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The Sudden Departure of the Frasers

Written by Louise Candlish

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The Sudden Departure of the Frasers

LOUISE CANDLISH



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For Sheila Crowley, saviour of this story

‘There was no trap involved, no trick: he was a wolf in wolf’s clothing. And I went right up to his door and asked him his name.’

Amber Fraser

Prologue

15 January 2013

'I hate you,' I said, trembling.

I love you, a voice replied, but it was not the one I wanted to hear; only my own, inside my head, the words incarcerated there forever.

He said nothing. His mouth made vile movements, a bully's gathering saliva to spit at an object of repugnance, a victim. In his eyes there pooled pure savagery.

And then he sprang.

Chapter 1

Christy, April 2013

Right from the moment she first held the keys in her hand, something felt wrong.

Later, she would regret ignoring that instinct, but at the time she put it down to the simple fact of Joe not being there with her. It couldn't be helped, of course, it was just one of those things – or several of them. A rescheduled client meeting that could under no circumstances be missed; the estate agent's half-day closure for staff training (or, as Joe suspected, plans for a long lunch courtesy of the commission earned on *their* house); her own eagerness to get into the property and start their new life: all conspired to bring her there that morning to pick up the keys alone.

'Well, congratulations, Mrs Davenport,' said the agent, and he placed the keys with a ceremonial flourish on the release document for her to sign. There were two sets, one attached to a costly-looking silver key ring with a pretty dragonfly charm – the previous owners', presumably.

'Thank you.' Hand shaking, Christy scrawled her name before snatching up the keys and defending them in a clenched fist – as if someone might step forward and battle her for them! For these were the keys to a house on

Lime Park Road, and never in her wildest dreams had she thought she would come to own a property on that street. Yes, she and Joe had always aimed high, but this, this was rags-to-riches stuff, the fairy-tale ending you wouldn't normally trust.

'I hope you and your husband have many happy years in your new home,' the agent said. He was different from the one who'd handled the sale, younger and less sincere: could that be why the encounter felt, somehow, illicit? He could be a con artist, she and Joe the innocent victims of some elaborate sting. Or maybe it was the previous agent who'd been the fraudster?

Illicit? Con artist? Fraudster? What had got into her? She could tell by the way the man was frowning that her smile looked as problematic as it felt; it was causing disquiet, the way it might if a clown put his face too close. Managing a last choked thank you, she made her exit to the street. It's just nerves, she told herself; or excitement, the pure, debilitating kind that was hard to distinguish from terror.

Either way, she could have walked the route in her sleep, for she knew Lime Park as well as any postman from the countless occasions she and Joe had roamed it together since first viewing the house. She knew the short parade that masqueraded as a high street, with its mix of cafés, boutiques and estate agents, and the florist's on the corner that spilled its colours far across the pavement, as if cans of paint had been flung from the windows above. She knew the famous old art school that had stood empty for years before being redeveloped into the complex of

luxury flats it was today. She knew the little park, the main gates of which she passed through now, walking in the shade of the old limes that lent the area its name, catching the scent of cut grass on the breeze. And she knew the web of streets beyond, including the one that curved around the park's southern edge, the one that contained the house to which she held the keys (she was gripping them in her hand still, as if to relax a single finger would be to render the whole business null and void; the fine edge of a dragonfly wing cut painfully into her palm).

And here it was: Lime Park Road, lined as far as the eye could see with cherry trees in full bloom, like giant sticks of candyfloss, casting dancing black patterns on the sun-bleached car lanes. It was a festive sight, could almost be the gateway to a carnival – until you noticed there wasn't a soul to be seen. No one was parking a car or closing a gate; no one was pushing a baby or walking a dog; no one was arriving or departing.

There was only her.

As the road swept eastward, the façade of their new home came into view. The houses on Lime Park Road were brick villas built in pairs in the late nineteenth century, their matching chimney stacks positioned at the outer edges of the roofs like cocked dog ears, and number 40 was the right hand of its twosome. Hers now, hers and Joe's, and yet it was with the furtive air of a trespasser that she pushed open the gate and teetered towards the glossy Oxford-blue door. She lifted the key to the lock, her breath held. How unfamiliar each element of entry was: that brief resistance followed by a sudden sweet give, the

weight of good timber against her palm, the cool hardness of tile underfoot, and the smell in the broad hallway of . . . not so much temporary disuse as reckless abandonment.

But maybe that was because she knew the previous owners had left in a hurry. Virtually overnight, in fact. Lord Lucan's got nothing on this pair, the agent had joked.

She wished she hadn't remembered that detail, for the sight of the bare hall walls and closed internal doors caused wild thoughts to surface: what might she find behind these doors? Bloodstains on the floor? A decomposing body? Some sort of weapon that linked the murder to Joe and her?

Ashamed, she turned brisk, throwing open the first door she came to, the one to the large square sitting room at the front. Everything was perfectly in order, of course, and quite devoid of signs of crime. There was the grand and glamorous marble fireplace they had so admired; and the pair of thickset ribbed radiators, the type torn from Victorian schoolhouses and reconditioned for the nostalgic wealthy; and the deep bay with its shining triptych of panes. She'd forgotten its original oak seat, newly upholstered in a textured linen print that looked far too expensive to actually sit on.

Christy marched across the room and hurled herself onto it, if only to prove that she was not the kind of person you could intimidate with *fabric*. The view onto the street was glorious, a collage of green leaf and golden brick unfettered by the low-level planting in the front

garden; it was like looking through a giant camera lens at a scene lit to perfection by a master cinematographer. This was where she would come to watch the seasons change, she thought, during those many happy years the agent had wished her.

On her feet once more, she moved to the rear of the ground floor, actually gasping at the sight of the vast kitchen, just as she had when she'd first seen it. The fittings were high-end and handmade (the agent had mentioned a designer neither she nor Joe had heard of but whose name, when invoked in earshot of her boss, Laurie, had caused swooning), the cabinet doors made of opaque glass with brass fittings, the worktop a glittering slice of quartz. Family and friends were going to be not so much impressed as astonished, she thought, and to picture them assembled amid the hard, gleaming angles was like imagining villagers circling a spaceship that had just landed in their field, lights flashing in colours never before seen on earth. With the image came a fresh swell of unease, a recognition of its true source. Who are we fooling? she thought: this house is worth far more than we paid for it. There *must* be a catch.

She remembered with perfect clarity the day the agent had rung with news of an unusually well-priced house in Lime Park, a once-in-a-lifetime deal for a buyer who could act fast – so fast that only the chain-free were invited to bid. How she and Joe had patted themselves on the back for having already sold their two-bed in New Cross and rented just before the market had suffered a fortuitous

downturn. But even so, this house was beyond ‘well-priced’, it was a gift, and in the whirlwind of the transaction they had perhaps not been diligent enough in asking the crucial, central question:

Why?

‘They’re leaving for personal reasons,’ was all the agent had been able to tell them of the sellers, which made Joe suspect financial ruin.

‘No,’ Christy said. ‘Why would they sell at such a good price if they need the money? They’d hold out for top whack.’

‘Not if they need the cash quickly,’ Joe said. ‘Maybe a debt’s been called in and they have to cut their losses. It must happen all the time in a recession.’

The agent agreed that times were harder in the outer suburbs. It wasn’t Chelsea, after all.

But Christy’s instinct pulled in a different direction. ‘No. This is something emotional. It must be divorce or illness. They need to pay for treatment, perhaps.’ Whatever it was it had to be something catastrophic for a couple to give up a home they’d plainly only just finished renovating, for the place was box-fresh throughout; you could smell the newness of it, hear it squeaking. ‘Are they leaving London?’

But the agent didn’t know, had no forwarding address on file, the sale being conducted by the couple’s solicitor. He admitted he’d not met the couple – Jeremy and Amber Fraser, they were called – face to face.

A sharp rap at the front door startled her and, laughing at herself, she opened up to the postman. He had an item

too big to fit through the letter box, an oversized brochure of some sort for Mrs A. Fraser. There was other post, too, all of it for the outgoing couple.

‘Didn’t the Frasers redirect their mail?’ she asked.

‘There’s sometimes a bit of an overlap,’ the postman said, ‘but it’ll kick in in a few days, don’t worry.’

‘I’ll collect it all up and send it on to them in one batch,’ she promised.

Alone again, she inspected the items. Only two were not junk or publicity mail-outs and both were addressed to Amber Fraser: one was a postcard with a picture of an old *Vogue* cover, the model an alluring redhead with a plum-coloured pout; the other a white envelope with ‘Private & Confidential’ stamped on it. Christy experienced a sudden desire to tear the letter open – an extension of that peculiar sensation of being in the house unlawfully – but resisted the urge and satisfied herself by reading the postcard:

Hi Amber,

How are you? Hope you’re still loving your forever home! Have tried emailing and phoning you, but no luck. Couple of loose ends to tie up – call me when you have a spare moment?

Love, Hetty xxx

Below the name a mobile phone number had been scribbled, ‘just in case’.

On cue, Christy’s phone began ringing: Joe.

‘Your meeting’s finished?’

‘Just this second. How’s the house?’

She was honestly not sure how to answer this. ‘It feels a bit strange, like I’m going to be arrested for breaking and entering. Does that sound crazy?’

Joe chuckled. ‘That’s just Imposter Syndrome. Happens to everyone.’

Well, not *everyone*, she thought, not the entitled Oxbridge types with whom he worked and routinely lost out to in promotions, but she knew what he meant: everyone ordinary, like them.

‘But don’t worry, the solicitor sent the confirmation email, we’ve definitely completed, otherwise they wouldn’t have released the keys. We’re the owners now.’

Christy felt her heart contract, and with its unclenching came the first flood of joy. ‘It just seems too good to be true, Joe.’

‘I know.’ But his tone was unambiguously triumphant because as far as he was concerned all good things came true if you worked hard enough to get them. In the seventeen years that had passed since they’d met at university, he had never stopped remembering that he had something to prove.

‘Are you on your way?’

‘Leaving right this minute, just setting my stopwatch to time the commute. One minute longer than an hour and we’re giving the house back.’

Laughing, Christy hung up and looked once more at the handful of post for the Frasers. Then she slotted the postcard and the ‘Private & Confidential’ letter between

two larger envelopes, out of sight. Joe's right, she thought, you're not an imposter.

You're just lucky.

'And look what else I've got!' Along with a chilled bottle of Veuve Clicquot, a gift from Marcus, the partner at Jermyn Richards who was his boss and long-time mentor, Joe waved a copy of *Metro* under her nose. It was open at an article titled 'Top Ten London Streets for Families':

6. LIME PARK ROAD (NEW ENTRY)

It's a miracle that this Victorian beauty has kept itself below the radar for as long as it has – blame the Lottery-funded revamp of the park last year and the newly opened Canvas restaurant for its breakout moment. This is the most sought-after street in the neighbourhood thanks to its handsome brick villas, once chaotic shares for the students of the Lime Park Art School. While there's still a smattering of the old boho crowd amid the incoming well-heeled families, don't let that deceive you: the days of snapping up a property for the price of a couple of watercolours are long gone.

'Talk about being in the right place at the right time,' Joe crowed. 'We've probably made a ten per cent capital gain on the house since this morning! Shame we've hardly got anything to put in it, mind you.'

'I know. It's a bit embarrassing,' Christy's glance swept the spacious zone between kitchen units and garden doors that had been furnished by the Frasers with such memorable

elan. There'd been a vintage dresser stacked with coloured glassware and a leaf-green velvet sofa with wittily mismatched cushions. The dining table and chairs had been of the same bold contemporary style she'd seen through the window of Canvas, all curved lines and vibrant hues.

Wherever they'd gone, the Frasers would not have arrived, as she and Joe had, with nothing but sleeping bags and a change of clothes. The cut-price van-hire company the Davenports were using to transport their possessions from the storage facility did not have the smaller van size available till the next day. Perched now on bar stools to eat the cheese-and-tomato sandwiches Christy had made that morning – it seemed too prosaic a snack for so glossy a setting – they were grateful to their predecessors for having left them and saved them from sitting cross-legged on the floor. (Another reason to discount the theory that the Frasers had fallen on hard times: the stools looked like design classics; you could probably get hundreds of pounds for them on eBay.)

But none of that worried Joe as he poured the champagne into plastic beakers. Smart in his office suit and only a few days into a new haircut, he looked like a man who'd earned his spot on that designer stool; a man entering his prime. His eyes, the colour of cognac and the only exotic touch in a solidly Anglo-Saxon face, glowed warm with glee as he touched his cup to hers and popped the discarded ends of her sandwich into his mouth. 'Here's to a new life of bread crusts and eye-watering debt!'

Christy grimaced. 'Let's not think about debt today. Let's pretend we own the house outright.'

In reality, she would not forget as long as she lived that adrenalin-drenched sprint to pull together the finance for the house, how they'd tossed into the pot the proceeds of their flat, life savings and a loan from Christy's parents (Joe's had nothing to lend; her own, little enough to cause her guilt pangs for having had the nerve to take it), not to mention a mortgage brokered in haste by a friend of a friend and regarded thereafter by the couple as too horrifyingly colossal to be real. Even then, they'd fallen short, had had to resort to punishing forgotten credit cards to cover their solicitor's fees.

'Cash-poor' didn't scratch the surface of it.

And then there was the other sacrifice, agreed between the two of them in what already felt to Christy like a deal with the devil: babies. There could be none yet, not until one – or both – of them had been promoted. After all, you could decide to have a family any time, couldn't you, but a house like 40 Lime Park Road was a rare and special thing and they might never have had this chance again.

Yes, they were agreed on it.

The arrival and unloading of their possessions the next day did not attract the curiosity they might have expected on a Saturday morning in suburbia. The street remained as deserted as it had been the day before, the atmosphere reminding Christy of that resettling of energy the morning after a party – a party so eventful that its highlights and lowlights could not yet be told apart.

'Where are all the neighbours?'

'It's the Easter holidays, don't forget,' Joe pointed out.

‘They’ll all have houses in Cornwall or France or take their kids on amazing safaris.’

‘That must be it,’ Christy said, marvelling again that they should find themselves joining such an affluent group. Would they fit in? Their backgrounds, their accents, the fact that they even had to ask: would they pass muster in an area like Lime Park?

She hoped so. After all, part of her desire to live here was the idea of an established and sociable community; nothing *too* grand or exclusive, of course, but certainly something more substantial than the anonymous, interchangeable relationships of their previous neighbourhoods. And perhaps the first local convention to be observed was that it was up to newcomers to introduce themselves and not the other way around.

Waiting until a civilized hour the next day, she began with the adjoining house, number 38, which was divided into two flats. She tried the downstairs bell first. After some delay, there were reluctant footsteps within and a heavy-set middle-aged woman appeared at the door, politely putting Christy off before she could even open her mouth: ‘Felicity’s not here. She’s down in Dorset at her daughter’s. I’m just checking on the place for her.’

The place in question, glimpsed through the half-opened door, had polished oak floorboards and walls painted a rich Venetian yellow. Christy noticed on the hall table a stack of mail that suggested several weeks’ absence, as well as a beautiful hourglass bottle of scent.

‘That’s a shame,’ she said warmly. ‘We’ve just moved in

next door and wanted to say hello. So Felicity is the owner, is she?’

The woman eyed her with circumspection. ‘Yes, but not for much longer. She’s just agreed a sale.’

‘Really? Sounds like everyone’s moving out.’ But Christy knew it was not uncommon to find two properties side by side on the market at the same time; the appearance of one ‘For Sale’ sign on a street often encouraged neighbours to have their own houses valued. ‘Well, she might decide to stay after that piece in the paper on Friday,’ she joked. ‘It was quite a write-up.’

The woman did not smile. ‘Oh, believe me, no amount of money could keep her here.’

Christy was taken aback. ‘Sorry, I –’

‘In fact, I doubt you’ll see Felicity back here at all before she moves out for good.’

‘What do you mean? Why not?’

But the woman already had her hand on the door, ready to close it. ‘I’m afraid I have to go, I’m right in the middle of cooking . . .’

The kitchen was partially visible on the far side of the hall, its lights off and worktop cleared; there were no smells of cooking. In any case, hadn’t she said she was only here to check on the place?

‘Do you know if they’re in upstairs?’ Christy said, her tone persistently bright, though she addressed only a sliver of the woman as the door advanced towards her. And then it was in her face, clicking shut, causing her to step suddenly back.

Not a very promising start.

She rang the bell for the upper flat, but there was no reply.

In the front garden of number 40, Joe was spraying the Frasers' immaculate topiary with a hose he'd found in their garden shed. 'There was definitely someone in the upstairs flat a minute ago. I saw a dark-haired bloke at the window.'

'Weird that he didn't answer his doorbell.'

'On the phone, maybe. What about the other side?'

But it was obvious there was no one in at number 42; the off-street parking bay had been empty since Friday.

Just then a man walked by their gate, a black Lab at his feet. Both human and canine eyes were cast determinedly to the pavement.

'Hi there,' Christy called brightly. 'We've just moved in!'

The man didn't glance up, the dog only briefly, and the two walked resolutely on.

Joe cracked up. 'You can't just shout out to random passers-by! He probably doesn't even live around here.'

'I saw him coming out of a house further up.'

'Er, he could have just been visiting someone. He's parked down there, see? The Volvo? Just wait till the neighbours come to us,' Joe added, continuing his watering. The hose spat and hissed in his hand like a threatened animal. 'It's not like we've joined a commune, it's just a regular street.'

The two exchanged a grin: it was certainly not regular by *their* standards.

'You're right,' she agreed, 'we've got years to get to know people. I'm just excited to see who else lives here.'

‘Well, don’t get your hopes up. Just because we live next door doesn’t mean we’re going to be best buddies . . . Damn!’ As he reached to twist free a dead shoot, the hose slipped and water shot at Christy, soaking her feet.

‘Urgh, it’s freezing!’

If this were a TV show, the Joe character would have squirted the hose upwards, soaked her to the skin, then she would have seized it and returned the insult, leading to shrieking and kissing and his lifting her over the threshold and chasing her upstairs to conceive their first child. But it was not TV and anyway they had their pact, didn’t they?

‘Coffee?’ she offered.

‘You’re not going to fire up the space-age monster?’

‘I was going to boil the kettle for economy-brand instant, actually.’ There was no way they could splurge on the imported capsules needed for the Frasers’ fitted appliance, assuming she could figure out how to operate the thing in the first place. ‘We might have to steal coffee from work from now on. Milk and loo rolls as well. We’ll take it in turns to evade suspicion.’

‘It might come to that,’ Joe said cheerfully.

Before heading indoors, Christy glanced up again at the neighbour’s flat, the overhanging bay visible above the dividing hedge. It was a dim day and there were no lights on, but Joe was right, there *was* someone up there.

She looked again at her wet feet and felt a shiver pass through her.