, as always, he scanned the passing faces for the one he longed to see. But someone like her wouldn't be up and about this early. She wasn't one of those stout, strident-voiced mothers who stomped around from the early morning, thinking they owned the place. (Actually, they *did* own the place, most of it anyway. Ninety per cent of properties were being bought by families, even the flats.)

It was getting on for 8.50 a.m. now and the builders were making their usual racket at number 40. With an abruptness that was almost violent, the occupant of the upstairs flat at number 38 lowered his blind – as if *that* would help.

Ryan doubled back to the park and then through the main gates to the high street where, in the café opposite his office, the mothers were gathering after drop-off. They threw themselves into their seats as if they'd just climbed Kilimanjaro, eagerly colluding to make a mountain out of a molehill. Er, walking a few streets to deliver a small child to a school gate? Try selling houses at the back end of a recession, he thought.

He was aware that he was developing a serious squeamishness regarding mothers and that it was somehow related to the ambiguity he was experiencing in his own relationship. So Julie wanted a baby, all right? (She was not so petty on this score – she was pretty fucking intense, in fact.) His protestations that they needed a flat first would buy him only so much time.

In the Lime Park Estates' shop window, one set of details caught his eye, just as it always did: *SOLD! Stunning family home in sought-after Lime Park Road ...*

Number 40. All the more sought after now *she* was there.

Fingering the alarm in his pocket, he entered the office with a sense of calling, a sense of his true life just beginning.

'Ryan, you still looking for a two-bed?' His colleague Cheryl summoned him over to her desk. 'I'm doing a valuation this morning at 10 Station Road. Want to come with?'

One of the benefits of selling property: when you were buying, you went straight to the top of the list of candidates.

'Actually, I've hit the pause button on that,' he said.

'Oh. Why?'

'Gonna save a bigger deposit, I think.'

'You're not splitting with Julie?'

Now she said it, he saw the inevitability of it. He disappointed Julie and that was only going to continue, possibly even intensify into anger. Her tenacity would not survive what was to come. 'You know something I don't?' he said, straight faced.

Sensing his lack of conviction (estate agents were attuned to the subtlest of false notes and experienced in ignoring them), Cheryl raised an eyebrow. 'Well, make your mind up. The market's going to pick up soon.'

They'd been trotting out that line throughout the recession and sooner or later it would prove true. Twenty-twelve it was now, year of the Olympics, year of London, year of little old Lime Park! Even so, better not to buy a flat locally in case he lost his job or was issued with a restraining order. And you couldn't pay your mortgage from jail, could you?

He returned the Vale Road keys to their cubbyhole and fired up his PC. Six years he had worked at Lime Park Estates as a negotiator. Two minutes it had taken him to decide to risk everything by installing a hidden camera device in Amber Fraser's bedroom.

Pure luck had found him at his desk and at a loose end when she'd walked in one Saturday morning in January. His nine-thirty had failed to show and he'd returned to the office early.

He knew at once what she was, even though her silhouette was obscured by a thick wool coat and the kind of oversized sheepskin boots an Inuit might choose: goddess, muse, supreme being. Hair shiny as copper and bright as a house fire. Broad, generous smile. Green-gold eyes with a complicated history in their depths and rare kindness softening the surface.

(Julie's eyes he would probably describe as, what, 'brown'?)

She'd been with her husband, of course: goddesses didn't roam the place unattended, that would be too easy. What Ryan saw every other man saw too and this one had done the sensible thing and put a ring on her finger. He was predictably well spoken and charming – what was the word? Avuncular (which made Ryan think of tarantula) – and plainly wealthy. Pleased with himself didn't begin to describe his attitude as he placed a protective palm on the small of the goddess's back and steered her towards the seats at Ryan's desk. At least he knew the value of what he had, he wasn't one of those trophy hunters: when he looked at her it was with profound devotion.

Jeremy and Amber Fraser they were called, and they'd just started looking for a family home in Lime Park.

'Your children aren't with you today?' Ryan asked.

'We haven't got any yet,' she said with a shocked giggle, as if he'd said something risqué.

Better get on with it, Ryan thought. Sugar daddy had to be fifty if he was a day. But this was excellent news. Being revealed to have given birth wouldn't necessarily have stripped Mrs Fraser of her godliness, but it would have been an issue he'd have needed to consciously overlook thanks to that aforementioned distaste.

'Is there anything you can show us this morning?' she asked. Her voice was gentle, playful, neutral of accent. The husband was the one with the breeding, evidently; *she* was a blank canvas, as beautifully staged as a high-end apartment in Manhattan. 'Seems a shame to troop back up to Battersea without taking a little peek somewhere.'

'Let me make a couple of calls,' Ryan told her.

Adrenaline oiling his silver tongue, he talked two clients into impromptu viewings. There would be no time to clean the place up, said the Crowboroughs on Trinity Avenue, but they would be happy to take the dogs out so at least the source of the stink was removed, even if the stink itself remained. Similarly, the Lockes on Lime Park Road promised to clear the breakfast table and get the kids out to the park (he hoped they would make the beds and flush the loos, too). Ryan imagined the two householders striking up a conversation in the street, wondering which, if either, would get lucky with the morning's buyers.

He drove the Frasers to the two properties in the company Fiat 500. Considering how he felt – starstruck, moonstruck, one of the two or both – he handled himself pretty well, careful not to focus too obviously on her. Even so, he didn't miss the chance to ogle her skinny-jeaned legs as they unfolded from the car and, likewise, he made sure the couple took all stairs first so he could bring up the rear as closely as was decent. She liked touching things, he noticed; touch was her primary sense: she'd peer at a family photo and then put her fingertips on the glass, tenderly, as if the faces she touched were real; or she'd trail the back of her hand along a scuffed banister. In the Trinity Avenue house there was a cat sleeping on a mohair throw and she stooped to stroke both the animal and its bed. 'Hello, button,' she told it. 'Aren't you a cutie?'

'I think this one's a possibility,' Jeremy Fraser said, as they departed Lime Park Road. 'If you look past the clutter, it's actually pretty sizeable.'

'I like the secret gate to the park,' Amber said.

'It needs work, but you won't find a better location,' Ryan agreed. 'It won't hang around long.' He gave the couple his mobile number, made it sound as if that was the better way to arrange a second viewing than using the office landline that Deborah preferred her negotiators to issue.

As Amber used her index and middle fingers to key in the digits he dictated, he imagined them stepping instead over the bare skin of his chest, heading downwards, a probe identifying a place of

interest.

She rang on the Monday. 'Is this Ryan? I don't know if you remember me... ?'

Was she insane? She must know any man would remember her. The better question was whether he had managed to sleep at night knowing she was in the same city and not sharing his bed. He'd Googled her over the weekend and learned little more than that her last, and possibly current, job was in media – no surprise there. She was not, as he'd hoped, one of those women who constantly posted selfies on social media as if their cleavage didn't exist unless someone was liking it.

'I'd really like to see the Lime Park Road house again,' she purred. 'I'm going to bring my designer Hetty, if that's OK. She's free any time Wednesday.'

'Of course, let me look at the diary and see who's around that day.'

'Oh.' There was a pause. 'To be honest, Ryan, I was hoping *you* might be available again.'

She trusted him, was the implication. So she worked in the old-school way of relationships, voice-to-voice, face-to-face – that made sense (and explained the lack of digital footprint: she recognized herself that she was an experience best had IRL).

He would have cancelled his own wedding to make the viewing.

It was only a shame the temperature continued to hover at zero and she again arrived wrapped up from head to toe.

'I love your shearling coat, Amber,' Hetty the designer said. 'Is it new?' She was no dud herself, with a great cloud of dark hair and make-up that stopped just short of theatrical, but she was a little brittle and entitled in her manner for Ryan's tastes. She knew her own value, that was for sure, like a Premier League footballer's wife (a cricketer's wife, maybe? No, a polo player's). Or one of those high-end escorts you read about who cost ten grand for the weekend but let you do whatever you liked.

Amber Fraser was not for sale. She was sincere and, what's more, had a capacity for humility he was not used to seeing in his wealthier house hunters. She made no distinction between Ryan, Hetty and the cleaner busy at the Lockes' house as they toured, but spoke equally respectfully to all.

'Christmas prezzie from Jeremy,' she told her companion regarding the coat, and she shrugged, causing its shoulders to slip slightly and reveal a perfect creamy collarbone.

Now he clocked the details, he found her outfit to be more pleasing than he'd first thought thanks to some killer accessories. Her gloves were close-fitting black leather, with a little covered button at her narrow wrist, and the boots were a huge improvement on the eskimo ones: also black leather, with a full-length zip up the inside of the calf and high spiky heels. Any other house and he'd have been worried she'd damage the flooring, but the Lockes' place was already so wrecked, it wasn't an issue. The kids were savages, no two ways about it. (Pity the poor cleaner who waded through the heaps of junk to find a piece of carpet to vacuum.)

'Do you still like the place?' Ryan asked Amber as they paused in the kitchen before leaving.

'I *love* it,' she said, and she drew close, conspiratorial. Her hair smelled of cake spices: nutmeg and cinnamon and ginger. 'But I haven't forgotten you work for the seller, not the buyer, so don't try to trap me, Ryan. And don't you *dare* tell them how keen I am. Jeremy wants to get some money off.'

'Tell them it needs a ton of work,' Hetty told him sternly. 'Because that's the truth.'

'They've just put in a new worktop,' Ryan protested.

Hetty dismissed this. 'That's just a spritz of cheap perfume on a body that hasn't been washed for a week.'

‘What a charming image,’ Amber said. ‘But if we’re going to get anatomical, guys, the bones *are* great, aren’t they?’

‘They are,’ Hetty agreed. ‘But we’ll have to rip everything out, Amber, rebuild from scratch. The state of those kids’ bedrooms: it’s like they’ve been playing football up there or, I don’t know, running a steeplechase.’

‘I know, it’s totally wrecked. How many kids *are* there in this family? There are so many beds.’ Leather fingers brushed Ryan’s forearm, thrilling him. ‘Tell us they’ve stopped reproducing, Ryan, *please*.’

Ryan couldn’t help the corners of his mouth twitching, but said nothing. Rachel Locke was often in the café across the road and, recently, in the branch, too, checking on progress. She was flustered and sweaty and smelled so *bodily*. When she communicated with her kids, her voice rose to a foghorn, making Ryan cringe. If every Mrs Locke in Lime Park could be replaced by a Mrs Fraser, well, he gave his word that no further work-related complaint would pass his lips as long as he lived.

‘Did you notice the man’s shirt on the floor in the spare bedroom?’ Hetty said. ‘*And* a pair of socks.’

Amber’s gloved fingers flew to her mouth. ‘What are you saying? That that’s where the husband sleeps?’

‘Well, he’s not a looker,’ Hetty said. ‘Did you see the holiday photo in the sitting room? No wonder she’s kicked him out of bed.’

‘You girls are wicked,’ Ryan said, and he enjoyed the wink the comment elicited.

His favourite line of the encounter: *If we’re going to get anatomical, guys ...*

The offer was made and confirmed in writing and Ryan guided the Lockes towards accepting it. They might get more, he conceded, but the market was still more sluggish than they hoped. (It was all very well telling buyers that after the Olympics houses like this would go to sealed bids. They just didn’t believe you.)

There was a second visit with Hetty, along with an architect, at which measurements were taken and technical specifications discussed. The weather was milder by then and Amber wore a thin jersey dress with those very sheer champagne-coloured tights that were fashionable. Ryan could tell the bra she wore was wafer-thin and lacy.

They exchanged contracts and completed the sale in April. To Ryan’s dismay, on the Friday of completion it was Jeremy Fraser who came to pick up the keys. He’d hoped it would be Amber and that she might be moved by the occasion to embrace him. (Still, the commission would be welcome.) Recovering, on the Monday he delivered a gift basket to the house, strolling over at lunchtime when he expected Jeremy to be safely at work.

The builders had already started tearing the place apart and Amber arrived at the door like the miracle survivor of an explosion. ‘Ryan, what a lovely gesture! Come upstairs away from all the noise and dust.’

The master bedroom was in use as a storage room, Ryan noticed, en route to the top of the house where Amber installed him in the makeshift living room and made him a coffee from a gleaming new Nespresso machine. There were several other welcome gifts, he saw, including a variety of indoor plants and three quarters of a homemade chocolate cake sitting in a glass dome.

‘You’re the first person to come into our private chamber,’ she said. She was wearing workout clothes a size too small, a gift to outrank any offering the neighbours might have made. ‘Would you

like some cake? The woman next door made it and Jeremy says it's delicious. I don't allow myself cake, but I like watching other people eat it. I hope you don't mind if I stare?'

'Stare away,' Ryan said. 'Nice of her to bake you a cake. Lime Park's like that, though. Great sense of community.'

She passed him a slice and settled beside him. 'Where do you live, Ryan? I don't think I've ever asked you. Are you local?'

'I'm over in Bexleyheath,' he told her. Though the cake *was* good, sitting next to her was too distracting for eating to be anything but mechanical. 'Looking to buy, been saving for a deposit for ever.'

'Better late than never,' Amber said, sighing. 'It's all so painful, isn't it? You know this is the first place I've owned? Our flat in Battersea was Jeremy's from his bachelor days and before that I always rented.'

'If this is your first rung on the ladder, where will you end up?' Ryan joked, 'Windsor Castle?'

'Oh, Ryan, you make me laugh. I'm going to miss our chats,' she said.

He already knew that she'd make these sorts of remarks to anyone; flirting was like breathing to her. Indeed, there was a sense of an ending for her as she escorted him to the door an hour later. He was under no illusion that he was a casual diversion she would forget the moment the door closed. Which was fine, he accepted that.

What was unacceptable was any suggestion that *he* should forget *her*.

He was a patient man. Between taking delivery of the device and identifying the opportunity to plant it, he was required to wait more than three months. The mission relied on timing: he'd need to go in after the decorators had finished and, most crucially, once Hetty had approved the job. Weekly walk-bys gave him an idea of how the work was progressing, increased to daily once the builders had retreated and the decorators taken up residence. The whole thing was remarkably efficient compared with some of the extension projects you heard about. At the far end of Lime Park Road, a basement had taken two years to be completed and the couple had separated in the process. The house that came back on the market was bigger and deeper and yet mysteriously slow to shift. (It had, according to Cheryl, lost its soul).

One day in July, he saw Amber at a terrace table at the café across the road. She was with a typical Lime Park denizen – a posh mum in her forties – and a less typical one: an attractive straight man in his thirties, a bit rough around the edges. As the woman rummaged in the tote at her feet, almost putting her head into the bag in her impatience, the man cast an appreciative gaze Amber's way. More than appreciative – carnal, Ryan would say. That was the only time he was tempted to expedite his plan: what if Amber ran off with this guy? All Ryan would be left with was Jeremy, which would be no reward for his perseverance.

Then he saw Hetty's red Beetle at the kerb one August morning and his blood fired. Of course Amber would not be running off with some casual admirer; the man in the café had been no more of a threat to the Fraser marriage than Ryan himself.

He waited till the end of the afternoon and phoned Hetty. 'We have a client looking for an interior designer and I mentioned your beautiful work at the Frasers' place. Is that all finished up now?'

'Almost! I was just there today, in fact. The decorators are all done with the first floor, they're just doing the last bits and pieces at the top now.'

'We all know what they say,' Ryan said chummily. 'The last ten per cent of the job takes ninety per cent of the time.'

‘Not these guys,’ Hetty said. ‘They’re on a penalty if they overrun.’

She was a ball-breaker: he’d been right to identify her as potentially dangerous. She was also, it transpired, his willing accomplice. ‘I’ll be popping in again on Thursday afternoon if you want to swing by and see the finished article?’ she offered. ‘I’m sure Amber won’t mind.’

‘I might take you up on that,’ Ryan said.

He arrived half an hour early. Amber was not in, which was disappointing in itself, but also advantageous in that she would not divert his attention from the job at hand. The decorators were not native English speakers and a quick call to Hetty was enough to satisfy them that he was not a violent offender or con man.

‘You carry on,’ Ryan told them. ‘I’ll have a look around down here while I wait for Hetty.’

After a safe interval, he slipped off his shoes in consideration of the new carpeting and padded up the stairs to the first floor. The place was unrecognizable, so slick and immaculate as to feel unreal. The master bedroom was plushly carpeted in vanilla, the walls, he was relieved to see, helpfully pale (Farrow & Ball Clunch, Hetty clarified, when she arrived). But the furniture was not yet in, nor any curtains or blinds up at the windows, and the Frasers, displaced from their upper quarters by the decorators, were evidently sleeping in a room at the rear of the first floor. Had they changed their minds and decided on a smaller bedroom for themselves? Couples did, sometimes, valuing the garden outlook over the greater square footage at the front. After a few moments’ hesitation, he resolved to fit the device in the master as intended and to check with Hetty that there had been no permanent change of plan. If there had, he’d somehow have to find a way to sneak back up and switch the thing before he left.

Shouldering the door closed behind him, he surveyed the empty room, nerves growling like hunger. He clearly recalled Amber and Hetty discussing layout possibilities on their last visit before the sale went through. They’d agreed there were two options for the placement of the bed: opposite the bay against the internal wall, or facing the fireplace against the dividing wall with number 38.

‘But what if the couple on the other side have their bed against this wall, too?’ Amber had queried. ‘The headboards will be *this* close.’ Fingers rigid, she held her palms a few inches apart.

‘I think it’s flats next door, actually,’ Hetty said. ‘In which case it might be a living room.’

Amber’s eyes grew wide. ‘So when you’re in the middle of, *you know what*, they’re sitting a couple of feet away watching *Silent Witness*?’

‘Yes,’ laughed Hetty. ‘Unless they’ve installed one of those peephole cameras and are watching you, “*you know what*”.’

It startled Ryan to remember that last part of the conversation. Had it been what had planted the idea? All at once the reality, the peril, of his trespass torpedoed him and he chided himself for dithering even the few minutes he had. Circling the room with new urgency, he found there was an obvious power point on the left-hand side of the fireplace above the double-height skirting. It was a twin socket, which was ideal, because the alarm wouldn’t be torn out the moment power was needed for something else.

He slid the prongs into the holes and turned on the switch. There was no light or hum to draw attention to it. Astonishing, in fact, how discreet it looked and how *right*, the sort of thing you might assume someone else had fitted as a legal requirement, in this case one of the builders. Provided it got past Hetty, the worst-case scenario was that the Frasers’ aesthetic sensibility was on the OCD side and, deeming it an eyesore, they relocated it or ditched it, in neither case stopping to investigate what it was they were handling.

Actually, that wasn't the worst-case scenario. The worst-case scenario was that Jeremy Fraser would smash it open, identify the surveillance device and call the police. But that was what a risk was, wasn't it?

Hetty arrived soon after and appeared to think nothing of his having waited in the house unaccompanied. 'Oh Ryan, Amber isn't around today, as you've probably gathered. She had a lunch date she couldn't get out of and won't be back till four. It's just us.'

'That's no problem. I've got to hand it to you, Hetty, from what I've seen down here, you've done a magnificent job.' Ryan oohed and aahed dutifully, pointing out the value she'd added.

'The Frasers aren't worried about that,' Hetty said. 'This is a home, a love nest, not an investment. They won't move for years, if ever.'

'Pleased to hear it,' Ryan said.

But when she led the tour into the master bedroom, he had the sensation of standing on a precipice, gulls sweeping past his face. His voice sounded hollow as he gestured into the emptiness, saying, 'They've decided against this as their master, have they?'

'No, not at all,' Hetty said. 'There's just been a delay with the en suite, we were waiting for the bath to arrive. But we're all set now and they'll be able to move in here as soon as the furniture comes out of storage.'

Excellent.

As for her spotting the device, he needn't have worried, for she had her eyes on a bigger, brighter prize: the famous bathtub. 'You remember our talking about it? I found it in Oaxaca in Mexico? Come and see it, it's *amazing*.' And she hurried past the smoke alarm into the en suite.

It was a monster of a tub, the kind of thing slaves spent years hammering to perfection for Cleopatra – or whoever the Mexican equivalent was. 'Wow, big enough for two,' he said, allowing his fingers to glance off the gleaming near lip.

'The interior is pewter,' Hetty said. 'I've already told Amber, if she *does* ever move, she should take it with her. It's too precious to leave.'

As Ryan departed, an older woman was arriving at the gate of number 38. She wore a blue velour tracksuit and her face was blotched with exertion. Well, if she was the occupant of the flat upstairs, he knew which side of the wall he'd prefer to sleep.

All being well, he'd be able to watch Mrs Fraser in her copper-and-pewter tub, provided she was the sort to leave the bathroom door open, for the camera facilitated 180-degree views with a dewarping function. A motion-detection function would save him trawling through hours of inanimate video. The high-definition images would be streamed direct to his smartphone, a pay-as-you-go procured expressly for the purpose and paid for in cash, though, again, he doubted the efficacy of such a precaution.

Now he'd got the crime underway, he found he was almost pleasurably fatalistic about it.

The footage was, at first, more thrilling for the novelty (excellent definition, great colour) than the content. As Hetty had promised, the furniture was delivered within a few days of Ryan's visit. The bed was positioned facing the window and within close range of the camera; beyond, stood an enormous freestanding wardrobe with mirrored doors and, in the window, a pair of armchairs with voluptuously curved arms. As a team of young men hauled these and other items, removing the protective packaging with the flourishes of magicians, he despaired of Amber Fraser appearing at all. Then, speeding through, he found her. As she entered the room, all heads turned as to an emerging sun

and she smiled a greeting, running her hands through her hair. Then, right in front of a roomful of men, she jumped onto the bare mattress and stretched out, pantomiming a nap, doing a little roll from side to side. The watching faces laughed now and she sprang up again, gave a little wave, and exited. This, evidently, was how she supervised workmen.

Without sound, the video had an effect that was faintly sinister.

There was nothing for forty-eight hours, but then came the day she moved in the couples' clothes and arranged their wardrobe. It was a fancy item fitted with fussy little his and her drawers and cubbyholes for an exhaustive collection of shoes. She worked at a lazy pace, stopping frequently to text on her phone or fetch herself coffee. Only as Ryan was growing sleepy did she do what he had been waiting over three months to see: she undressed.

Well, her body was hands-down the most erotic and arousing he'd ever laid eyes on, slender and toned but with heavy breasts and a proper behind, like one of those insanely proportioned RealDolls he'd read about (and, OK, dreamed of acquiring). Truly this was a woman born to be worshipped. To be touched, too, of course – but you couldn't have everything.

She devoted an hour to trying on dresses. One, green and lacy, appeared to be her favourite, and she stalked about the room in it (and a pair of heels) before slipping out of it once more and hanging it on the wardrobe door. Then she lay on top of the bed in just her knickers as if wondering what to do next. Not what Ryan would have hoped, sadly, but when she jumped up again her breasts swung a little in the direction of the camera, which was a delightful bonus. She used her left hand to minimize the bounce, smoothing the right one across her face before dropping both hands to her sides. She still had the heels on.

Truly, it was like an opening ceremony just for him.

He was not prepared for the frequency of the marital sex. The Frasers were active in a way he knew to be exclusive to new relationships and couples trying for a baby (they belonged, for all he knew, to both groups). Mostly the action was under the covers and in darkness, but sometimes it was well lit and exposed. The positions varied every once in a while, but it was mostly missionary or her on top. Often, it began with her husband pawing her as she lay on her front, more like a cub that wanted to get a game going rather than an erotic seduction – and then spinning her on to her back. It was mostly fairly fast.

Incredible how quickly you became inured to free pornography. After the first few weeks, Ryan found himself zooming in on their faces, craving human nuance over the mammalian moves of the sexual act itself. Once Jeremy's face was square on to the camera and, as he spoke, Ryan strained to lipread; he was fairly certain Jeremy was simply repeating Amber's name, which was conventional enough. What was odd was *her* face: still, almost closed, as if transported to another place or perhaps lobotomized. She loved her husband but she didn't have any wild, obscene lust for him. *That*, Ryan would have liked to have seen.

In a novel, he would have witnessed some awful domestic violence or other crime, but the reality was the Frasers got on extremely well. On the few occasions that Amber seemed low, Jeremy comforted her. On the rare occasions that he looked angry, she consoled him. Ryan grew to prefer these non-sexual tableaux: they were more revealing, more involving of their (admittedly uninvited) guest.

Best of all was when Amber was alone, unselfconscious, and he had her to himself. Most of the days, she dressed in workout clothes and kept them on until the early evening, changing in good time for the return of her husband. The rest, she dressed properly and did her hair and make-up, often

beautifying herself well into the late morning, presumably for a lunch date or outing of some sort. Then, hours later, she'd come back and shower or bathe a second time and she'd be back in front of the mirrored wardrobe doors putting on another dress, retouching her face. Occasionally she'd sigh heavily, as if exhausted by the stipulations of her own beauty.

Ryan followed the strict rule of viewing only at home at night behind closed doors, but it was a time-consuming hobby and, just as he'd willed it, Julie soon arrived at his door and told him she wanted to break up.

'What have you been *doing*?' she demanded, and Ryan found himself regarding her with genuine curiosity. Mid-brown hair, mid-brown eyes, mid-height: how *mid* she was, and how tragic that women – and men, for that matter – were consigned to this ordinariness when you could see how they ached to be special.

'Don't you have *anything* to say?' She spoke in a way that he understood to mean all he had to do was promise to reform and she'd change her mind, but he didn't because the truth was he didn't have time for both her and Amber and of course he was going to choose Amber.

'Not really,' he said.

As he watched – and rewatched – the images on his phone, ears alert for any approaching noises on the landing outside his room, he felt no guilt. Yes, Amber excited predictable baseness in him, he was not made of stone, but she also inspired something higher, even spiritual. Amber was a religion and he was her believer.

He was surprised by the relief he felt when, towards Christmastime, the Frasers packed two enormous suitcases and disappeared, presumably for a holiday. (He would not forget the glorious afternoon when Amber had come back from a trip to Selfridges and tried on three new bikinis, one g-string style. In the informal league table of highlights this catapulted straight into his top five.)

Safe in the knowledge that the couple were off-site, he would have liked to have broken into number 40 somehow, taken an item of underwear for himself, but of course the Frasers had a state-of-the-art alarm system. There was risk-taking and then there was walking into the police station and giving yourself up.

He spent Christmas with his mother, scratching constantly at the infestation of thoughts about Ronnie Corbett in *Sorry!* and, more disquietingly, Anthony Perkins in *Psycho*.

One day in January, something new and disturbing happened. Amber appeared in the bedroom sobbing and threw herself violently onto the bed. She clutched her chest and writhed in pain as if suffering a cardiac arrest; she beat her fists against the pillow like a child denied her birthday. Was this emotional or medical, then? He couldn't be sure. Had he been watching the footage live, he might have been tempted to phone for an ambulance, but there was a lag of several hours and all he could do was wait, appalled, to see how it ended.

After an hour or so of this recumbent anguish, Amber got to her feet and stumbled from the room. She didn't come back for days. During this period, a grave-faced Jeremy continued to move in and out of the room, still sleeping there at first, until he too abandoned ship and returned only each morning to select clothes from the wardrobe and get ready for work. Where had Amber gone? Was she still in the house? Ryan suppressed feelings of panic that she might have been hospitalized: no, he'd seen her leave the room on her own two feet, she'd definitely not been injured. Most likely, she was still there, but using a different bedroom. Perhaps she and Jeremy had had a row.

When, finally, Jeremy packed a holdall with clothes, Ryan understood that the couple were separating and Jeremy moving out. Now Amber was back in view. She'd come into the room and stare at herself in the wardrobe mirror. Once, she stood right in front of the camera, tore a bangle from her wrist and flung it into the en suite. Overbalancing, she fell, landing close to the alarm, peering at it with bitter eyes before getting up from the floor. Where she'd previously been helpless, now she was furious, a fury that could not be contained, judging by her pacing. Pained by her pain, Ryan decided to pay a visit, rehearsing a line about it being a courtesy call to follow up the sale (albeit nine months after the event) and ask if she might like the property revalued. He imagined himself saying, 'Everything all right? You look a bit off colour,' prompting a confession of marital breakdown and the grateful acceptance of estate-agently sympathy.

There was no reply at the door.

'She's not answering,' said the neighbour at number 42. Ryan recognized her as the woman Amber had been in the café with, together with the good-looking guy who Ryan had since seen on the high street a few times with a posh blonde. 'I'm not sure she's even in. I think she might have gone to join her husband on his business trip. She hasn't been well recently.'

'I know,' Ryan was about to say, but stopped himself. At least he knew now that the couple had not split up. Knowledge equalled self-preservation for a man in his position.

The courtesy call became a courtesy email. She did not reply.

The next time the camera registered any activity was the following Saturday, when Amber spent half an hour or so at the window watching the street below. She seemed calmer now, content again. In the mirror she cupped her breasts with her hands through her sweater and kept them like that for some time. He wondered if she'd had enlargement surgery, which would explain her previous absence; perhaps that hysteria had been pre-op nerves. But he didn't think so. Her figure, with which he was as minutely familiar as any husband, looked just the same.

Though he didn't realize it then, this was the last time he would see her. Jeremy returned from his work trip and was in and out of the room, showering, dressing, and finally packing again. The leather holdall was the same one he'd used for his work travel but this time he took items for both his wife and himself.

There was nothing for several days and then, at one otherwise unremarkable morning briefing in early February, Deborah made an incredible announcement. The owner of 40 Lime Park Road had just phoned and the house was going back on the market.

'You mean Jeremy and Amber Fraser?' Ryan exclaimed. 'But they've only been there ten months.'

'You've got a good memory,' Deborah said.

She handled the sale personally, allowing several parties to proceed in a race to exchange, an unethical practice that the agency discouraged as a rule. Though it was standard for each client to be assigned a negotiator as a point of contact, it was a small team and the properties themselves were shared. Not this time. Only Deborah and her most senior negotiator, Mark, were allowed to know the burglar alarm code for 40 Lime Park Road and when Ryan made requests to take his own candidates for a viewing, he was told they must be referred to Mark.

The old woman next door was selling up as well, apparently, though she was using a different agent.

Someone had seen a police car on the street, Cheryl whispered.

Well, once he heard *that*, he couldn't sleep. What if the police searched the Frasers' house and found the smoke alarm? Objects that might fool ordinary civilians would surely not fool a forensic

investigator. The website from which he'd bought the device had promised no hidden serial numbers, but what good was that if they only sold a handful of the things a month? They could be traced individually in no time at all.

On the other hand, there was a tamper alarm on the device and this had not yet been triggered. Plus Cheryl had eavesdropped on Deborah and Mark and understood that it was the next-door flat that was of police interest, not the Frasers'. 'Wonder if they'll tell people *that* when they're showing them around,' she said, disgruntled for more obvious reasons than Ryan's to have been cut out of the deal.

There was nothing for it but to bide his time and stay calm. Now, when he checked in with the Frasers' master bedroom, it was to watch his colleagues conduct viewings.

Even though, in time, he was aware of the house selling to a young couple from New Cross, it came as a supreme shock when a new figure appeared on video. She was a dowdy woman in her thirties – and possibly quite mad, he soon decided, judging by the frantic way she cleaned the room, going over and over the spotless carpet with her Hoover. One minute she was ill in bed and the next she was up and removing all the furniture. Watching her manhandle the double bed on to its side and edge it through the door, Ryan almost lost the will to live.

No sooner had the mad woman moved herself and her husband (a fretful-looking thing) out of the bedroom than she was back, spending hours a day in a chair by the window. It was like she was convalescing from some debilitating disease and yet she appeared perfectly able-bodied. She must be, he realized with an unexpected pinch of compassion, depressed.

Then, the tamper alarm *did* issue an alert and the connection between 40 Lime Park Road and his secret phone was broken. Sleepless, he berated himself for not having got into the house before somehow (it wasn't as if he hadn't tried to think of a way, but Deborah's defences had been impenetrable and the new owner struck him as the type to escalate it if he were to visit unannounced; after all she'd never met him). Dozens of theories occurred as to what might have deactivated the device, his favourite being that she'd removed it with the intention of fitting it somewhere else in the house, somewhere a fire was more likely to start.

However, two days passed and it had not been reinstalled.

Rubbish collection day in Lime Park was Friday. Late Thursday night, Ryan drove his mother's Micra to Lime Park and located the bin for number 40. At least there were only two sackfuls; these he transferred to the boot of the car, watched only by a fox.

It took over an hour the next evening to sift twice through the disgusting tangle of dust and human hair and God knew what (it was compulsory to recycle food waste in a separate bin, thank the Lord). He hadn't actually expected to find it, the exercise being more in the spirit of elimination than discovery, but, to his great joy, there it was! It had slipped into an empty Tampax box, to all appearances a discarded smoke alarm.

'What are you doing, Ryan?' his mother called through the locked garage door. 'Ros is here with her daughter ...'

'Coming!'

Since he and Julie had split up, his mother had been hinting about the neighbour's divorced daughter, who was Ryan's age. She'd been going to the gym, apparently, and was 'back in the game'. Meeting her, he saw immediately that she was revolted by the idea of a middle-aged man living with his mother and needing to be persuaded from some unnamed activity in a sealed garage. It probably didn't help that he clutched a crushed Tampax box under his arm as he reached to accept a beer. She

was OK-looking, he supposed, soft-bodied and a bit wrinkled, especially around the eyes and mouth. Like him, like Julie, like the new couple in the Frasers' house, she was nothing special.

He couldn't wait to go up to his bedroom and review the Amber highlights. Not that he intended storing them for long, he understood that that was too risky. This would be the last time.

The next day, having stuffed the Lime Park rubbish into his own bin, he walked down to the boating lake in Danson Park. 'Goodbye, Amber,' he mouthed, before hurling the alarm and the phone into the water.

And he imagined her at that exact moment, wherever she was, whoever she was with, reacting as if by extrasensory perception to the sound of his thoughts.

'Oh, Ryan,' she'd say, her voice sticky with sorrow. 'I'm really going to miss you.'

'I'll miss you, too,' he said aloud. His heart hammered dreadfully, his skin was afire, and it took him a minute or two to regain his composure.

And then, chin up, he walked to the station to catch his usual train to work.

The end

In the heady swelter
of a suburban summer,
the Elm Hill lido opens . . .



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Prologue

I am running naked through the streets of Elm Hill.

It is late evening, summer's end, and the streetlamps burn synthetic holes in the darkening sky. Deep in the rack of streets on the east side of the park, the mild air feels hostile, the near-silence thunderous.

I am trembling badly. The arm covering my breasts has begun to spasm and both knees are buckling. Blood leaks from my right foot where gravel has sliced the sole. But none of that distresses me as much as my face, the grimacing, primitive feel of it, as if I've been robbed of all that makes me civilized.

He has done this to me.

A sign for Wilson Road slides into view and I feel a sudden ache of hope: where I started is farther from me now than my front door. Just a left turn here, a quiet stretch of residential road, and the high street will be ahead. This *will* end.

A woman approaches, lifts her eyes, and I see the same startled expression and flash of high colour as in every other face I've encountered, all mobility arrested by the shock of seeing a nude woman loose in leafy Elm Hill. They suspect I'm insane – there is a secure mental health facility at Trinity Hospital a mile or two away – and are afraid to help in case I turn savage.

But there's a flicker in this face that prompts me to speak for the first time since this nightmare began: 'Please, can you lend me something?'

'What?' She's stunned by my addressing her – and by my accent. It's worse to know that I am educated.

'To cover myself. Please.'

'I don't think I've got anything ...' She looks down at her cotton dress and gestures helplessness. It's balmy; no one is carrying a scarf or a jacket.

It strikes me that I'm thinking normal thoughts. I'm still rational.

'Oh,' she says, and suddenly she does have something, screwed up in her handbag, a light cardigan of some sort.

'Can I borrow it? I'll return it if you–'

'Keep it.'

With shaking hands, I tie the garment around my lower half, then tighten my arms over my chest.

'Look, hang on.' The woman takes a purposeful step towards me, her gaze lingering on the bruises that bloom on my arms. *His* fingerprints. 'My name's Beverley. You don't have to tell me yours, but something has obviously happened, hasn't it? Come home with me and–'

I interrupt: 'Where do you live?'

'Broadwood Road.'

I know it: no closer than home. 'No thank you, I'm fine.' I sound polite, as if declining the offer of a drink.

The awful thing is she's relieved. She did the right thing and now she can scurry away with a clear conscience and a story to tell.

On the move once more, I slam my left toes into the raised edge of a paving stone and cry out from the pain. Raising my free hand to my face to wipe away tears, I catch a scent beneath the sweat, a scent that only makes me sob harder: chlorine and sunshine, scrubbed stone and suburban grass. Swimming pool.

I'll never go back.

At last the high street blazes in greeting, the Vineyard bar directly opposite the junction at which I've emerged. I falter. I'd forgotten about the pavement terrace, its crush of smokers; I'll need to pass right by it to reach Kingsley Drive. From a standing start, I sprint across the traffic lanes and meet the shockwave, the universal bewilderment that erupts into laughter.

'Who booked the stripper?' a man's voice calls out and a second round of laughter volleys into my back. 'Bit long in the tooth for that, aren't you, love?'

I sense rather than see the phones in their palms. There will soon be pictures circulating, if not already, attracting likes and shares and retweets, comments that make this man's sound tender.

I'm on my street. The pain in my damaged toes is ferocious, consuming the foot and calf, making me limp. My building is in sight: four featureless storeys, the night sky above. It's nearly over, nearly over.

And then I see him. He stands by the building doors watching, waiting. My knees roll and at last I sink to the ground, powerless. Because I know he'll watch forever, he'll wait forever.

It will never be over.

Chapter 1

31st August 2015, 12.15am

She coughs in her sleep.

I spring to her bedside to check that her chest is rising and falling as it should, that her pulse is steady and her skin warm. In the dimmed light, I can see the vestiges of stickers glued on the headboard in younger years, pictures of kittens and ponies and love hearts: all things nice.

Children grow and it strikes the parent as both miracle and loss.

The coughing subsides, but I remain on my knees, vigilant. I haven't watched over her like this since the night she was born, when I stayed awake, enchanted and petrified, ready for her cry. At least Ed is with me this time. Thirteen and a half years ago, he wasn't allowed in the maternity ward after visiting hours but was sent home with the other fathers, ready or not.

I don't suppose Lara Channing had to stand for *that*. She would have been in some posh clinic for the births of Georgia and Everett, installed in a private room with Miles by her side, the recipient of privileges she'd assume came as standard. 'You are an angel,' she would tell the staff in her smoky, intimate way, 'I mean it: an *angel*.' And she would say it like she really meant it.

But I mustn't think ill of Lara. Not now.

'Here, this should sober you up.' Ed comes into the room with mugs of black coffee – as if adrenaline has not annihilated the alcohol hours ago, pinned open our eyes and cleansed our ears.

I return to my seat on the little pink sofa by the door, take the coffee in both hands. The smell is instantly comforting. Though there is space next to me, Ed chooses not to take it, perching instead on Molly's desk chair under the window. 'Is she sleeping a bit better, d'you think?'

'Yes. I'm glad we brought her home.'

We speak in whispers. Until the last half hour she'd fought sleep like an infant, her distress slow to fade, and since then we've hardly dared exchange more than a syllable.

'She needed to be in her own bed,' I add.

'You're probably right. It's good you insisted.'

You insisted, this should sober *you* up: it destroys me, the way he speaks. If never again, surely tonight we should be united. 'She was completely hysterical, Ed. We know how to deal with that better than anyone. And it's not like we've snatched her from intensive care and absconded, is it?'

He lifts his glasses from the bridge of his nose, replaces them a second later. He is not quite looking at me. 'No, but the paramedics were pretty clear about wanting to take her in for observation.'

'We'll observe her here,' I say.

He nods, lets it go. To the right of where he sits, Molly's school uniform hangs on the wardrobe door, a scholarly silhouette with regulation tights dangling low. New shoes sit on the carpet below. All ready for the first day of term on Wednesday. I wonder if she'll be well enough to go back or if

we should keep her home for the week to recuperate fully. To think how we used to dither over arrangements when she had a day off sick, debate whose turn it was to cover, like it actually mattered!

All three of us were different people then.

‘Ed?’

‘Hmm?’

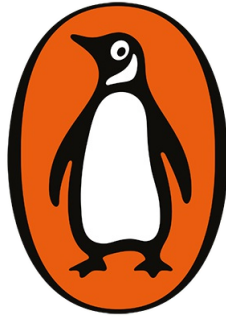
‘I wish I’d never ...’ I pause, struggling to subdue the ‘what if’s, to keep them from massing and charging.

‘Wish you’d never what, Nat?’ *Now* he looks at me, direct and eager, almost with a sense of daring.

I lose my nerve. ‘Nothing.’

And I think how wrong people are when they say you should never regret, I think how unrealistic that is – dangerous, frankly. Personally, I regret almost everything, including and especially these last months. Even the parts when I was so happy I thought I might levitate, when it felt as if I’d never before known what summer was, what pleasure was, what it meant to live life to the full.

Mostly, I regret ever laying eyes on Lara Channing.



THE BEGINNING

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