



SHE STAYED  
IN YOUR HOUSE.

NOW SHE WANTS  
YOUR LIFE.

# THE PERFECT GUEST

'Tense, compulsive and gripping'  
Charlotte Levin, author of *If I Can't  
Have You* and *If I Let You Go*

RUTH IRONS

# **THE PERFECT GUEST**

Ruth Irons grew up in South Wales before studying music at Exeter University, and then musical theatre at Central School of Speech and Drama. She worked as an actor, musician, and music teacher for many years before turning to writing as a creative outlet, completing courses with Curtis Brown Creative and The Writers Bureau. Ruth lives in Kingston-Upon-Thames with her husband and two daughters. *The Perfect Guest* is her debut novel.

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**Ruth Irons**

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*To Ollie, Heidi and Maeve.*

a feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group and having a good relationship with the other members of the group because they welcome you and accept you.

- A sense of belonging is one of humanity's most basic needs.



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## Chapter One

I sat in my car on the driveway, staring at the blinding white façade of the house that had sucked up the last of my overdraft. Once again, the words played in my head. *Why am I doing this?* And once again, the answer came back. *Because this is what normal people do. They go on nice weekend breaks and enjoy themselves with friends.*

My gaze remained on the house while my fingers picked at a spot of dried food on the thigh of my jeans. I should have found something clean to wear. This was the type of house where clean people stayed, not grubby, sleep-deprived, skint café workers. *Why am I doing this?*

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake,’ I muttered to myself, flinging open the car door before the same words repeated and repeated again and again.

There were three other cars parked on the gravel driveway and now I noticed they were lined up in a neat curve that carefully mirrored the curve of a central, sandstone fountain. I glanced back at my red Nissan Micra and its rebelliously perpendicular position, and squeezed the keys in my hand, about to head back and re-park it in line with the others. But before I could take a step, the front door of the house burst open and Megs appeared.

‘Dinny! Oh my God, it’s so good to see you!’ She beamed, her lipsticked mouth showing large, bright teeth, and her caramel hair flicking around her shoulders in soft curls. I hadn’t seen her in a couple of years and there were new lines around her eyes, but her forehead was smooth and I wondered if she’d had fillers, or whatever they were called. She pulled me into a hug and I smelt Chanel and Prosecco.

‘Hi, Megs, great to see you too.’ My voice sounded forced, and something sank inside me. I’d forgotten how tiring it was trying to match Megs’ undiluted, relentless energy.

‘Come in and check this place OUT.’ She grabbed my hand, which still

held the car keys. I balled it into an awkward fist, wondering if I should move the keys to my other hand or whether she'd let go of me soon.

She swung open a door to our left and I caught a glimpse of a large, plush living room with dark walls and coral curtains. 'Isn't it GORGEOUS?'

I didn't have time to take it in before she swept me towards an opposite door, and what appeared to be a sort of cloakroom.

'Not that we'll be needing that with this glorious weather! We've totally lucked out. I mean, I know it's June and it bloody well SHOULD be sunny but you just never know, do you?'

The wide, white corridor ended, and the space opened out. I felt my eyes blinking to adjust to the light and the beauty in front of me. Chevron oak floors stretched towards a glass-box extension at the back. To my right, oversized cream sofas faced a square cut-out fireplace that sat on top of a wide, sandstone ledge along which plants and cream candles were dotted. Above the fireplace hung a huge abstract oil painting of dark swirls and pinpricks of light, like stars viewed from under a stormy sea.

'Dinny, my lovely.' Priya appeared from a door on my left that I assumed was the kitchen. She handed me a glass of bubbles and chinked her own against mine before leaning in to kiss my cheek. 'So pleased you could make it.' Her glossy black hair was pulled over one shoulder and she wore fashionable, thick-rimmed glasses. Her dress was pale-blue linen, and impossibly uncrumpled for a garment that had either been worn in a car or packed in a suitcase. But then Priya was the sort of person who hung clothes in plastic covers from the hooks in the back of her car – something I'd never done in my life.

'This place is just stunning,' I said, still gazing about, taking in the high lantern ceiling, and the wooden lintels driven into the wall to make up the floating staircase.

'Hats off to Megs for finding it and arranging the whole thing,' Priya said, raising her glass towards Megs.

'I do have an eye for these properties, don't I?' Megs said, with a smug grin. 'Remember that place in Greece?'

'Oh my God, that infinity pool,' said Priya. I didn't say anything, having not been invited to Greece.

'It's just such a shame Neve couldn't make it,' added Megs, marching into the kitchen. Priya and I glanced at each other and my insides clenched. I sipped my Prosecco and looked down. Megs reappeared with her own glass of bubbles. 'She would have gone crazy for this place.' She wrinkled her nose and took a large swig.

Priya stared meaningfully at Megs, who gave a sudden flash of

embarrassment. We all knew I was Neve's last-minute replacement, and that if her father hadn't been taken ill last week, she would have been here instead of me.

'Where's Rachel?' I said, trying to change the subject.

Priya nodded towards a set of metal-framed seats arranged in a corner near the wall of glass. Rachel was hunched over, clenching a phone to her ear and staring with a serious expression at a small metal sculpture that sat on the glass coffee table in front of her.

'So she won't take the bottle at all? Has Mum tried?' Her voice bounced off the hard surfaces and came to us in tense bursts. 'No, of course I'm not saying that; it's just perhaps if you let Mum try . . .'

'Longest she's been away from Phoebe,' said Megs, leaning towards me with a conspiratorial wink. 'I reckon she won't last the two nights and will be off home later. Priya reckons tomorrow. We've got twenty quid on it.'

'Shhh,' said Priya. 'Dinny's going to think we're awful. Stop it.' She nudged Megs but couldn't stop the sly smile spreading across her face.

'Oh, Din, if you reckon she'll stay till Sunday you can get in on it too – what do you think? Twenty quid?'

I felt a spike of panic. Twenty pounds. God, that was a lot of money. Well, to me it was. The idea of casually betting it away, as a joke, made me feel sick. But then the amount of money I'd spent to be here also made me feel sick. And then another thought occurred . . . I could win forty pounds.

'OK,' I found myself saying. 'Sure.' I gave what I hoped was a nonchalant shrug and Megs laughed and squeezed my arm.

Priya gave me an uncertain look. 'It's just a silly thing, Dinny, you don't have to . . .'

'No, I want to,' I said, my smile feeling forced and somehow manic on my face.

Priya gave a small nod and looked down into her bubbles. She knew I didn't have the bank balance the rest of them did. It wasn't like they were trust-fund babies – they didn't waltz around Oxford brandishing Daddy's credit card or anything like that. But they had extra funds that I didn't. They'd come to Oxford through private school, plus years of after-school tutoring and carefully chosen extra-curricular activities that looked fabulous on application forms. They also had that natural confidence born of charismatic parents and expensive education. That ability to tap a spoon against a champagne flute then deliver a perfectly charming, off-the-cuff speech to a room full of people without so much as a flushed cheek or a sweaty palm. That ability to tell a joke with the casual smirk of someone who knows it's going to bring the house down. I, however, was not one of them.

I'd been coerced into Oxbridge meetings when I'd arrived at sixth form after comp and my teachers had realised I'd probably get straight As. There were no tutors, and no strategic extra-curricular activities – just a love of reading and a talent for analysing texts in a way English Literature examiners seemed to like. I also played piano reasonably well, but that wasn't because my parents wanted me to be a virtuoso; it was because I liked Elton John.

No one was more surprised than I was when I got the acceptance letter in the post. I remember the tears in my father's eyes, him squeezing my shoulder and sniffing. 'Oxford,' he'd whispered, almost to himself. 'Oxford.' My mother had made little squeaking sounds and fumbled for her reading glasses so she could read the letter again 'properly' with shaking hands. I see that moment in my mind's eye almost daily. Probably because it's the only time I've ever seen my parents look proud of me.

'God, someone get me a drink,' Rachel said, dropping her phone onto the coffee table and burying her face in her hands, her platinum bob falling forwards across her face.

'On it!' said Megs, dashing to the kitchen.

Priya walked over to Rachel and laid a hand on her back. 'What's the deal? Richard not coping?'

'Honestly, you'd think with my mum there too they'd be able to sort it out between them.' She shook her head and reached for the glass Megs produced, before taking a long sip of Prosecco. 'Perhaps it's still too soon. Perhaps I shouldn't have left them.'

'Look, Rach.' Megs perched on the arm of an orange chair next to Rachel. 'You deserve a break. This is a tough phase. I mean . . . obviously it was a while ago for me, but I can still remember it like it was yesterday. The sleepless nights, the bleeding nipples . . .' Rachel visibly flinched and I watched her hand move almost involuntarily towards her left breast. 'You need to let your hair down.'

Rachel nodded uncertainly, and looked up at Priya as she spoke. 'It's true. These first few months are tough – you've got to make a concerted effort to make time for yourself.' She rubbed Rachel's back as if soothing a child. 'The first time away is always really stressful. But it gets easier, I promise. I mean, these days I can just stock up the fridge for Doug and he's pretty good at getting them up and dressed and fed.'

'Great . . . so how many years have I got until that happens?'

'Oo, I'd say only about four or five?'

Rachel groaned.

'But if you wait even longer, they bugger off to university and you don't have to think about them at all!' Megs beamed. She always relished an

opportunity to make light of her parenting journey. In truth, getting pregnant straight out of uni then raising a child on her own must have been hideous. But Megs was never the sort to dwell on trauma – she took her role as life and soul of the party very seriously, and the toils of single motherhood did not fit her chosen narrative. Of course, having parents with serious means who gave her a flat to live in had no doubt blunted the struggles most women would have experienced in her position. Part of me wondered if she recognised this, and if it was the reason she steered well clear of the ‘woe-is-me’ narrative.

Rachel, by contrast, was very good at woe-is-me. ‘It’s just so draining. It’s constant, you know?’ She sipped her Prosecco, a frown knitted across her pale face.

Megs and Priya nodded and murmured sympathetically. I experienced a familiar awareness that I had nothing to offer this conversation. Even an attempt at an understanding noise or comment would have felt insincere. At forty-two I had no children, and no partner with whom I was about to even consider them. I had left no nervous husband behind when I’d closed my door this morning, nor any instructions or lists or food for childcare providers. There was no one missing me, or waiting for a text to find out I’d arrived safely, or wondering what I’d instruct them to do if I were there. Tomorrow morning, there would be no beep from my mobile with *How did you sleep, sweetheart?*

I stood by the floating staircase, watching the montage of motherhood in front of me, bathed in white sunlight that flooded the glass-box conservatory, and I felt the usual othering of myself.

‘Oh God, Dinah doesn’t want to hear all this boring bloody mumsy stuff!’ Megs came to my rescue with perfect timing. ‘Let’s get your bags in and show you your room. You’re going to love it!’

Once I’d fetched my rucksack from the car, Megs whisked me upstairs, which was decorated in the same understated way as the living area. Large skylights illuminated pale walls that were dotted with paintings and various wooden items that looked as if they’d been brought back from exotic countries. The landing led to a square gallery surrounded by an oak bannister. Luscious plants hung from corners in macramé baskets, and sunlight from the glass ceiling shone down on a Moroccan-tiled area below.

‘Games room and sauna down those stairs,’ Megs said, giving me a wink.

‘Wow,’ I said, unable to grasp the sheer size and extravagance of the place.

She led me to a corner of the gallery, and a door next to a rattan chair

that was draped with a white fur throw. She swung the door open to reveal the most beautiful bedroom I'd ever seen. The light poured in through double casement windows and a glass door that appeared to lead out onto a wrought-iron balcony. A pale rug covered most of the floor, artfully distressed grey floorboards peeping out at the edges, and the huge bed was draped with a yellow, tasselled throw. A modern, cut-out fireplace sported unburnt logs, entwined with fairy lights – a touch that seemed somehow childlike in this sophisticated environment. An oak chest of drawers sat along one wall, a pale-pink dressing table along the opposite. To my left a pale wood door stood ajar, and I suspected from the white floor tiles I could see that this must be the en-suite bathroom.

*'Voilà!'* said Megs. 'What do you think?'

'It's gorgeous,' I said, still absorbing the artful serenity of the place.

'This is the smallest bedroom, I hope you don't mind?'

I let out an involuntary snort. 'I don't mind at all – it's about the size of my entire flat.'

Megs' phone beeped and she stabbed at the screen. 'Fuck's sake. Can't I go away for a couple of nights without work falling apart?' I watched her type furiously. 'Honestly, these bloody new graduates. Can't do anything without you holding their hand.' She looked up. 'Sorry, I'll leave you to it and deal with this downstairs.' She swept out of the room and I was left in silence.

One of the windows was open wide and a warm breeze washed into the room, trembling the leaves of the fern that sat by the door to the balcony. I closed my eyes and could hear the shush of trees outside, sprinkled with birdsong.

I dropped my rucksack onto the bed, wary of disturbing it, anxious not to imprint myself too heavily upon this perfect place, and spoil it with my imperfection. I trod lightly towards the balcony door and opened it. The structure was more of a fire escape than a balcony, only really big enough for two or three people. Tight, spiral steps led down to a patch of gravel below.

I dug into my jeans pocket and brought out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, closing the bedroom door before lighting up and leaning against the warm, black metal of the balustrade. Inhaling deeply, I felt the tingle of nicotine stretch through me. I leaned over the railing and looked to the right. The pale sapphire ripples of a swimming pool peeped from behind the corner of the house, and I heard a faint slosh of water, as if someone was dangling their legs in, just out of sight. Straight ahead of me was a boundary wall and, beyond, a deep gully with thick trees on the opposite side.

My phone beeped and I delved into my back pocket to retrieve it. It was



Hen. *Dinah, where are you? Kate called saying you'd taken time off work. Let me know what's going on. Xx*

I took a long drag and exhaled slowly, trying to think what to type back. Perhaps *I'm 42, I can take time off work without my big sister's permission. Or You live in Aberdeen, why do you care about your sister in London taking a couple of days off work?* But I knew why she cared and why she was asking. Just as I knew why Kate and Hen had each other's numbers and texted behind my back to keep tabs on me. I tried to think of the most grown-up, least passive-aggressive thing to say. As I did, I realised I was searching for the words a non-fucked-up person would say to a concerned sibling. It frustrated me how hard that was.

*I'm fine, Hen. Just taking a mini-break with the uni girls! Gorgeous place. I'll be back on Sunday. Hope you're well. Love to George and the girls. Xx*

Never mind un-fucked-up, that message sounded like someone else entirely had sent it. Hen was probably reading it, thinking I'd been taken hostage and someone had control of my messages. Sure enough, *beep*.

*What do you mean 'mini-break'? You're completely skint and Kate said you were on your last warning at the café. Apparently you've used all your holiday up so what do you mean you've taken time off? Unpaid??!!*

I didn't think so hard about the next message. *Fuck off Hen.*

I dropped my cigarette stub onto the floor and stamped on it before scuffing it over the edge of the balcony with my shoe. I told myself I'd collect all the stubs on Sunday and put them in the bin.

Back in the room I tipped my measly belongings onto the bed. I imagined Megs, Priya and Rachel lounging by the pool in their designer swimsuits with sheer cover-ups and oversized sunglasses. I held up my black swimming costume with the patches of brown where the elastic had perished. Kicking off my trainers, I wriggled out of my jeans and into the swimsuit, grabbing a pair of denim shorts and scrambling into them. I looked at myself in the mirror of the pink dressing table, trying to remember the last time I'd worn either of these items. The swimsuit was basic with no support for my breasts or stomach, and the shorts were definitely tighter than they'd once been. A

roll of fat bulged over the top, and I hoisted them up further so they sat higher around my waist, marginally improving my silhouette.

I pulled out a pink stool from under the dressing table and sat down, staring at my blotchy complexion in the mirror. My hair was a straggled mane, dark at the top and then bleached from about halfway down where it corkscrewed into unruly spirals. I crammed my fingers into my pockets, already knowing I hadn't brought any hair ties with me.

I scanned the table top, eyes going to a small box encrusted with shells and plastic jewels. It was a strange object for this tranquil room, just like the pink dressing table and the fairy lights in the fireplace. But then I remembered what Megs had said when she'd emailed me the details of the weekend. The house belonged to a family who rented it out when they were on holiday. It blew my mind that somewhere this pristine could be someone's normal, everyday home. But at least it made sense of the objects in here: this was probably a little girl's room. I imagined a bedspread with pink and yellow unicorns, and toys scattered on the floor. That made sense. They'd done the best they could to make it adult-friendly before they went away, but there were still signs of the owners' lives left like fingerprints. I stood and crossed to an oak wardrobe that stood in the corner next to the window, but when I pulled the handle, it was locked.

Infused with a vague disappointment, I sat back down at the dressing table, turned to the jewellery box and flipped open the lid. It could have been mine from my own childhood. Inside were tangled chains, a purple heart keyring, and a minuscule peach lip gloss that looked as if it had come with a magazine. I found what I was looking for at the bottom. A hair tie. It was orange, with a chunky plastic rainbow attached to it, but it was the only option, so I scraped my hair back and secured it into a bun. I stood up then, as an afterthought, and opened the top drawer of the dresser. There was a bottle of Body Shop 'Citrus Breeze' spray, which I pumped liberally over myself before throwing the bottle back and heading downstairs to the others.

## Chapter Two

When I emerged from the glass conservatory, I could hear voices from behind a long privet hedge. Through a gap, I spied a glimmer of blue and headed towards the pool. As I crossed the grass, I took a moment to look back at the house, the resplendence of the white walls and gleaming glass forcing me to squint. To the left I noticed a balcony, fronted by more glass and sporting ferns and snake plants in large terracotta pots, but I couldn't see into the room beyond.

At the poolside, Megs was reclining on a sun lounger, one leg bent and an arm shielding her eyes in a theatrical pose I didn't think could be sustainable for any length of time. Priya was doing lengths in the pool, her slender brown limbs slicing the water in practised strokes. She was someone who always did things properly. If she wanted to swim regularly then she'd have lessons. She'd never skip a lecture at uni. She ground her own coffee. I'd only seen glimpses of her as a mother, but I imagined she baked from scratch for every school cake sale and sewed name labels into every sock.

Rachel paced along the length of the opposite side of the pool, her phone pressed to her ear, still wearing the cropped trousers and denim shirt she arrived in. 'It's in the top drawer of the changing table . . . no, not that one, the one upstairs . . . yes . . . but make sure she's properly dry first or it won't sink in . . .'

I tried to imagine it but couldn't. Someone calling me from miles away because I had some expertise or knowledge they didn't, and they required my help. Someone needing me to tell them where to find the cream to soothe a baby's skin. Or some underling at work calling to pick my brains because they had an important meeting and wanted my advice. The only person who called me was Hen, and that was to check up on me, or to tell me I'd fucked up again.

'God, Dinny, your LEGS. I can't cope. Put them away and stop making us

all jealous.'

I smiled at Megs and pointed a toe. 'What, these old things?'

She laughed and I felt a swell of gratitude. Megs always had a way of making you feel better by picking out positives. In my darker moments, I wondered why these women still bothered with me. When we were young and fresh from school, living in Oxford and preening at the power of our own potential, it seemed our trajectories might be similar. And for the others, they were. But while their stars rose, mine fizzled out. I discovered I wasn't a shooting star, after all; I was a wet firework, destined to lie in the damp grass and stare up at my twinkling friends.

But for some reason these bright, shining beings still tolerated me. We weren't as close as we once were – hence my being a last-minute replacement for a *properly* close friend – but I was still there, clinging to their tails. Sometimes I worried they laughed at me behind my back. And maybe I *was* more of a source of gossip and entertainment than a real friend, but sometimes I didn't care. I mean, it's not as if I had a choice of friends. It's not like I would have had other offers if I hadn't taken them up on this holiday. I'd be back in Hounslow in my mouldy, rented flat above the electrical shop, weighing up whether to shut the cracked window to muffle some noise from the traffic and the pub opposite, or to keep it open to get some fresh air into the place. I'd be eating unsellable, stale muffins from the café for dinner, and drinking the cheapest thing available – tap water.

I sat on a grey wicker sun lounger and Megs sprang up from hers. 'Priya made a margarita mix, and God it's good!' She retrieved a large frosted jug from the shade under her lounger and a huge, plastic martini glass, pouring me a measure up to the brim then bringing it to me.

I took a sip and it was bitter and salty and so, so strong. 'That's delicious,' I said, taking another sip, the lime and ice cubes bumping against my lips and the salt stinging my tongue.

Megs grinned at me with mischief in her eyes. 'Told you.'

Rachel finished on the phone and Megs swooped towards her with another newly filled glass, squeezing her shoulder sympathetically as Rachel recounted the details of the phone call and the ineptitude of the people she'd entrusted her daughter to.

Priya swam to the side of the pool and rested her elbows there, looking up at the other two to listen to what was being said. Once again, I stayed put, knowing I had nothing to contribute.

I took another swig of my drink, then remembered I'd brought two bottles of cheap wine and scavenged a random assortment of pastries from