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A Fatal Reunion

PENELOPE EVANS

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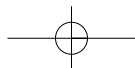
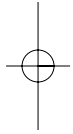
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PENELOPE EVANS was born in Wales and grew up in Scotland. She attended the University of St Andrews before becoming a criminal lawyer in London. Her previous novels, *The Last Girl*, *Freezing*, *First Fruits* and *A Fatal Reunion*, were published to much critical acclaim. She currently lives in Buckinghamshire where she combines writing fiction with journalism.

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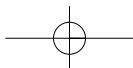
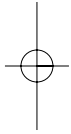
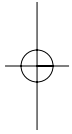
First Fruits

My Perfect Silence

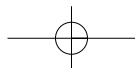
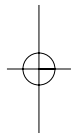
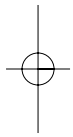
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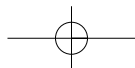
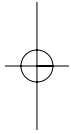
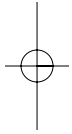
Freezing



To my daughters Katharine and Alice.



PART ONE

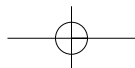
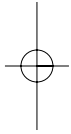
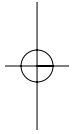


The Patersfield Advertiser, 3rd September

HEADLESS CORPSE DISCOVERED OUTSIDE PATERSFIELD

Council workmen have discovered an incomplete skeleton in long grass on the A40 roundabout on the outskirts of Patersfield. The corpse, whose sex has still to be established, is believed to have lain uncovered for up to three months in a spot ten yards from a busy road. Police expect that inquiries will be severely hampered by the body's advanced state of decomposition. Pathologists are blaming animals for the absence of a head and clothes. Speaking off the record, a spokesperson for Bucks Constabulary has doubted the existence of foul play. Patersfield is a favourite stopping off point for tramps journeying between London and Oxford, an issue that has concerned the town council for some years. A member of the Treasurer's Committee who asks not to be named observed to our reporter, 'Now it's not only their litter they're leaving behind.' The matter is to be discussed at the next Council meeting, on Thursday 18th September.

The ADVERTISER asks: how can a corpse lie undiscovered for so long, so close to the centre of Patersfield? Is the car cutting us off from our environment? After the hike in last year's Council tax, why is no one bothering to cut the grass on our roundabouts? Phone the ADVERTISER to have your say. Then turn to page 4 for our free competition to win a Mercedes S class...



Chapter One

I saw her the very first day I came to the university.

Her parents were outside the hall of residence, hauling her cases out of the boot of a small car. She had her back to them – and me. She was looking down at the university spread out below us. Old Scots stone – Victorian spires spiking the sky, mellowed quads. And beyond it all, the sea, with the dry twinkle of waves that are never warm, this far north. Not quite Oxford, as my father had been careful to mention. But old enough for her, for Carlie. Old and cold enough after her semi-detached home wherever. St Leonards – old after her modern house and her modern comprehensive with its light and air and one size fits all. Carlie always was impressed by age.

As she stood with her back to me, I thought she was old as well. A little old lady in a cloche hat and shaggy fur coat, too hot, surely, for a warm September day. Button up boots. Then suddenly she turned and I saw her face, and she wasn't old, she was young. As young as me.

Her face was pale, yet heated at the same time. Beneath the rim of the cloche hat, her eyes were liquid with excitement, alive to everything they saw. Suddenly I had the desire for her to see me too, include me in the reason for the glow, part of the excitement. Unconsciously I put down my single suitcase and stood, waiting for her to notice me...

...And she looked straight through me. She was turning to

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find her parents. They also had put down the cases to watch her, waiting quietly for just this, for her eyes to come back to them. And even then, the first time I saw her, I knew what was happening in Carlie's world. A minute after arriving and she was torn, swaying between her future and her past. I saw the excitement darken to something deeper. I saw her tilt, as if falling towards them, a short man and his short wife. And I saw them through Carlie's eyes. The best people in the world. People who loved her, whom she was about to leave behind.

I picked up my suitcase and moved on up the steps to hall. I'd been in the same between-place myself, where the past and future separate and split right there in front of you. But it had happened when I was six, when it was time to go away to school. And all I remember is that I was torn in one direction only. Not wanting to be anywhere except home. My parents had put me on the train with other, older, boys and waved me off, my mother cuddling the puppy that everyone had told me was going to be mine, and never would be now, not really. It snuggled down in her arms and ignored me as I went. That was what she was good at, my mother: animals.

That particular dog died just before I came away to the university. It was the only time I ever saw my mother cry.

From the door of the hall, I glanced back towards the small group with the mountain of cases. They were going to have to make a second, and a third trip to carry it all. This girl must have brought every moveable scrap of her existence with her.

I found my room. A window that looked out over a golf course and in the distance a thin line of sand dunes. The sea was not far away. I liked that. Ground floor, though; I knew what that meant from school. People coming in late from the pub, after the doors were locked. They'd be knocking on the glass at all hours, trailing in mud and worse, too drunk even to say thanks.

It had breeze block walls that would sweat when winter came. A flaw in modern design. Something else to provoke the dry comment from my father. He had expected me to go to his old college, where old meant old. Where corridors and streets would be full of people I had known; old friends of his, or the children

of friends. The next logical step. My father had read Greats before reading for the law. Now he said it would be harder, afterwards when I followed him to the Bar, not taking up my place in Oxford. People would think that I hadn't made the grade.

I put my alarm clock beside the bed, and the Liddell and Scott (Greek into English) on the desk. Lewis and Short (Latin into English) up on the shelf. Greek and Latin texts lined up next to it. And that was it. I had arrived.

Outside in the corridor, I heard the fire door swing open, the creaking magnified by a breeze block echo. Voices and footsteps and cases banging against the walls. The door next to mine opened and the noise continued through the wall beside my bed. There was going to be a problem with soundproofing. Every time someone stepped into the corridor I would know it.

Not that it was other people's noise that would bother me. Twelve years amongst other boys, you learn to blank it out. It was my own sounds that would be the trouble. A single scrape of my chair, and whoever had moved in next door would know he's not alone. It would be like school again. Friendly types who get bored – or lonesome – don't care who they talk to.

I picked my copy of Catullus off the shelf. It fell open at the poem to his faithless mistress. *Odi et amo*. I hate and I love. *Flaming Catullus* the Victorians called him, disapprovingly, before continuing to snuffle their way through his scenes of tumescence and fellatio and spunk. And love. Above all, Catullus writes about love. And hate. *Odi et amo*.

I was nineteen years old. And maybe this was already what I expected love to be: an amalgam of loving and hating. A paradox, an oxymoron – everything the Greeks had already given a name to. I was ready for it. I thought that was what love was.

But now came a banging on the door. It had started straight away, the sociableness. I tossed the book aside and considered ignoring the knock, then hauled myself out of the chair. Standing at the door was the short man I'd seen beside the car, the father of the girl with the excited eyes. He looked me up and down, not trying to hide his dismay.

'Can I help you?'

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'You're a lad!' he exclaimed.

I nodded.

'Just visiting then? Helping a sister move in?' His voice was hopeful.

'This is my room.'

He stared at me a while longer, then sighed. 'Right you are. Sorry, son. See, I thought you'd be a girl. Mixed hall but with different wings. Girls on one side. Boys on the other, d'you follow?' I watched him resign himself to the new situation, and summon up a smile. He lowered his voice. 'No harm in telling you why I'm here, though. It's our girl, Carlie. She's going to be next door to you. Mind, we've had trouble with her, sitting there the past half hour saying no one's going to want to speak to her, getting herself into a right state. First time away from home, y'see. I thought, if I came and knocked next door, that would be a start for her, break the ice. You don't mind, do you?' A pause, then the smile faded. 'Ah well, maybe you're busy. Mum and Dad still with you, I'll bet. Caught you at the wrong moment.' He was giving up on me. Another moment and he'd be back in the room again, breaking the news about the chap next door, who just stared at him and never said a word.

'No,' I said. 'No parents. That is, they're at home. They don't...we don't need to... Done it all before, if you see what I... So, not busy, not busy at all. I'm...I'm just here. Alone.'

My rush of words had caught him by surprise, almost making him take a step back. Then his eyes softened. And look, he's seen right through me. A nice man, that's what he is. A lovely man. 'There lad,' he says gently. 'I get your drift. You settle yourself in. And when you're ready, go knock on our Carlie. She'll like that. Go and see Carlie.' He jerked his head towards the door he had come from. Dazed, I nodded.

Back in my chair I picked up the Catullus again. But I couldn't concentrate. She was here, the girl with the future bright in her cheeks, right next door to me. 'Go and see her,' he said.

Go and see her. Easy enough to say. Long after the parents had gone, I was still trying to psych myself up to do just that. Go and see her. But this wasn't the way, sitting in my chair, not moving.

At this rate I was going to end up never even speaking to her.

Then just before midnight, there came a knock. Made me catch my breath.

I opened the door. For a moment we stared at each other.

'Hello,' she said finally. Her voice was light, tentative. 'I'm Carlie.'

Another pause as she waited. Finally, she prompted me. 'And you?'

And I felt my eyes go wild. Because with Carlie standing in front of me, I had forgotten, I truly had forgotten my own name. 'Guy,' I said at last. 'I'm Guy Latimer.'

I said that. That was me talking. Where did I find the words?

She stood in the centre of my room, looking round. She had on a sort of crocheted shift thing, over some kind of old silk thing. And even I knew this isn't what girls usually wear, not even the unfashionable ones. Certainly not the girls I'd known at home in the country, with their body warmers and hacking jackets. But she wasn't dowdy. She was wearing bright red lipstick that made her skin seem very white, almost translucent. Curly dark hair cut close to her head.

'Your father was here earlier,' I said.

She rolled her eyes. 'That was terrible, knocking on you like that! God, why do parents always think they have to interfere?'

I thought briefly of my parents, tried to imagine the same problem.

'Well they can't now, can they?' I offered finally. 'Interfere, I mean. You're here and they're – wherever. Gone. I suppose your father thought it was the last thing he could do for you.'

I thought I was saying what she wanted to hear. Instead her face grew bright red, then crumpled like a little girl's. And all at once I had a girl – a grown up girl – crying in my room.

And I didn't know what to do. Someone was crying and there wasn't even a dead dog to account for it. All I could do was stare at her drooping head, and the curls at the base of her neck – and wait.

Without warning she stopped crying and looked up. Her eyelashes were glittering. 'Have you got any biscuits?'

I shook my head helplessly.

'Wait there then,' she instructed me – *as if I was going to abandon my own room!* 'I'll be back.'

And she was. A moment later she had returned with a scuffed Quality Street tin, full of biscuits, all of them home made.

'Tea?' she said. 'Coffee? You must have that?'

Again I had to shake my head. And once again she was away, a little longer this time, coming back with two mugs. Wordlessly I took one and sipped hot, sweet tea. Not the way I used to drink it. She headed for the chair, leaving me with nowhere but the bed. I sat down, awkward, and gazed up and down and around – everywhere except at the girl in my room – tried to think of a single sensible thing to say.

And came up with nothing.

It didn't matter. Carlie did all the talking. She talked about her parents, her town, her school. She told me the books she liked, the music she didn't like, the friends she liked, and the girls who were glad to see the back of her. She sat with her legs curled under her, batting the air as she talked, animated as a kitten let out of a box. Her voice was high and friendly. She looked and sounded completely at home.

And it was an act. Even then I knew. Right from the start I seemed to know my Carlie. I knew she was just showing off, pretending none of this fazed her – not the leaving home, not the being alone. Not even the sitting here with me, a complete stranger. If I had had to guess I would have said it had been practised in front of a mirror, all of it, so she could come up with this: a grown up Carlie. A Carlie who was in control.

A Carlie who was anything but.

How did I know this? I'd never been able to read anyone's mind before. Perhaps it was because I had never looked properly, I mean, just sat there – and looked. She talked, I listened, and we were never so young as on that first day, the day we met. Carlie and I.

She left, taking her mugs and her biscuit tin with her. And that was the last chance I had to speak to her for days. Freshers' week started and she was off and away, doubtless practising the same

new skills she had tried out on me. I caught glimpses of her, though, in the distance. Disappearing into coffee shops with other people; once, cycling past me with her skirts flying up, revealing a pair of legs that took me by storm. Before I'd known what I was doing I was running after her. But at the last moment she had turned a corner, pedalling swiftly away from me down a wynd towards the English department. And she was gone.

The next time I saw her was in the Union, queuing to sign up for some society or other. Talking, those hands still moving. Another girl was with her, listening intently as if fascinated to see so much energy expended on a simple thing like standing in a line. She had an air of faint disapproval that Carlie seemed not to notice. Five minutes later I was at the head of the same queue, scrawling my name three places below hers. Carlie Hawkins.

'You haven't written down what you want to do.' The girl behind the table, dressed all in black, pointed to the space beside my name.

'What I want to do?' I repeated after her stupidly.

'Acting, stage management, props? What are you interested in? You're nice and tall. Dark, sort of intense looking. Young, though.' Apparently she considered her position by the desk gave her permission to pass a verbal commentary on the appearance of anyone who approached her. Then she added, 'You'll get parts if you can act.'

I glanced up at the society banner and realised I had just put my name down for drama soc. 'Oh,' I said, and paused. 'Not acting.'

'Prompting?' she prompted. 'Or lighting?'

'Lighting,' I whispered. 'Maybe.'

'Write it down, then,' she said impatiently. Her eyes had moved on to the guy standing beside me. I could guess what she would say about him. Tall as me, but blond with it, with a proper growth of beard. A natural lead.

I picked up the pen again and watched it hover. Crossed out my name.

'Sorry,' I muttered. 'Made a mistake.'

But I listened out for her. Tiny movements in her room, tiny

sounds through the wall. Alone, she turned out to be quieter than anyone could have expected. I began to guess that it took it out of her, all that vivaciousness, all that animation. I would hear her door close, and that would be it. Silence, palpable in its relief. Sometimes I imagined I could hear pages turning. I imagined a quiet Carlie, a different Carlie, released from the show. A happier Carlie?

Turning the pages in my own room, I remembered her father's words. '*Go knock on our Carlie.*' But how? Some folk could make the hardest things sound easy. I bought some mugs and some teabags, and listened for the sound of Carlie that somehow would say, *knock on my door.*

Until one night, I heard a different kind of sound.

It was hardly anything. To catch it you'd have needed ears like mine, trained to trap the smallest sounds of a girl I'd only talked to once. What was it? I didn't know exactly. A series of breaths, too quick and stifled to be normal breathing. An odd, laboured sound that repeated itself over and over. A bad sound that disturbed me, as if I had been a dog with an instinct but no vocabulary to put it into words.

And it electrified me. I went back to my desk with its half written essay on the poems of Horace. Was she crying? I thought how she had cried here that time, in my room. There had been no sound at all then. Tears had simply rolled down her face in a way that seemed effortless, painless. In retrospect, Carlie had made crying look like something almost enjoyable. If she was crying now, then it wasn't like the first time. This was different. This was wrong.

I bent towards the page I had just read, the words I had just quoted. *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo.* Suddenly they didn't seem to mean anything any more, lines in a language I seemed not to recognise. I told myself that in a little while she would stop, the way she had when she was here, and no harm done. I told myself there was nothing I could do. Nothing she would want me to do.

I listened to the fractured sounds through the wall and told myself I couldn't knock on her door, not for this reason. Or any reason. Unless maybe for a fire. Maybe.

Then I thought of Carlie with the excited eyes crying. All by herself. *Go see our Carlie.*

Next thing I knew, I was standing at her door. It gave way without me expecting it, and there was Carlie, kneeling on the floor in front of me. And the sound wasn't tiny after all. That had been the wall getting in the way. She was bent over, taking great whooping breaths as if trying to empty the room of air. Looking up, her eyes, bulging, terrified, fixed me with mute appeal. Her teeth were bared, strands of saliva shining on her chin.

I understood now. Twelve years with other boys, you were bound to see it sooner or later. A kid – usually one of the fat ones – who'd sit bolt upright in the night, gasping and wheezing. And if throwing slippers at him failed to put him right, someone would have to go running for matron. Asthma, last refuge of the homesick. It happened all the time, until they grew out of it.

Except this was different. This was worse than any chubby boy in the middle of a fright. And no matron now. No one to sit quietly on the bed, quell the panic that constricted the airways, soothe the breath back the way it came. All Carlie had was me.

I got down on the floor, and tried to catch her hands. They flailed around, her fingers catching me on the chin, nicking the skin with her nails. I'd find blood there later. But I struggled until finally I had them, Carlie's two hands held fast in mine.

And those frightened eyes. I kept a grip on these too, in a way. *Look at me*, I said. *Look at me, Carlie.* I was surprised at my voice, how calm it sounded. *Count with me... One, two, three, four.* A cool calm voice, soft as matron's when she used to say the same thing – softer even than that. I never knew my voice could sound the way it did now. *Five, six, seven. Slowly... breathe slowly, Carlie.* I counted and I talked, and I held her with my hands and my eyes. And gradually, the toiling stopped. Her breathing became regular and open. Easy again.

Even then we kept counting. *Eighty eight, eighty nine, ninety.* Up to a hundred and beyond. Two hundred, long past the point where we could have stopped.

Finally, I loosed her hands, laid them in her lap. Her breath was easy, her breast rising and falling. Her eyes had closed ages

ago, way back in the nineties. Now she opened them again, to look at me, half in a daze. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'What did you say your name was?'

'Guy,' I said. 'I'm Guy.' Suddenly I could feel myself blushing. Awkward, I got to my feet. 'Will you be alright?'

She nodded, too tired to speak. I took a step back, felt behind me for the door. 'I'd better go then.' I said, 'Leave you in peace. I've an essay to write, anyway. But I can always be back, if you...' Somehow I couldn't bring myself to say it: *if you need me*. Then I blinked, looked around me in surprise. I was no longer even in the same room as her. Too large a step backwards and somehow I had taken myself right outside again. I was back in the corridor with her door already swinging back into position. I had forced my own exit. I waited a moment, wondering if she would call after me, but she didn't.

I went back to my desk. It was a full hour before I could make the words stand still in front of my eyes. But I got there in the end, by gathering every thought and shovelling it out of my head. Lines of poetry began to make sense again. *Odi profanum vulgus et arceo*. 'I hate ordinary people. They're vulgar and I won't have them near me.'

The words looked different to me now. Half an hour ago I'd thought there'd been something splendid about turning one's back on the world like that. Now they read like the opinions of a lofty snob. I had to start the essay all over again.

I worked, and when I had finished I was pleased because I thought I had managed to forget Carlie. Then I read my essay and saw I hadn't forgotten her at all. She had changed the way I'd thought about something I thought I knew all about – a poem, a poet, an entire world view. Pushing her out of my head, only to realise an essay written in her absence had been transformed by her. Carlie was inside me now.