

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a modern interior. It shows a hallway with light-colored wooden flooring and white walls. A large, rectangular skylight is set into the ceiling, looking out onto a winter scene with bare trees. In the distance, a doorway leads to another brightly lit room. To the right, there is a long, low white cabinet with three glass decanters on top.

**'Dazzling . . .
a pitch-perfect psychological thriller'**

LEE CHILD

THE GIRL BEFORE

**Everything that's yours
was once hers**

JP DELANEY

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***The Girl Before* is being brought to the big screen.
The film is set to be directed by Academy
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**THE
GIRL
BEFORE**

JP DELANEY

Quercus

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Mr Darkwood, once so interested in romantic love and whatever anyone had to say about it, was now thoroughly sick of the topic. Why did these lovers always repeat themselves? Didn't they ever get tired of hearing themselves talk?

Eve Ottenberg, *The Widow's Opera*

Like all addicts, signature killers work from a script, engaging in repetitive behaviour to the point of obsessiveness.

Robert D. Keppel and William J. Birnes, *Signature Killers*

We may say that the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts* it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he *repeats* it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it.

Sigmund Freud, *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through*

My fascination with letting images repeat and repeat – or in film's case 'run on' – manifests my belief that we spend much of our lives seeing without observing.

Andy Warhol

1. *Please make a list of every possession you consider essential to your life.*

Then: Emma

It's a lovely little flat, the letting agent says with what could almost pass for genuine enthusiasm. Close to the amenities. And you've got that private bit of roof. That could become a sun terrace, subject of course to the freeholder's consent.

Nice, Simon agrees, trying not to catch my eye. I'd known the flat was no good as soon as I saw that six-foot stretch of roof below one of the windows. Si knows it too but he doesn't want to tell the agent, or at least not so soon it'll seem rude. He might even hope that if I listen to the man's stupid patter long enough I'll waver. The agent's Simon's kind of bloke: sharp, laddish, eager. He probably reads the magazine Simon works for. They were exchanging football chat before we even got up the stairs.

And here you've got a decent-size bedroom, the agent's saying. With ample—

It's no good, I interrupt, cutting short the charade. It's not right for us.

The agent raises his eyebrows. You can't be too choosy in this market, he says. This'll be gone by tonight. Five viewings today, and it's not even on our website yet.

It's not secure enough, I say flatly. Shall we go?

There are locks on all the windows, he points out. Plus a Chubb

on the door. You could always install a burglar alarm, if security's a particular concern. I don't think the landlord would have any objection.

He's talking across me now, to Simon. *Particular concern.* He might as well have said, *Oh, is the girlfriend a bit of a drama queen?*

I'll wait outside, I say, turning to leave.

Realising he's blundered, the agent adds, If it's the area that's the problem, perhaps you should have a think further west.

We already have, Simon says. It's all out of our budget. Apart from the ones the size of a teabag.

He's trying to keep the frustration out of his voice, but the fact that he needs to rile me even more.

There's a one-bed in Queen's Park, the agent says. A bit grotty, but . . .

We looked at it, Simon says. In the end, we felt it was just a bit too close to that estate.

His tone makes it clear that *we* means *she*.

Or there's a third-floor just come on in Kilburn—

That too. There was a drainpipe next to one of the windows.

The agent looks puzzled.

Someone could have climbed it, Simon explains.

Right. Well, the letting season's only just started. Perhaps if you wait a bit.

The agent has clearly decided we're time-wasters. He too is sidling towards the door. I go and stand outside, on the landing, so he won't come near me.

We've already given notice on our old place, I hear Simon say. We're running out of options. He lowers his voice. Look, mate, we

were burgled. Five weeks ago. Two men broke in and threatened Emma with a knife. You can see why she'd be a bit jumpy.

Oh, the agent says. Shit. If someone did that to my girlfriend I don't know what I'd do. Look, this might be a long shot, but . . . His voice trails off.

Yes? Simon says.

Has anyone at the office mentioned One Folgate Street to you? I don't think so. Has it just come on?

Not exactly, no.

The agent seems unsure whether to pursue this or not.

But it's available? Simon persists.

Technically, yes, the agent says. And it's a fantastic property. Absolutely fantastic. In a different league to this. But the landlord's . . . To say he's *particular* would be putting it mildly.

What area? Simon asks.

Hampstead, the agent says. Well, more like Hendon. But it's really quiet.

Em? Simon calls.

I go back inside. We might as well take a look, I say. We're halfway there now.

The agent nods. I'll stop by the office, he says. See if I can locate the details. It's been a while since I took anyone round, actually. It's not a place that would suit just anyone. But I think it might be right up your street. Sorry, no pun intended.

Now: Jane

‘That’s the last one.’ The estate agent, whose name is Camilla, drums her fingers on the steering wheel of her Smart car. ‘So really, it’s time to make up our minds.’

I sigh. The flat we’ve just viewed, in a run-down mansion block off West End Lane, is the only one in my price range. And I’d just about persuaded myself it was all right – ignoring the peeling wallpaper, the faint smell of someone else’s cooking seeping up from the flat below, the poky bedroom and the mould spattered across the unventilated bathroom – until I’d heard a bell being rung nearby, an old-fashioned handbell, and the place was suddenly filled with the noise of children. Going to the window, I found myself looking down at a school. I could see into a room being used by a toddler group, the windows hung with cut-outs of paper bunnies and geese. Pain tugged at my insides.

‘I think I’ll pass on this one,’ I managed to say.

‘Really?’ Camilla seemed surprised. ‘Is it the school? The previous tenants said they rather liked the sound of children playing.’

‘Though not so much they decided to stay.’ I turned away. ‘Shall we go?’

Now Camilla leaves a long, tactical silence as she drives us back

to her office. Eventually she says, 'If nothing we saw today took your fancy, we might have to think about upping your budget.'

'Unfortunately, my budget can't budge,' I say drily, looking out of the window.

'Then you might have to be a bit less picky,' she says tartly.

'About that last one. There are . . . personal reasons why I can't live next to a school. Not right now.'

I see her eyes going to my stomach, still a little flabby from my pregnancy, and widen as she makes the connection. 'Oh,' she says. Camilla isn't quite as dim as she looks, for which I'm grateful. She doesn't need me to spell it out.

Instead, she seems to come to a decision.

'Look, there is one other place. We're not really meant to show it without the owner's express permission, but occasionally we do anyway. It freaks some people out, but personally I think it's amazing.'

'An amazing property on my budget? We're not talking about a houseboat, are we?'

'God, no. Almost the opposite. A modern building in Hendon. A whole house – only one bedroom, but loads of space. The owner is the architect. He's actually really famous. Do you ever buy clothes at Wanderer?'

'Wanderer . . .' In my previous life, when I had money and a proper, well-paid job, I did sometimes go into the Wanderer shop on Bond Street, a terrifyingly minimalist space where a handful of eye-wateringly expensive dresses were laid out on thick stone slabs like sacrificial virgins, and the sales assistants dressed in black kimonos. 'Occasionally. Why?'

'The Monkford Partnership designs all their stores. He's what

they call a techno-minimalist or something. Lots of hidden gadgetry, but otherwise everything's completely bare.' She shoots me a look. 'I should warn you, some people find his style a bit . . . *austere*.'

'I can cope with that.'

'And . . .'

'Yes?' I prompt, when she doesn't go on.

'It's not a straightforward landlord-tenant agreement,' she says hesitantly.

'Meaning?'

'I think,' she says, flicking down her indicator and moving into the left-hand lane, 'we should take a look at the property first, see if you fall in love with it. Then I'll explain the drawbacks.'

Then: Emma

OK, so the house is extraordinary. Amazing, breathtaking, incredible. Words can't do it justice.

The street outside had given no clue. Two rows of big, nondescript houses, with that familiar Victorian red-brick/sash-window combo you see all over north London, marched up the hill towards Cricklewood like a chain of figures cut from newspaper, each one an exact copy of the next. Only the front doors and the little coloured windows above them were different.

At the end, on the corner, was a fence. Beyond it I could see a low, small construction, a compact cube of pale stone. A few horizontal slits of glass, scattered apparently at random, were the only indication that it really was a house and not some giant paperweight.

Wow, Simon says doubtfully. Is this really it?

Certainly is, the agent says cheerfully. One Folgate Street.

He takes us round the side, where a door is fitted into the wall, perfectly flush. There doesn't seem to be a bell – in fact, I can't see a handle or a letter box either; no nameplate, nothing to indicate human occupation at all.

The agent pushes the door, which swings open.

Who lives here now? I ask.

No one at the moment, he says, standing aside for us to go in.

So why wasn't it locked? I say nervously, hanging back.

The agent smirks. It was, he goes. There's a digital key on my smartphone. One app controls everything. All I have to do is switch it from Unoccupied to Occupied. After that, it's all automatic – the house's sensors pick up the code and let me in. If I wear a digital bracelet, I don't even need the phone.

You are *kidding* me, Simon says, awestruck, staring at the door. I almost laugh out loud at his reaction. For Simon, who loves his gadgets, the idea of a house you can control from your phone is like all his best birthday presents rolled into one.

I step into a tiny hall, barely larger than a cupboard. It's too small to stand in comfortably once the agent has followed me, so without waiting to be asked I go on through.

This time it's me who says wow. It really is spectacular. Huge windows, looking on to a tiny garden and a high stone wall, flood the inside with light. It isn't big, but it feels spacious. The walls and floors are all made of the same pale stone. Notches running along the base of each wall give the impression they're floating in the air. And it's *empty*. Not unfurnished – I can see a stone table in a room to one side, some designery-looking, very cool dining chairs, a long, low sofa in a heavy cream fabric – but there's nothing else, nothing for the eye to catch on to. No doors, no cupboards, no pictures, no window frames, no electric sockets that I can see, no light fittings or – I look around, perplexed – even light switches. And although it doesn't feel abandoned or unlivd in, there's absolutely no clutter.

Wow, I say again. My voice has an odd, muffled quality. I realise I can't hear anything from the street outside. The ever-present

London background noise of traffic and scaffolding riggers and car alarms has gone.

Most people say that, the agent agrees. Sorry to be a pain, but the landlord insists we remove our shoes. Would you . . . ?

He bends down to unlace his own flashy footwear. We follow suit. And then, as if the stark, bare emptiness of the house has sucked all his patter out of him, he simply pads about in his socks, apparently as dumbstruck as we are, while we look round.

Now: Jane

‘It’s beautiful,’ I say. Inside, the house is as sleek and perfect as an art gallery. ‘Just *beautiful*.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Camilla agrees. She cranes her neck to look up at the bare walls, made of some expensive cream-coloured stone, that soar into the void of the roof. The upper floor is reached by the most crazily minimalist staircase I’ve ever seen. It’s like something hewn into a cliff face: floating steps of open, unpolished stone, with no handrail or visible means of support. ‘No matter how often I come here, it always takes my breath away. The last time was with a group of architecture students – that’s one of the conditions, by the way: you have to open it for visits every six months. But they’re always very respectful. It’s not like owning a stately home and having tourists drop chewing gum on your carpets.’

‘Who lives here now?’

‘No one. It’s been empty almost a year.’

I look across at the next room, if ‘room’ is the right word for a free-flowing space that doesn’t actually have a doorway, let alone a door. On a long stone table is a bowl of tulips, their blood-red blooms a shocking dash of colour against all that pale stone. ‘So where did the flowers come from?’ I go and touch the table. No dust. ‘And who keeps it so clean?’

‘A cleaner comes every week from a specialist firm. That’s another condition – you have to keep them on. They do the garden, too.’

I walk over to the window, which reaches right to the floor. ‘Garden’ is also a bit of a misnomer. It’s a yard, really – an enclosed space about twenty feet by fifteen, paved with the same stone as the floor I’m standing on. A small oblong of grass, eerily precise and trimmed as short as a bowling green, butts up against the far wall. There are no flowers. In fact, apart from that tiny patch of grass, there’s nothing living, no colour of any kind. A few small circles of grey gravel are the only other feature.

Turning back to the interior, it occurs to me that the whole place just needs some colour, some softness. A few rugs, some humanising touches, and it would be really beautiful, like something out of a style magazine. I feel, for the first time in ages, a small flutter of excitement. Has my luck finally changed?

‘Well, I suppose that’s only reasonable,’ I say. ‘Is that all?’

Camilla gives a hesitant smile. ‘When I say *one* of the conditions, I mean one of the more straightforward ones. Do you know what a restrictive covenant is?’

I shake my head.

‘It’s a legal condition that’s imposed on a property in perpetuity, something that can’t be removed even if the house is sold. Usually they’re to do with development rights – whether the house can be used as a place of business, that sort of thing. With this house, the conditions are part of the lease agreement, but because they’re also restrictive covenants, they can’t ever be negotiated or varied. It’s an extraordinarily tight contract.’

‘What kind of thing are we talking about?’

‘Basically, it’s a list of dos and don’ts. Well, don’ts mostly. No alterations of any kind, except by prior agreement. No rugs or carpets. No pictures. No potted plants. No ornaments. No books—’

‘No *books*! That’s ridiculous!’

‘No planting anything in the garden; no curtains—’

‘How do you keep the light out if you can’t have curtains?’

‘The windows are photosensitive. They go dark when the sky does.’

‘So no curtains. Anything else?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Camilla says, ignoring my sarcastic tone. ‘There are about two hundred stipulations in all. But it’s the final one that causes the most problems.’

Then: Emma

... No lights other than those already here, the agent says. No washing lines. No wastepaper baskets. No smoking. No coasters or placemats. No cushions, no knick-knacks, no flat-pack furniture—

That's *mental*, Si says. What gives him the right?

The IKEA furniture in our current flat took him weeks to assemble, and as a result he regards it with the same personal pride as something hewn from trees and carved by his own hand.

I told you it was a tricky one, the agent shrugs.

I'm looking up at the ceiling. Talking of lights, I say, how do you turn them on?

You don't, the agent says. Ultrasonic motion sensors, coupled with a detector that adjusts the level according to how dark it is outside. It's the same technology that makes your car headlights come on at night. Then you just choose the mood you want from the app. Productive, peaceful, playful, and so on. It even adds extra UV in the winter so you don't get depressed. You know, like those SAD lights.

I can see Simon is so impressed by all this that the right of the architect to ban flat-pack furniture is suddenly no longer an issue.

The heating's underfloor, obviously, the agent continues, sensing he's on a roll. But it draws heat from a borehole directly

under the house. And all these windows are triple glazed – the house is so efficient, it actually returns power to the national grid. You'll never pay a fuel bill again.

This is like someone describing porn to Simon. And the security? I say sharply.

All on the same system, the agent says. You can't see it, but there's a burglar alarm built into the outside wall. All the rooms have sensors – the same ones that turn the lights on. And it's smart. It learns who you are and what your usual routine is, but anyone else, it'll check with you to make sure they're authorised.

Em? Simon calls. You have *got* to see this kitchen.

He's wandered into the space to one side, the one with the stone table. At first, I can't even see how he's identified it as a kitchen. A stone counter runs along one wall. At one end is what I suppose could be a tap, a slim steel tube jutting over the stone. A slight depression underneath suggests this might be a sink. At the other end is a row of four small holes. The agent waves his hand over one. Instantly it spouts a fierce, hissing flame.

Ta-da, he goes. The cooker. And actually the architect prefers the word 'refectory' to 'kitchen'. He grins as if to show he realises how stupid this is.

Now that I look more closely, I can see that some of the wall panels have tiny grooves between them. I push one and the stone opens – not with a click, but with an unhurried, pneumatic sigh. Behind it is a very small cupboard.

I'll show you the upstairs, the agent says.

The staircase is a series of open stone slabs, set into the wall. It's not safe for children, obviously, he warns as he leads us up it. Mind how you go.

Let me guess, Simon says. Handrails and stair gates are on the no-no list as well?

And pets, the agent says.

The bedroom is just as sparse as the rest of the house. The bed is built-in – a plinth of pale stone, complete with a rolled-up, futon-style mattress – and the bathroom isn't closed off, just tucked behind another wall. But while the emptiness of the downstairs was dramatic and clinical, up here it feels calm, almost cosy.

It's like a very posh prison cell, Simon comments.

Like I said, it's not to everyone's taste, the agent agrees. But for the right person . . .

Simon presses the wall by the bed and another panel swings open. Inside is a wardrobe. There's barely room for a dozen outfits.

One of the rules is, nothing on the floor at any time, the agent says helpfully. Everything has to be put away.

Simon frowns. How would they even know?

Regular inspections are built into the contract. Plus if any of the rules are broken, the cleaner's obliged to inform the management agency.

No way, Simon says. That's like being back at school. I'm not having someone tell me off for not picking up my dirty shirts.

I realise something: I haven't had a single flashback or panic attack since I stepped inside the house. It's so cut off from the outside world, so *cocooned*, I feel utterly safe. A line from my favourite film floats into my head. *The quietness and the proud look of it. Nothing very bad could happen to you there . . .*

I mean, it's amazing, obviously, Simon goes on. And if it wasn't for all those rules, we'd probably be interested. But we're messy

people. Em's side of the bedroom looks like a bomb went off in French Connection.

Well, in that case, the agent says, nodding.

I like it, I say impulsively.

You do? Simon sounds surprised.

It's different, but . . . it sort of makes sense, doesn't it? If you'd built somewhere like this, somewhere incredible, I can see why you'd want it to be lived in properly, the way you'd meant it to be. Otherwise, what would be the point? And it's fantastic. I've never seen anything like it, not even in magazines. We *could* be tidy, couldn't we, if that's the price for living somewhere like this?

Well – great, Simon says uncertainly.

You like it too? I say.

If you like it, I love it, he goes.

No, I say, but do you really? It would be a big change. I wouldn't want us to do it unless you really wanted to.

The agent's watching us, amused to see how this little domestic turns out. But this is always the way it is with us. I have an idea, and then Simon thinks about it and eventually says yes.

You're right, Em, Simon says slowly. It's much better than anywhere else we're going to get. And if it's a fresh start we want – well, this is a whole lot fresher than if we just moved into another standard one-bed flat, isn't it?

He turns to the agent. So how do we take this further?

Ah, the agent says. That's the tricky bit.

Now: Jane

‘The final stipulation being – what?’

‘Despite all the restrictions, you’d be surprised how many people still want to go for it. But the last hurdle is that the architect himself has right of veto. Effectively, he gets to approve the tenant.’

‘In person, you mean?’

Camilla nods. ‘If it even gets that far. There’s a lengthy application form. And of course you have to sign something to say you’ve read and understood the rules. If that’s successful, you get invited to a face-to-face interview wherever in the world he happens to be. The last few years, that meant Japan – he was building a skyscraper in Tokyo. But he’s back in London now. Usually, though, he doesn’t bother with the interview. We just get an email saying the application’s been rejected. No explanation.’

‘What sort of people get accepted?’

She shrugs. ‘Even in the office, we can’t see any pattern. Although we have noticed that architecture students never get through. And you certainly don’t need to have lived in a place like this before. In fact, I’d say it’s a drawback. Other than that, your guess is as good as mine.’

I look around. If I’d built this house, I think, what kind of

person would I choose to live in it? How would I judge an application from a prospective tenant?

‘Honesty,’ I say slowly.

‘Sorry?’ Camilla’s looking at me, puzzled.

‘What I take out of this house isn’t just that it looks nice. It’s how much commitment has gone into it. I mean, it’s uncompromising, obviously – even a bit brutal, in some ways. But this is someone who’s put everything, every ounce of passion he’s got, into creating something that’s one hundred per cent as he wants it. It’s got – well, it’s a pretentious word, but it’s got *integrity*. I think he’s looking for people who are prepared to be equally honest about the way they live in it.’

Camilla shrugs. ‘You may be right.’ Her tone suggests she doubts it. ‘So, do you want to go for it?’

By nature, I am a careful person. I rarely make decisions without thinking things through: researching the options, weighing the consequences, working out the pros and cons. So I’m slightly taken aback to hear myself saying, ‘Yes. Definitely.’

‘Good.’ Camilla doesn’t sound at all surprised, but then who wouldn’t want to live in a house like this? ‘Come back to the office and I’ll find you an application pack.’

Then: Emma

1. Please make a list of every possession you consider essential to your life.

I pick up my biro, then put it down again. A list of everything I want to keep would take all night. But then I think some more, and that word ‘essential’ seems to float out of the page at me. What, really, is essential? My clothes? Since the break-in, I’ve virtually been living in the same two pairs of jeans and an old baggy jumper. There are some dresses I’d want to take, obviously. A couple of nice jackets. My shoes and boots. But nothing else I’d really miss. Our photographs? They’re all backed up online. My few half-decent pieces of jewellery were taken by the burglars. Our furniture? There isn’t a piece that wouldn’t look tatty and out of place in One Folgate Street.

It occurs to me that the question has been worded this way deliberately. If I’d been asked to make a list of what I could do without, I’d never have managed it. But by putting the thought in my head that really none of it’s important, I find myself wondering if I can’t just shed all my things, my *stuff*, like an old skin.

Maybe that’s the real point of The Rules, as we’ve already dubbed them. Maybe it isn’t simply that the architect’s a control

freak who's worried we'll mess up his beautiful house. Maybe it's a kind of experiment. An experiment in living.

Which, I suppose, would make Si and me his guinea pigs. But actually I don't mind that. Actually I *want* to change who I am – who we are – and I know I can't do it without some help.

Especially who *we* are.

Simon and I have been together ever since Saul and Amanda's wedding, fourteen months ago. I knew the two of them from work, but they're a bit older than me and apart from them I didn't know many people there. But Simon was Saul's best man, the wedding was beautiful and romantic, and we hit it off right away. Drinking and talking turned into slow dancing and exchanging phone numbers. And then later we discovered we were staying at the same B & B and, well, one thing led to another. The next day I thought, What have I done? Clearly, this was yet another impulsive one-night stand and I was never going to see him again and would now be left feeling cheap and used. But in fact it was the other way round. Si called the moment he got home, and again the next day, and by the end of the week we were an item, much to the amazement of our friends. Especially *his* friends. He works in a very laddish, boozy environment where having a steady girlfriend is almost a black mark. In the kind of magazine Si writes for, girls are 'lookers' or 'honeys' or 'cuties'. Page after page is filled with pictures of 'B & K', as it's known – 'bra and knickers' – though the articles are mostly about gadgets and technology. If the article is about mobile phones, say, there's a picture of a girl in her underwear, holding one. If the article is about laptops, she'll still be in her undies, but wearing specs and typing on a keyboard. If the article is about underwear, she

probably won't be wearing any underwear at all, but holding it up instead as if she's just slipped it off. Whenever the magazine throws a party, the models all turn up dressed pretty much as they appear in the magazine, and then the pictures of the party get splashed all over the magazine too. It isn't my scene in the least, and Simon told me early on that it wasn't his either – one of the reasons he liked me, he said, was because I wasn't anything like those girls, I was 'real'.

There's something about meeting at a wedding that turbo-charges the first bit of a relationship. Simon asked me to move in with him just a few weeks after we started going out. That surprised people too – usually it's the girl pushing the guy, either because she wants to get married or just to move on to the next stage. But with us it was always the other way round. Maybe that's because Simon's a bit older than me. He's always said, the moment he saw me he knew I was the one. I liked that about him – the way he knew what he wanted, and what he wanted was me. But it never really occurred to me to ask myself whether this was what I wanted too, whether he meant to me what I clearly meant to him. And recently, what with the burglary and the decision to move out of his old flat and find somewhere new together, I've started to realise it's time to make a decision. Life's too short to spend it in the wrong relationship.

If that's what this is.

I think about that a bit longer, unconsciously chewing the end of my biro until it splinters and bits of sharp plastic fill my mouth. A bad habit I have, along with biting my nails. Perhaps that's something else I'll stop doing in One Folgate Street. Perhaps the house will turn me into a better person. Perhaps it will bring

order and discipline to the random chaos of my life. I will become the sort of person who sets goals, makes lists, sees things through.

I turn back to the form. I'm determined to make the answer to the question as short as possible, to prove that I get it, that I'm in tune with what the architect's trying to do.

And then I realise what the right answer is.

I leave the box for the answer completely blank. As blank and empty and perfect as the interior of One Folgate Street.

Later, I give the form to Simon and explain what I've done. He's like, But what about *my* stuff, Em? What about The Collection?

'The Collection' is a motley assortment of NASA memorabilia he's been painstakingly building up for years, mostly in boxes under the bed. Maybe it could go into storage, I suggest, torn between amusement that we're actually debating whether a few bits of eBay tat signed by Buzz Aldrin or Jack Schmitt are going to stop us from living in the most incredible house we've ever seen, and outrage that Simon can seriously think his astronauts take priority over what happened to me. You've always said you wanted it to have a proper home, I say.

A cupboard at Big Yellow wasn't exactly what I had in mind, babe, he goes.

So I'm like, It's only things, Si. And things don't really matter, do they?

And I feel another argument brewing, the familiar rage bubbling to the surface. *Once again, I want to shout, you've made me think you're going to do something, and once again when it actually comes to it you're going to try to wriggle out.*

I don't say it, of course. This anger isn't me.

Carol, the therapist I've been seeing since the burglary, says being angry is a good sign. It means I'm undefeated or something. Unfortunately, my anger is only ever directed at Simon. That's normal too, apparently. Those who are closest bear the heaviest burden.

OK, OK, Simon says quickly. The Collection goes into storage. But there might be some other things . . .

Already I feel weirdly protective of the lovely blank empty space of my answer. Let's ditch everything, I say impatiently. Let's start again. Like we're going on holiday and the airline charge for baggage, all right?

All right, he says. But I can tell he's only saying it to stop me kicking off. He goes over to the sink and pointedly starts to wash up all the dirty cups and plates I've piled in there. I know he thinks I can't do this, that I'm not disciplined enough to live an uncluttered lifestyle. I attract chaos, he always says. I go over the top. But that's exactly why I want to do this. I want to reinvent myself. And the fact that I'm doing it with someone who thinks he knows me, and thinks I'm not up to it, pisses me off.

I reckon I'll be able to write there, I add. In all that calm. You've been encouraging me to write my book for ages.

He grunts, unconvinced.

Or maybe I'll do a blog, I say.

I consider the idea, examining it from every angle. A blog would be pretty cool, actually. I could call it *Minimalist Me*. *My Minimalist Journey*. Or maybe something even simpler. *Mini Miss*.

Already I'm getting quite excited about this. I think how many followers a blog about minimalism could get. Maybe I'll attract

advertisers, give up the day job, turn it into a best-selling lifestyle journal. Emma Matthews, the Princess of Less.

So would you close down the other blogs I set up for you? he asks, and I bridle at the implication I'm not serious about this. It's true that *London Girlfriend* only has eighty-four followers, and *Chick-Lit Chick* a mere eighteen, but I never really had the time to write enough content.

I turn back to the application form. One question down, and already we're fighting. There are another thirty-four questions to go.

Now: Jane

I glance through the application pack. Some of the questions are decidedly strange. I can see how asking what possessions you want to bring or what fixtures and fittings you might change is relevant, but what about:

23. Would you sacrifice yourself to save ten innocent strangers?

24. What about ten thousand strangers?

25. Do fat people make you feel a) sad, or b) annoyed?

I'd been right earlier, I realise, when I used the word 'integrity'. These questions are some form of psychometric test. But then, 'integrity' isn't a word estate agents need very often. No wonder Camilla had looked bemused.

Before I fill it in, I google the Monkford Partnership. The first link is to their own website. I click, and a picture of a blank wall appears. It's a very beautiful wall, made of pale, soft-textured stone, but a little uninformative, even so.

I click again and two words appear:

Works

Contact

When I select *Works*, a list fades on to the screen:

Skyscraper, Tokyo

Monkford Building, London

Wanderer Campus, Seattle

Beach House, Menorca

Chapel, Bruges

The Black House, Inverness

One Folgate Street, London

Clicking on each name brings up more pictures – no words, just images of the buildings. All are utterly minimal. All are built with the same attention to detail, the same high-quality materials, as One Folgate Street. There isn't a single person in the photographs, or anything that even hints at human occupancy. The chapel and the beach house are almost interchangeable: heavy cubes of pale stone and plate glass. Only the view beyond the windows is different.

I go to Wikipedia:

Edward Monkford (b.1980) is a British techno-architect associated with the minimalist aesthetic. In 2005, along with data technologist David Thiel and two others, he formed the Monkford Partnership. Together they have pioneered the development of domotics, intelligent domestic environments in which the house or building becomes an integrated organism with no extraneous or unnecessary elements.^[1]

Unusually, the Monkford Partnership accepts only a single commission at a time. Their output to date has thus been intentionally small. They are currently working on their most ambitious project so far: New Austell, an eco-town of 10,000 homes in North Cornwall.^[2]

I skim down through lists of awards. The *Architectural Review* called Monkford ‘a wayward genius’, while *Smithsonian* magazine described him as ‘Britain’s most influential starchitect . . . A taciturn trailblazer whose work is as unshowy as it is profound.’

I skip to ‘Private Life’.

In 2006, when still largely unknown, Monkford married Elizabeth Mancari, a fellow member of the Monkford Partnership. They had one son, Max, in 2007. Mother and child were killed in an accident during the construction of One Folgate Street (2008–2011), which had been intended to serve as the family home, as well as being a showcase for the fledgling partnership’s talents.^[3] Some commentators^[who?] have pointed to this tragedy, and Edward Monkford’s subsequent lengthy sabbatical in Japan, as the formative event behind the austere, highly minimalist style that made the partnership’s name.

Returning from his sabbatical, Monkford abandoned the original plans for One Folgate Street – at the time, still a building site^[4] – and redesigned it from scratch. The resulting house became the recipient of several major awards, including a Stirling Prize from the Royal Institute of British Architects.^[5]

I read the words again. So the house started with a death. Two deaths, in fact: a double bereavement. Is that why I felt so at home there? Is there some kind of affinity between those austere spaces and my own sense of loss?

Automatically, I glance at the suitcase by the window. A suitcase full of baby clothes.

My baby died. My baby died and then, three days later, she was born. Even now, it’s the unnatural wrongness of it, the horror

of that casual inversion of the proper order of things, that hurts almost more than anything.

Dr Gifford, a consultant obstetrician despite being barely older than I am, had been the one to look me in the eye and explain that the baby would have to be born naturally. The risk of infections and other complications, plus the fact that a Caesarean is a major surgical procedure, meant it was hospital policy not to offer one in cases of prenatal mortality. *Offer* – that was the word he used, as if having a baby by Caesarean, even a dead one, was some kind of treat, like a free basket of fruit in a hotel. But they'd induce me with a drip, he said, and make the whole thing as fast and painless as possible.

I thought: but I don't want it to be painless. I want it to hurt, and to have a live baby at the end of it. I found myself wondering if Dr Gifford had children. Yes, I thought. Doctors married young, to other doctors usually, and he was far too nice not to have a family. He would go home that night and describe to his wife, over a pre-dinner beer, how his day had been, using words like 'prenatal mortality' and 'full term' and possibly 'bit grim'. Then his daughter would show him a drawing she'd done at school, and he would kiss her and tell her she was brilliant.

I could tell from the set, strained faces of the medical team as they went about their work that even for them, this was horrible and rare. But whereas for them professionalism could provide some sort of refuge, for me there was only an overwhelming, numbing sense of failure. As they attached the drip with its cargo of hormones to get me started, I could hear the howls of another woman, further down the maternity ward. But that woman would walk out with a baby, not an appointment card

to see a bereavement officer. 'Maternity': another strange word, when you thought about it. Would I even *be* a mother, technically, or was there some other term for what I was about to become? I'd already heard them saying 'post-partum' instead of 'post-natal'.

Someone asked about the father and I shook my head. No father to contact, just my friend Mia here, her face white with misery and worry as all our carefully laid birthing plans – Diptyque candles and water pools and an iPod full of Jack Johnson and Bach – were discarded in the sombre rush of medical activity; not even mentioned, as if they'd only ever been part of an illusion that all was safe and well, that I was in control, that childbirth was barely more taxing than a spa treatment or a particularly fierce massage, not a deadly business in which outcomes like this were perfectly possible, even to be expected. One in two hundred, Dr Gifford had said. In a third of cases, no reason was ever found. That I was fit and healthy – before the pregnancy, I'd done Pilates every day, and run at least once a week – made no difference; neither did my age. Some babies simply died. I would be childless, and little Isabel Margaret Cavendish would never have a mother. A life would never happen. As the contractions started, I took a gulp of gas and air and my mind filled with horrors. Images of abominations in Victorian formaldehyde jars swam into my mind. I screamed and clenched my muscles, even though the midwife was telling me it wasn't time yet.

But afterwards – after I had given birth, or given death, or whatever it should be called – everything was strangely peaceful. That was the hormones, apparently – the same cocktail of love and bliss and relief every new mother feels. My daughter was perfect and quiet and I held her in my arms and cooed over her

just as any mother would. She smelled of snot and body fluids and sweet new skin. Her warm little fist curled loosely around my finger, like any baby's. I felt . . . I felt *joy*.

The midwife took her away to make casts of her hands and feet for my memory box. It was the first time I'd heard that phrase and she had to explain. I would be given a shoebox containing a snippet of Isabel's hair, the cloth she was swaddled in, some photographs and the plaster casts. Like a little coffin; the mementoes of a person who had never been. When the midwife brought the casts back, they were like a kindergarten project. Pink plaster for the hands, blue for the feet. That's when it finally started to sink in that there would be no art projects, no drawings on the walls, no choosing of schools, no growing out of uniforms. I hadn't only lost a baby. I had lost a child, a teenager, a woman.

Her feet, and all the rest of her, were cold now. As I washed the last bits of plaster off her toes at the tap in my room, I asked if I could take her home with me, just for a while. The midwife looked askance and said that would be a bit strange, wouldn't it? But I could hold her for as long as I wanted, here at the hospital. I said I was ready for them to take her away.

After that, looking at the grey London sky through my tears, it felt as if something had been amputated. Back at home, raging grief gave way to more numbness. When friends spoke to me in shocked, sympathetic tones about my *loss*, I knew of course what they meant, and yet the word also felt deadly accurate. Other women had won – victorious in their gamble with nature, with procreation, with genetics. I had not. I – who had always been so efficient, so high achieving, so successful – had lost. Grief, I discovered, feels not so very different from defeat.

And yet, bizarrely, on the surface, everything was almost back to the way it had been before. Before the brief, civilised liaison with my opposite number in the Geneva office, an affair played out in hotel rooms and bland, efficient restaurants; before the mornings of vomiting and the – initially awful – realisation that we might not have been quite as careful as I'd thought. Before the difficult phone calls and emails and the polite hints from him about 'decisions' and 'arrangements' and 'unfortunate timing', and finally the slow dawning of a different feeling, a feeling that the timing might be right after all, that even if the affair was not going to lead to a long-term relationship, it had given me, unmarried at thirty-four, an opportunity. I had more than enough income for two, and the financial PR firm I worked for prided itself on the generosity of its maternity benefits. Not only would I be able to take off almost a whole year to be with the baby, but I was guaranteed flexible working arrangements when I came back.

My employers were just as helpful after I told them about the stillbirth, offering me unlimited sick leave; they'd already arranged maternity cover, after all. I found myself sitting alone in a flat that had been carefully prepared for a child: the Kuster cot, the top-of-the-range Bugaboo, the hand-painted circus frieze around the spare-bedroom wall. I spent the first month expressing breast milk that I poured down the sink.

Bureaucracy tried to be kind, but, inevitably, wasn't. I discovered that the law makes no special provision for a stillbirth; a woman in my position is required to go and register the death, and the birth, simultaneously – a legal cruelty that still makes me angry whenever I think about it. There was a funeral – again, a

legal requirement, though I would have wanted one anyway. It's hard to give a eulogy for a life that didn't happen, but we tried.

Counselling was offered, and accepted, but in my heart I knew it wouldn't make any difference. There was a mountain of grief to be climbed, and no amount of talk would help me up it. I needed to work. When it became clear I actually couldn't go back to my old job for another year – you can't just get rid of someone who's doing maternity cover, apparently; they have rights, just like any other employee – I resigned and started working part-time for a charity that campaigns to improve research about stillbirths. It meant I couldn't afford to go on living where I was, but I would have moved anyway. I could get rid of the cot and the nursery wallpaper, but it would still always be the home where Isabel isn't.

Then: Emma

Something's woken me up.

I know straight away it isn't drunks outside the kebab shop or a fight in the street or a police helicopter overhead because I'm so used to those, they barely register. I lift my head and listen. A thud, then another.

Someone's moving around in our flat.

There've been a few break-ins recently round here, and for a moment I feel my stomach knot with adrenalin. Then I remember. Simon's been out – some work piss-up or other – and I went to bed without waiting up. The sounds suggest he's had too much to drink. I hope he'll have a shower before he comes to bed.

I can tell roughly how late it is by the street noise, or rather the lack of it. No growl of engines accelerating away from the traffic lights. No car doors slamming around the kebab shop. I find my phone and peer at the clock. I don't have my lenses in, but I can see it says 2:41.

Si comes along the corridor, drunk enough not to remember that the floor by the bathroom always creaks.

It's OK, I call out. I'm awake.

His footsteps pause outside the door.

To show I'm not cross I add, I know you're drunk.

Voices, indistinct. Whispering.

Which means he's brought someone home. Some workmate who didn't make the last train back to the suburbs. That's annoying, actually. I've got a busy day tomorrow – *today*, now – and providing breakfast for Simon's hungover colleagues isn't part of the plan. Although, when it actually comes to it, I know Simon will be charming and funny and call me 'babe' and 'beautiful' and tell his mate how I almost became a model and isn't he the luckiest man in the world, and I'll give in and just be late for work. Again.

I'll see you later then, I call out, a bit peeved. They'll probably get the Xbox out.

But the footsteps don't move away.

Annoyed now, I swing my legs out of bed – I'm decent enough for workmates, just, in an old T-shirt and boxers – and pull open the bedroom door.

But I'm not as quick as the figure on the other side, the one in the dark clothing and the balaclava who pushes his shoulder against it, hard and sudden, knocking me backwards. I scream – at least, I think I do: it might just be a gasp, fear and shock paralysing my throat. The kitchen light's on, and I see the flash as he raises the knife. A small knife, such a small one, hardly bigger than a pen.

His eyes stand out against the dark wool of the balaclava. They widen as he takes in the sight of me.

Whoa, he says.

Behind him I see another balaclava, another set of eyes, more anxious this time.

Leave it, bruv, the second one says.

One of the intruders is white, one black, but both are talking the same black street slang.

Chill, the first one says. Sick, innit.

He raises the knife further, until it's directly in front of my face. Gimme your phone, you stuck-up bitch.

I freeze.

But then I'm too quick for him. I reach behind me. He thinks I'm getting my phone but actually I'm grabbing my own knife, the big meat knife from the kitchen that's on the bedside table. The handle comes into my hand, smooth and heavy, and in one fluid movement I bring it round so that it slides into the bastard's belly, just below the ribs. It goes in easily. No blood, I think, as I pull it out and stab him again. There's no spurt of blood like there is in horror films. That makes it easier. I punch the knife through his arm, then his abdomen, then lower still, somewhere round his balls, twisting it savagely into his groin. As he crumples to the ground, I step over his body to the second figure.

You too, I tell him. You were there, you didn't stop him. You little *prick*. I jam the knife into his mouth, as easy as posting a letter.

And then everything goes blank, and I wake up screaming.

It's normal, Carol says, nodding. It's perfectly normal. In fact, it's a good sign.

Even now, in the calm of the sitting room where Carol does her consultations, I'm shaking. Nearby, someone is mowing a lawn.

How's it good? I say numbly.

Carol nods again. She does this a lot, whenever I say pretty much anything in fact, as if to indicate that she doesn't usually

answer her clients' questions, but is going to make an exception, just this once, for me. For someone who is doing such *good work*, making such *excellent progress*, perhaps even *turning a corner*, as she concludes at the end of every session. She was recommended by the police, so she must be good, but to be honest I'd rather they caught the bastards than dished out therapists' cards.

Fantasising you had a knife might be your subconscious indicating that it wants to take control of what happened, she goes.

Really? I say. I tuck my feet under me. Even without shoes, I'm not sure this is strictly allowed, given the pristine state of Carol's sofa, but I reckon I might as well get something for my fifty quid. Is this the same subconscious that's decided I mustn't remember anything that happened after I handed over my phone? I say. Couldn't it just be telling me what a dick I was not to keep a knife by my bed in the first place?

That's one interpretation, Emma, she says. But not a very helpful one, it seems to me. Survivors of assault often blame themselves rather than the attacker. But the attacker is the one who's broken the law, not you.

Look, she adds, I'm not so much concerned about the actual circumstances of what happened to you as the process of recovery. Seen from that perspective, this is a significant step. In these latest flashbacks, you're starting to fight back – blaming your assailants rather than yourself. Refusing to be defined as their victim.

Except I *am* their victim, I say. Nothing changes that.

Am? Carol says quietly. Or *was*?

After a long, significant pause – a 'therapeutic space', as she sometimes calls it, a pretty stupid way of describing what is,

after all, just silence – she prompts gently: And Simon? How are things with him?

Trying, I say.

I realise this could be taken two ways, so I add, I mean he's trying his best. Endless cups of tea and sympathy. It's like he feels responsible because he wasn't there. He seems to think he could have beaten them both up and made a citizen's arrest or something. When actually they'd probably have stabbed him. Or tortured him for his PIN numbers.

Carol says mildly, Society has a kind of . . . *construct* of what masculinity is, Emma. When that's undermined, it can leave any man feeling threatened and uncertain.

This time the silence drags on for a whole minute.

Are you managing to eat properly? she adds.

For some reason I've confided in Carol that I used to have an eating disorder. Well, 'used to' is a relative term because, as anyone who's ever had one knows, it never really goes away, and it's when things get shaken up and out of control that it threatens to come back.

Si's making me eat, I say. I'm fine.

I don't tell her that sometimes I dirty a plate and put it in the sink so Simon thinks I've eaten when I haven't, or that sometimes I make myself throw up after we've been out. Some parts of my life are off-limits. Actually, it's one of the things I used to like about Simon, the way he'd look after me when I was ill. The problem is, when I'm not ill, his being all attentive and caring drives me crazy.

I didn't do anything, I say suddenly. When they broke in. That's what I can't understand. I was literally shaking with adrenalin.

It's meant to be fight or flight, isn't it? But I didn't do either. I did *nothing*.

For no particular reason, I'm crying now. I pick up one of Carol's cushions and hold it against myself, hugging it to my chest, as if by squeezing it I can somehow squeeze the life out of the shitty little toerags.

You did do something, she says. You played possum. As an instinct, that's perfectly valid. It's like hares and rabbits – rabbits run, hares crouch. There's no right or wrong response in these situations, no 'what if'. There's just whatever happened.

She leans forward and edges a box of tissues closer to me across the coffee table. Emma, I want to try something, she says when I've finished blowing my nose.

What? I say dully. Not hypnosis. I've told you I won't do that.

She shakes her head. This is something called EMDR, Eye Movement Desensitisation and Retraining. It can seem a slightly strange process at first, but it's actually very straightforward. I'm going to sit beside you and move my fingers from side to side across your field of vision. I want you to track them with your eyes while you relive the traumatic experience in your mind.

What's the point of that? I say doubtfully.

The truth is, she says, we don't know exactly how EMDR works. But it seems to help people work through what happened, to give a sense of perspective. And it's particularly helpful in cases like this, where someone's unable to remember the details of what happened. Are you willing to give it a try?

All right, I shrug.

Carol moves her chair so she's a couple of feet from me and holds up two fingers.

Concentrate on a visual image from the beginning of the break-in, she says. Keep it static for now, though. Like when you pause a film.

She starts to move her fingers from side to side. Obediently, I follow them.

That's it, Emma, she says. And now let the film start. Remember how you felt.

It's hard to concentrate at first, but, as I get used to the movement of her fingers, I can focus enough to replay the night of the break-in in my mind.

A thud in the sitting room.

Footsteps.

Whispers.

Me getting out of bed.

The door crashing open. The knife in front of my face—

Deep breaths, Carol murmurs, just like we practised.

Two, three deep breaths. *Me getting out of bed . . .*

The knife. The intruders. The argument between the two of them, short and urgent, as to whether my presence meant they should get the hell out of there or go ahead and rob the flat anyway. The older one, the one with the knife, gesturing at me.

Skinny bird. What's she gonna do?

Breathe, Emma. Breathe, Carol instructs.

Touching his knife against the base of my throat. *Cos if she does try something, we'll cut her, right?*

No, I say sharply, panicked. I can't do this. I'm sorry.

Carol sits back. You've done very well, Emma. Well done.

I breathe some more, until I've got back my composure. I know

from previous sessions it'll be up to me to break the silence now. But I don't want to talk about the burglary any more.

We may have found somewhere else to live, I say.

Oh yes? Carol's voice is as neutral as ever.

Simon's flat's in a really horrible area. Even before I made the crime figures worse. I bet the neighbours hate me. I've probably knocked five per cent off the value of their homes.

I'm sure they don't hate you, Emma, she says.

I put the sleeve of my sweater into my mouth and suck at it – an old habit I seem to have started again. I say, I know moving's giving in. But I can't stay there. The police say with this sort of attacker, there's a chance they'll come back. They get a sense of *ownership*, apparently. Like you're somehow theirs now.

Which you're not, of course, Carol says quietly. You are your own person, Emma. And I *don't* think moving on is giving in. Quite the reverse. It's a sign you're making decisions again. Regaining control. I know it's hard at the moment. But people do come through this kind of trauma. You just have to accept that it takes time.

She glances at the clock. Excellent work, Emma. You've made real progress today. I'll see you next week at the same time, shall I?

Now: Jane

30. Which statement best describes your most recent personal relationship?
- a) More like friends than lovers
 - b) Easy and comfortable
 - c) Soulful and intense
 - d) Tempestuous and explosive
 - e) Perfect but short-lived

The questions on the application form seem to get odder and odder. To begin with, I try to give each one careful consideration, but there are so many that, by the end, I'm hardly even thinking about my answers, I'm just dashing them off on instinct.

They want three recent photographs. I choose one taken at a friend's wedding, a selfie of me and Mia climbing Snowdon a couple of years back, and a formal portrait I had done for work. And then it's done. I write a covering letter; nothing over the top, just a polite note emphasising how much I like One Folgate Street and how I will strive to live there with the integrity it deserves. Even though it's just a few lines, I redraft it half a dozen times before I'm happy with it. The agent said not to get my hopes up, that most applicants never get past this stage, but

I go to bed really hoping I will. A new beginning. A fresh start. And as I drift off to sleep, another word floats into my head as well. A *rebirth*.

2. *When I'm working on something, I can't relax until it's perfect.*

Agree ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ *Disagree*

Then: Emma

A week goes by with no response to our application, then another. I send an email checking they've received it. There's no reply. I'm starting to get pissed off – they made us answer all those stupid questions, choose the photographs, write a letter; the least they could do is write back saying we haven't got it – when finally an email arrives from admin@themonkfordpartnership.com, subject: 'One Folgate Street'. I don't give myself time to get nervous. I open it straight away.

Please come for an interview at 5pm tomorrow, Tuesday, 16th March, at the Monkford Partnership.

Nothing else. No address, no details, no indication if we're meeting Edward Monkford himself or some underling. But of course the address is easily found online and it doesn't really matter who we're meeting. This is it. We've cleared every hurdle but the last one.

The Monkford Partnership occupies the top floor of a well-known modern building in the City. It's got an address, but most people just call it 'The Hive' because that's what it looks like – a giant

stone beehive. Amongst all the boxy glass-and-steel skyscrapers in the Square Mile, it sits on the approach to St Paul's like some weird, pale chrysalis laid by an alien. And from street level it's even stranger. There's no reception desk, just a long wall of pale stone with two slits that must lead to the lifts, because there's a steady stream of people coming in and out. All of them, both men and women, seem to be wearing expensive black suits and open-neck shirts.

I feel my phone buzz. Something's flashed up on the screen:

The Monkford Building. Check in now?

I touch *Accept*.

Welcome, Emma and Simon. Please take lift three and get out at floor fourteen.

I've no idea how the building has identified us. Perhaps there was a cookie embedded in the email. Simon knows about that kind of techy stuff. I show him, hoping it'll excite him, but he just shrugs dismissively. Places like this – rich, moneyed, self-confident – aren't his cup of tea.

There's no one else waiting for our lift, apart from a man who looks even more out of place here than us. His hair is long and grey, unkempt even though it's tied back in a ponytail. He's got a two-day growth of stubble and he's wearing a moth-eaten cardigan and shabby linen trousers. I glance at his feet and see he isn't even wearing shoes, just socks. He's eating some chocolate, a Crunchie bar, very noisily. When the lift doors open, he shuffles inside and takes up a position at the back.

I look around for buttons, but there aren't any. I guess it only goes to the floors it's programmed to.

As we go up, so smoothly there's no sense of movement, I

feel the man's eyes travelling over me. They come to rest on my midriff. And there they stay, as he licks chocolate crumbs off his fingers. Awkwardly, I put my hand where he's looking and find my shirt has ridden up. A small piece of bare stomach is showing just above my trousers.

What's up, Em? Simon says, noticing my discomfort.

Nothing, I say, turning to face him, away from the strange man, surreptitiously tucking my shirt in as I do so.

Changed your mind yet? Simon says quietly.

I don't know, I say. In fact I haven't, but I don't want Si to think I'm not open to a discussion about this.

The lift doors open and the man shuffles off, still eating his Crunchie.

Showtime, Simon says, looking around.

It's another big, sleek space, an open light-filled area running the length of the building. At one end a wall of curved glass overlooks the City – you can see the dome of St Paul's, Lloyds of London, all those other landmark buildings, then Canary Wharf in the distance, the Thames snaking round the Isle of Dogs and off through the endless flat plains to the east. A blonde in a tailored black suit unfolds herself from a leather chair, where she's tapping on an iPad.

Welcome, Emma and Simon, she goes. Please take a seat. Edward will see you shortly.

The iPad must be where all her emails are, because after ten minutes of silence she says, Please follow me.

She pushes open a door. Just from the way it moves, I can tell how heavy it is, how balanced. Inside, a man is standing at a long table, resting on his balled fists, studying some plans. The sheets

are so big they only just fit on the table. Glancing at them, I see they aren't printouts but actual drawings. Two or three pencils and a rubber are grouped in one corner, neatly arranged in order of size.

Emma, Simon, the man says, looking up. Would you like some coffee?

OK, so he's attractive. That's the first thing I notice about him. And the second. And the third. His hair is an indeterminate blond, the fair curls cropped close to his head. He's wearing a black pull-over and an open-neck shirt – nothing fancy, but the wool hangs nicely from his wide, lean shoulders – and he has a warm, slightly self-deprecating smile. He looks like a sexy, relaxed schoolteacher, not the strange obsessive I've been picturing.

And Simon clearly clocks all this too, or sees me clock it, because he suddenly strides forward and grasps Edward Monkford's shoulder.

Edward, is it? he goes. Or Eddy? Ed? I'm Simon. Nice to meet you, mate. Swanky place you've got here. This is my girlfriend, Emma.

And I cringe, because this mock-cockney thing is something Simon only ever does with people he feels threatened by. Quickly I say, Coffee would be great.

Two coffees please, Alisha, Edward Monkford says to his assistant, very politely. He gestures me and Simon towards the chairs on the other side of the table.

So tell me, he says when we're all seated, looking straight at me and ignoring Simon, why you want to live at One Folgate Street.

No, not a schoolteacher. A headmaster, or the chairman of the governors. His stare is still friendly, but a little bit fierce too. Which, of course, only makes him more attractive.

We've anticipated this question, or something like it, and I manage to get out the answer we've prepared, something about how much we'll appreciate the opportunity and how we'll try to do the house justice. Next to me, Simon glowers silently. When I've finished, Monkford nods politely. He looks a bit bored.

And I think it will change us, I hear myself say.

For the first time, he looks interested. Change you? How?

We were burgled, I say slowly. Two men. Well, youths really. I can't actually remember what happened, not the details. I'm suffering from some kind of post-traumatic shock.

He nods thoughtfully.

Encouraged, I go on: I don't want to be the person who just stood there and let them get away with it. I want to be someone who makes decisions. Who fights back. And I think the house will help. I mean, we're not the sort of people who would normally live that way. All those rules. But we'd like to give it a go.

Again, the silence stretches on. Mentally, I'm kicking myself. How can what happened to me possibly be relevant? How can the house make me a different person?

The ice-cool blonde brings the coffees. I jump up to take one and in my haste and nervousness I somehow manage to spill the cup, the whole cup, over the drawings.

Jesus, Emma, Simon hisses, jumping up too. Look what you're doing.

I'm so sorry, I say miserably, as the brown river slowly engulfs the designs. God, I'm so sorry.

The assistant rushes out to get cloths. I can see this opportunity slipping away. That dramatic blank list of possessions, all those hopeful lies I put in the questionnaire – they'll all count

for nothing now. The last thing this man wants is a clumsy coffee-spilling oaf messing up his beautiful house.

To my surprise, Monkford only laughs. They were terrible drawings, he says. I should have binned them weeks ago. You've saved me the bother.

The assistant returns with J-cloths and rushes around, dabbing and wiping.

Alisha, you're making it worse, Monkford says sharply. Let me.

He bundles up the drawings so the coffee's contained on the inside, like a giant nappy. Dispose of that, he says, handing it to her.

Mate, I'm so sorry, Simon goes.

For the first time, Monkford looks directly at him.

Never apologise for someone you love, he says quietly. It makes you look like a prick.

Simon's so stunned, he says nothing. I can only gawp, astonished. Nothing in Edward Monkford's manner so far has suggested he would say anything so personal. And Simon has punched people for less – far less. But Monkford only turns back to me and says easily, Well, I'll let you know. Thank you for coming, Emma.

There's a brief pause before he adds, And you, Simon.

Now: Jane

I wait in a reception area on the fourteenth floor of the Hive, watching two men argue in a glass-walled meeting room. One, I'm pretty sure, is Edward Monkford. The same fairish curls framing a lean, ascetic face as in a photo I found on the internet; the same black cashmere pullover and white open-necked shirt. He's handsome – not eye-catchingly so, but he has an air of confidence and charm, with a nice lopsided smile. The other man is shouting at him, although the glass is so thick I can't make out the words – it's as quiet as a laboratory up here. Something about the gestures the man's making, and his swarthinness, makes me think he could be Russian.

The woman standing to one side, occasionally adding an interjection of her own, could definitely be an oligarch's wife. Much younger than her husband, dressed in gaudy Versace prints, her sleek hair dyed an expensive shade of blonde. Her husband ignores her, but Monkford occasionally turns politely in her direction. When the man finally stops shouting, Monkford calmly says a few words and shakes his head. The man explodes again, even more angrily.

The immaculate brunette who checked me in comes over. 'I'm

afraid Edward's still in a meeting. Can I get you anything? Some water?'

'I'm fine, thank you.' I nod at the dumbshow in front of me. 'That meeting, I take it?'

She follows my gaze. 'They're wasting their time. He won't change it.'

'What are they arguing about?'

'The client commissioned a house when he was in a previous marriage. Now his new wife wants an Aga. To make it more cosy, she says.'

'And the Monkford Partnership doesn't do cosy?'

'That's not the point. If it wasn't agreed as part of the original brief, Edward won't make alterations. Not unless it's something *he's* unhappy with. He once spent three months rebuilding the roof of a summerhouse to make it four feet lower.'

'What's it like, working for a perfectionist?' I say. But I've clearly crossed a line, because she just gives me a cool smile and moves away.

I continue to watch the argument – or rather, the rant, because Edward Monkford takes almost no part in it. He allows the other man's anger to wash over him like waves over a rock, his expression one of polite interest, no more. Eventually, the door is thrown open and the client storms out, still muttering, his wife teetering after him on her high heels. Monkford strolls out last. I smooth down my dress and stand up. After much consideration, I've gone for Prada – navy blue, pleated, hemline just below the knee; nothing too showy.

'Jane Cavendish,' the receptionist reminds him.

He turns to look at me. Just for a moment he seems surprised

– startled, even, as if I’m not quite what he’d expected. Then the moment passes and he extends his hand. ‘Jane. Of course. We’ll go in here.’

I would sleep with this man. I’ve barely said more than hello to him, but I have nevertheless registered that something, some part of me quite beyond my conscious control, has made a judgement. He holds the meeting-room door open for me and somehow even this simple, everyday courtesy seems charged with significance.

We sit opposite each other, across a long glass table dominated by an architectural model of a small town. His gaze travels across my face. When I’d decided he wasn’t much more than reasonably good-looking, that was before I’d seen him up close. His eyes, in particular, are striking; pale blue, their corners etched with lines, even though I know he’s only in his thirties. Laughter lines, my grandmother used to call them. But on Edward Monkford, they give his face a fierce, almost hawk-like intensity.

‘Did you win?’ I ask, when he doesn’t say anything.

He seems to shake himself. ‘Win what?’

‘That argument.’

‘Oh, that.’ He shrugs and smiles, and his face instantly softens. ‘My buildings make demands of people, Jane. I believe they’re not intolerable, and in any case, the rewards are far greater than the demands. In one sense, I suppose, that’s why you’re here.’

‘It is?’

He nods. ‘David, my technology partner, talks about something called UX – that’s tech-speak for User Experience. As you’ll be aware, having seen the terms and conditions of the lease, we gather information from One Folgate Street and use it to refine the user experience for our other clients.’

I'd actually skimmed most of the conditions document, which ran to about twenty pages of tiny print. 'What kind of information?'

He shrugs again. His shoulders under the sweater are broad but lean. 'Metadata, mostly. Which rooms you use most often, that kind of thing. And from time to time, we'll ask you to redo the questionnaire, to see how your answers are changing.'

'I can live with that.' I stop, aware that might sound presumptuous. 'If I get the chance, I mean.'

'Good.' Edward Monkford reaches down to where some coffee cups and a bowl of sugar cubes in paper wrappers sit on a tray. Absent-mindedly, he rearranges the sugar in a stack, aligning the edges until it forms a perfect square, like a Rubik's Cube. Then he turns the cups so the handles all point in the same direction. 'I might even ask you to meet some of our clients, to help us convince them that living without an Aga and a cabinet of sports trophies won't be the end of their world.' Another smile touches the corners of his eyes, and I feel myself going a little weak at the knees. This isn't like me, I think, followed by: Is it mutual? I give him a tiny, encouraging smile in return.

A pause. 'So, Jane. Is there anything you'd like to ask *me*?'

I think. 'You built One Folgate Street for yourself?'

'Yes.' He doesn't elaborate.

'So where do *you* live?'

'In hotels, mostly. Near whatever project I'm working on. They're perfectly bearable, so long as you put all the loose cushions in a wardrobe.' He smiles again, but I sense he isn't joking.

'Don't you mind not having a home of your own?'

He shrugs. 'It means I can focus on my work.' Something about the way he says it doesn't invite any more questions.

A man comes into the room – barging in clumsily, banging the door against its stopper, already talking nineteen to the dozen. ‘Ed, we need to talk about bandwidth. The idiots are trying to scrimp on the fibre optics. They don’t understand that in a hundred years’ time, copper wiring will seem as outdated as lead water-pipes are today—’

The speaker is a scruffy, heavily built individual, an erratic growth of stubble covering his fleshy, jowly face. His hair, which is greyer than his stubble, is tied up in a ponytail. Despite the air conditioning, he’s wearing shorts and flip-flops.

Monkford doesn’t seem perturbed by the interruption. ‘David, this is Jane Cavendish. She’s applied to live at One Folgate Street.’

So this must be David Thiel, the technology partner. His eyes, set so deep in his face I can barely make out their expression, turn to me incuriously, then swivel back to Monkford. ‘Really, the only solution is for the town to have its own satellite. We need to rethink everything—’

‘A dedicated satellite? That’s an interesting notion,’ Monkford says thoughtfully. He glances at me. ‘I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse us, Jane.’

‘Of course.’ As I stand up, David Thiel’s eyes drop down towards my bare legs. Monkford sees it too, and a frown crosses his face. I get the feeling he’s about to say something, but then he restrains himself.

‘Thank you for seeing me,’ I add politely.

‘I’ll be in touch soon,’ he says.

Then: Emma

And then, the very next day, there's an email:

Your application is approved.

I can't believe it – not least because the email contains nothing else: no explanation about when we can move in, or what their bank details are, or what we're supposed to do next. I call the agent, Mark. I'm getting to know him quite well now I'm doing all this stuff for the application, and he isn't actually as bad as I first thought.

He sounds genuinely pleased when I tell him we've got it. Since it's empty, he says, you can move in this weekend if you want. There's some paperwork to sign, and I'll need to talk you through installing the app on your phones. That's about it, really.

That's about it, really. It's just sinking in that we've done it. We're going to live in one of the most amazing houses in London. Us. Me and Simon. Everything's going to be different now.

3. *You are involved in a traffic accident that you know is your fault. The other driver is confused and seems to think she caused the crash. Do you tell the police it was her fault or yours?*

☐ *Her fault*

☐ *Your fault*

Now: Jane

I am sitting in the spare, empty austerity of One Folgate Street, utterly content.

My gaze takes in the pristine blankness of the garden. I've discovered now why there aren't any flowers. The garden is modelled on what the internet tells me are *karesansui*, the formal meditative gardens of Buddhist temples. The shapes are symbolic: mountain, water, sky. It's a garden for contemplating, not for growing things.

Edward Monkford spent a year in Japan, after his wife and son died. That's what made me think to search for it.

Even the internet is different here. Once Camilla had downloaded the app to my phone and laptop, and handed me the special bracelet that triggers One Folgate Street's sensors, she connected to the wi-fi and typed in a password. Since then, whenever I turn on a device I'm met not by Google or Safari, but by a blank page and the word *Housekeeper*. There are just three tabs: *Home*, *Search* and *Cloud*. 'Home' brings up the current status for One Folgate Street's lighting, heating, and so on. There are four different settings to choose from: productive, peaceful, playful and purposeful. 'Search' takes me to the internet. 'Cloud' is my backup and storage.

Every day, Housekeeper suggests what clothes I should wear, based on the weather outside, my appointments and what's currently at the laundry. If I'm eating in, it knows what's in the fridge, how I might cook it and how many calories it will add to my daily total. Meanwhile, the 'Search' function filters out adverts, pop-ups offering me a flatter belly, distressing news stories, top tens, gossip about minor celebrities, spam and cookies. There are no bookmarks, no history, no saved data. I am wiped clean every time I close the screen. It's strangely liberating.

Sometimes, I pour myself a glass of wine and simply walk around, touching things, acclimatising myself to the cool, expensive textures, adjusting the precise position of a chair or vase. Of course I was already familiar with that saying by Mies van der Rohe, 'Less is more', but I hadn't appreciated just how *sensual* less could be, how rich and voluptuous. The few pieces of furniture are design classics: Hans Wegner dining chairs in pale oak, white Nicolle stools, a sleek Lissoni sofa. And the house comes with a number of simple but luxurious lesser props: thick white towels, bed sheets made of high-thread-count linen, hand-blown wine glasses with thermometer-thin stems. Every touch is a small surprise, a quiet appreciation of quality.

I feel like a character in a film. Amongst so much good taste, the house somehow makes me walk more elegantly, stand in a more considered way, place myself within each vista for maximum effect. There's no one to see me, of course, but One Folgate Street itself seems almost to become my audience, filling the sparse spaces with quiet, cinematic scores from Housekeeper's automated playlist.

Your application is approved. That was all the email said. I'd been reading bad news into the fact that the meeting was so short, but it seems Edward Monkford is inclined to brevity in all things. And I'm sure I wasn't imagining that unspoken undercurrent, that tiny jolt you get when an attraction is reciprocated. Well, he knows where I am, I think. The waiting itself feels charged and sensual, a kind of silent foreplay.

And then there are the flowers. On the day I moved in, they were lying on the doorstep – a huge bouquet of lilies, still wrapped in plastic. No note, nothing to indicate whether this is something he does for all his new tenants or a special gesture just for me. I sent him a polite thank you anyway.

Two days later, another, identical bouquet arrived. And after a week, a third – exactly the same arrangement of lilies, left in exactly the same place beside the front door. Every corner of One Folgate Street is filled with their heavy scent. But, really, this is getting to be too much.

When I find the fourth identical bouquet, I decide enough's enough. There's a florist's name printed on the cellophane wrapper. I call them and ask if it's possible to change the order for something else.

The woman on the other end comes back sounding puzzled. 'I can't find any order for One Folgate Street.'

'It may be under Edward Monkford? Or the Monkford Partnership?'

'There's nothing like that. Nothing in your area, in fact. We're based in Hammersmith – we wouldn't deliver so far north.'

'I see,' I say, perplexed.

Next day, when yet more lilies arrive, I pick them up, intending to throw them in the bin.

And that's when I see it – a card, the first time one's been left, on which someone has written, *Emma, I will love you forever. Sleep well, my darling.*

Then: Emma

It's just as wonderful as we hoped. Well, as I hoped. Simon goes along with everything, but I can tell he's still got reservations. Or perhaps he doesn't like feeling beholden to the architect for letting us live here cheaply.

But even Simon is pretty amazed by a showerhead the size of a dinner plate that simply turns itself on when the cubicle door is opened, identifies each of us from the waterproof bracelet we've been given to wear, and remembers the different water temperatures we like. We wake on our first morning with the light in the bedroom slowly fading up – an electronic sunrise, the street noises muffled to silence by the thick walls and the glass – and I realise I've had my best night's sleep in years.

Unpacking, of course, takes no time at all. One Folgate Street already has lots of nice things, so our old stuff simply joins The Collection in storage.

Sometimes I just sit on the stairs with a mug of coffee, my knees tucked under my chin, drinking in how nice it all is. Don't spill the coffee, babe, Simon calls when he sees me. It's become a standing joke. We've decided it must be because I spilled the coffee that we got the house.

We don't ever mention Monkford calling Simon a prick, or Simon's non-reaction.

Happy? Simon asks, coming to sit next to me on the stairs.

Happy, I agree. Buuuut . . .

You want to move out, he goes. Had enough already. I knew it.

It's my birthday next week.

Is it, babe? I hadn't remembered.

He's joking, of course. Simon always goes way over the top for things like Valentine's and my birthday.

Why don't we get a few people round?

A party, you mean?

I nod. On Saturday.

Simon looks worried. Are we even allowed parties here?

It won't get messy, I say. Not like last time.

I say this because the last time we threw a party, the council sent a noise-abatement officer round.

Well, OK then, he says doubtfully. Saturday it is.

By nine p.m. on Saturday, the house is packed. I've put candles all the way up the stairs and outside in the garden and dimmed the lighting right down. The fact Housekeeper doesn't have a 'party' setting does make me a bit worried at first. But I've checked The Rules and 'No parties' isn't on the list. Maybe they just forgot, but hey, a list is a list.

Of course, our friends can't believe it when they walk through the door, though there are plenty of jokes about where's all the furniture and why haven't we unpacked yet. Simon's in his element – he always likes to be the envy of his mates, to have the

most exclusive watch or the latest app or the coolest phone, and now he has the best place to live. I can see him adjusting to this new version of himself, proudly demonstrating the cooker, the automatic entry system, the way the electric sockets are just three tiny slits in a stone wall, how even the drawers built under the bed are different on the man's side and the woman's.

I'd thought about inviting Edward Monkford, but Simon persuaded me not to. Now, as Kylie's 'Can't Get You Out of My Head' ripples through the crowd, I realise he was right – Monkford would loathe all this noise and mayhem and dancing; he'd probably make up another rule on the spot and throw everyone out. Just for a moment, I imagine that happening – Edward Monkford turning up uninvited, turning off the music and telling everyone to get out – and it actually feels rather good. Which is stupid, because after all it's my party.

Simon goes past, his hands full of bottles, and leans in to kiss me. You look great, birthday girl, he says. Is that a new dress?

I've had it for ages, I lie. He kisses me again. Get a room, you two, Saul shouts over the music as Amanda pulls him into the knot of dancers.

There's a lot of booze, a little bit of drugs, plenty of music and shouting. People spill into the tiny garden to smoke and get yelled at by the neighbours. But by three in the morning everyone's starting to drift away. Saul spends twenty minutes trying to persuade Simon and me to come on to a club, but despite having done a couple of lines I'm knackered and Simon says he's too drunk, and eventually Amanda takes Saul home.

Come to bed, Em, Simon says when they've gone.

In a minute, I say. I'm too tired to move.

You smell gorgeous, gorgeous, he says, nuzzling my neck. Let's go to bed.

Si, I say hesitantly.

What? he says.

I don't think I want to have sex tonight, I say. Sorry.

We haven't since the break-in. We haven't really talked about it. It's just one of those things.

You said everything would be different here, he says softly.

It will, I say. Just not yet.

Of course, he says. There's no hurry, Em. No hurry at all.

Later, as we lie beside each other in the darkness, he says quietly, Remember how we christened Belfort Gardens?

It had been a silly challenge we'd set ourselves: to make love in every room before we'd been there a week.

He doesn't say anything else. The silence lengthens, and eventually I fall asleep.

Now: Jane

I invite some friends to lunch – a little house-warming gathering. Mia and Richard bring their children, Freddie and Martha, and Beth and Pete bring Sam. I've known Mia since Cambridge; she's my oldest and closest friend. Certainly I know things her own husband doesn't, such as that in Ibiza shortly before their wedding, she slept with another man and almost called it off, or that she contemplated having a termination with Martha because her post-natal depression with Freddie had been so bad.

Much as I love these people, I shouldn't have invited them together. I only did it because of the novelty of having enough space, but the fact is, however tactful my friends try to be, sooner or later they start talking about their children. Richard and Pete patrol after their toddlers as if jerked along by invisible reins, fearful of the stone floor, those lethal stairs, the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that a running child might not even see, while the girls pour huge glasses of white wine and moan quietly but with a kind of battle-weary pride about how boring their lives have become: 'God, last week I fell asleep watching the *Six O'Clock News*!' 'That's nothing – I'd crashed by CBeebies!' Martha regurgitates her lunch over the stone table, while Sam manages to smear the plate-glass windows with fingers previously dipped in chocolate

mousse. I find myself thinking there are advantages to not having a child. A part of me just wants them all to go so I can tidy up.

And then there's a funny little moment with Mia. She's helping me get the salad ready when she calls out, 'J, where do you keep the African spoons?'

'Oh – I donated them to the charity shop.'

She gives me a strange look. 'I gave you those.'

'Yes, I know.' Mia went to do voluntary work in an African orphanage once, and she brought me back two hand-carved salad spoons, made by the kids. 'Sorry. I decided they didn't quite make the cut. D'you mind?'

'I suppose not,' she says with a slightly put-out expression on her face. Clearly she does mind. But pretty soon lunch is ready and she forgets about it.

'So, J, how's your social life?' Beth asks, pouring herself a second glass of wine. She offers me the bottle, but I shake my head.

'The usual drought,' I say. For years, this has been my allotted role within the group: to provide them with vicarious stories of sexual disasters that make them feel they haven't completely left all that behind, while simultaneously reassuring them that they're much better off as they are.

'What about your architect?' Mia says. 'Anything come of him?'

'Ooh, I didn't know about the architect,' Beth says. 'Tell.'

'She fancies the man who built this house. Don't you, J?'

Pete has taken Sam outside. The child is squatting next to the patch of grass, scattering it with tiny fistfuls of gravel. I wonder if it would be spinsterish to ask him to stop. 'I haven't done anything about it, though,' I say.

‘Well, don’t hang around,’ Beth says. ‘Grab him before it’s too late.’ She stops, horrified at herself. ‘Shit, I didn’t mean . . .’

Grief and anguish rip at my heart, but I say calmly, ‘It’s OK, I know what you meant. Anyway, my biological clock seems to have set itself to snooze for the time being.’

‘Sorry, anyway. That was unbelievably tactless of me.’

‘I wondered if that was him outside,’ Mia says. ‘Your architect, I mean.’

I frown. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘When I got Martha’s penguin from the car just now, there was a man with flowers coming to your front door.’

‘What sort of flowers?’ I say slowly.

‘Lilies. Jane?’

I’m already hurrying to the door. The flower mystery has been nagging at me ever since I found that strange note. As I pull the door open, the bouquet has already been laid on the step and he’s almost back at the road. ‘Wait!’ I call after him. ‘Wait a moment, will you?’

He turns. He’s about my age, maybe a couple of years older, his dark hair prematurely flecked with grey. His face looks drawn and his gaze is strangely intense. ‘Yes?’

‘Who are you?’ I gesture at the bouquet. ‘Why do you keep bringing me flowers? My name isn’t Emma.’

‘The flowers aren’t for you, obviously,’ he says disgustedly. ‘I only keep replacing them because you keep taking them. That’s why I left a note – so you’d finally get it into your thick skull that they’re not there to brighten up your designer kitchen.’ He stops. ‘It’s her birthday tomorrow. That is, it would have been.’

Finally, I realise. They’re not a gift, they’re a memorial gesture.

Like the ones people leave at the scene of a fatal accident. Mentally, I kick myself for being so wrapped up in thinking about Edward Monkford, I hadn't even considered that possibility.

'I'm so sorry,' I say. 'Did she . . . Was it near here?'

'In that house.' He gestures behind me, at One Folgate Street, and I feel a shiver go down my spine. 'She died in there.'

'How?' Realising that might sound intrusive, I add, 'I mean, it's none of my business—'

'It depends who you ask,' he interrupts.

'What do you mean?'

He looks straight at me. His eyes are haggard. 'She was murdered. The coroner recorded an open verdict, but everyone – even the police – knew she'd been killed. First he poisoned her mind, then he killed her.'

For a moment I wonder if this is all nonsense, if this man is simply deranged. But he seems too sincere, too ordinary for that.

'Who did? Who killed her?'

But he only shakes his head and turns away, back towards his car.

Everything that's yours, was once hers

Jane stumbles on the rental opportunity of a lifetime: the chance to live in a beautiful ultra-minimalist house designed by an enigmatic architect, on condition she abides by a long list of exacting rules.

After moving in, she discovers that a previous tenant, Emma, met a mysterious death there - and starts to wonder if her own story will be a re-run of the girl before.

As twist after twist catches the reader off guard, Emma's past and Jane's present become inexorably entwined in this tense, page-turning portrayal of psychological obsession.



'I devoured it' Peter James

IT'S A CHANCE TO LIVE A PERFECT LIFE.

BUT AT WHAT PRICE?

'Riveting' Lisa Gardner