

Dear Prudence

A Psychological Horror

Chapter 1

I can't control everything. I mean, I want to – but sometimes things just slip through my grasp, and 'Hey Presto' - Chaos!

Another lung full of sweet smoke and this time I struggle a bit to stop the cough. I lean forward, cross my forearms along the veranda rail and rest my chin on my sweat soaked arms. My focus is on the James Street apartments just across the road from me.

I've been watching the people over there for nearly a year now – ever since I arrived from Melbourne. Man! It was good to leave that place; too much chaos. I felt like I was really losing it at times. No way could I have made it through those times if it wasn't for Prudence – dear Prudence.

I started scanning the apartments from top right – as usual. Shortly I came to the Kumar's window. Mr and Mrs sitting at their dining table with a laptop open before them – It's cool blue glow giving their faces a grey appearance. I figured they were 'Skyping' family, by the animated way they spoke and how they seldom took their eyes off the screen, except to confer on a point, before returning to the conversation and laughter.

The next window revealed 'Big Jim' - playing Xbox as usual. Always with a beer by his left arm and his cat curled in his lap. He had headphones on, with a little microphone attached and located close to his lips. He was speaking agitatedly to whomever he was connected to in that strange gaming world.

One floor below Big Jim is the Fairing family, and joy! – Chastity is home. The Fairings' moved in about 6months ago. They came from a little mining town in central Queensland. I'd never met them, but a couple of months back I'd checked their letterbox and found a letter addressed to Chastity - I like to know who my neighbours are, so I took the letter home and read it – I've still got it in my bedside table drawer. Anyway, her brother Andrew, is currently serving in Afghanistan as some sort of special soldier and he was saying that he hoped "Chase" – that's his nickname for her (I prefer Chastity) – was coping with the lifestyle change. Coming from such a quiet little country town and suddenly finding yourself in the middle of one of Brisbane's busiest suburbs, could be a bit intimidating.

Andrew needn't worry though; Chastity seems to be fitting in real well. I know she seems very popular when I watch her with her friends, during their school lunch breaks and visits to McDonalds. She does have a little problem with looking after her privacy though - a legacy of living next-door to nothing but bush I expect. Tonight was no exception and to my delight, or was it anxiety, she had left her curtains open - again. I knew she was in her ensuite, I could see the steam from the exhaust vent.

Prudence... I mean Chastity, was only about 15 years old and I knew that I should probably turn around and get myself away from her window - but I never could.

My joint had gone out, so I reached in to my jeans pocket and pulled out the old Zippo lighter. It used to belong to Prudences' Dad, but after the fire, he didn't need it. I thumbed the roller and put the subsequent flame to the end of the joint until it glowed with a satisfyingly red cherry. I took another long hit and this time I managed to control the cough.

I saw movement out corner of my eye and knew that Chastity was out of her shower and had returned to her bedroom.

Little lights started dancing at the edges of my vision and I knew it wasn't a result of the marijuana - Chaos was coming back.

(Andy Smerdon)

Chapter 2

Marvin Poole slipped into his tattered lounge chair and adjusted the eyepiece to his eye. He'd already checked his watch and knew without doubt that she would be up and about. He steered the telescope to her window.

"Ah, there you are," he mumbled to himself more in routine than surprise. Her naked body still stirred him but not like long ago. Since the marriage and the baby, and not to mention the passing years, her body had developed some unsightly lumps and bumps, and gravity had done its withering work.

From the lonely dark of his lounge through his telescope he'd watched her for several years, watched her as a delectable twenty something trying on partners left, right and centre. Twosomes, threesomes as many as can fit sometimes. He'd watched her settle down, seeking long-term relationships until she finally found him. Mr Right. Marriage. He watched her blossom with child, and now the humdrum of life was slowly wearing away her appeal. All this time, like all the others before, he had never got closer than the strength of his telescope. He hadn't even learned her name. He didn't have the guts to meet the centre of his attention and he was well aware of this flaw.

He turned his eye from the telescope and really, almost for the first time, examined his thoughts. "Hell, I'm only fifty-five. What's going on?" He looked at his naked lap. "Pah, flaccid," he thought.

Semi-disgusted with his lack of erection he got up and prowled around his dark apartment. By the ambient light outside his short thin naked body reflected in the kitchen mirror. He stared at himself without emotion. "Weedy," was all he could think of. "Always weedy." He crept into his bedroom, flicked on the light and dressed himself for bed. "She doesn't do it for me anymore," he spoke aloud to the room. "That's it. She just doesn't do it for me anymore."

This had happened before and he would do as he had done in the past, move apartments. He was lucky, he could always do that.

Marvin Poole was the caretaker of the building. "Thirty odd years and still going strong," he'd laugh with the tenants when he arrived to fix their problems. They grinned politely back and tried to shush him straight out after he changed the light bulb or fixed the toilet or whatever. No-one liked Marvin, dull grey paintbrush hair, hoary bristles, black rimmed industrial strength glasses, ugly as sin, yeah, no-one liked Marvin. He was awkward with kids and animals and only really got on with the elderly, who probably tolerated him rather than face the loneliness of old age. It wasn't that people actively disliked him it's just that, as a rule, no-one liked Marvin.

He knew all this and had mostly come to terms with it years ago – this had been happening to him all his life.

So, unsatisfied, Marvin slept on his decision and the next morning slowly starting packing his stuff. Sure it was going to take a while to find a suitable home with a nice view but he might as well get ready.

Over the next few months Marvin moved through the building like a restless ghost, spending random nights in spare apartments here and there all over the building seeking a suitable view. The building faced similar sized buildings on all sides so it was intensive work. He was lucky that his building was somewhat rundown and rarely if ever more than half occupied so he pretty much had his choice of rooms. Still, this was an important decision for Marvin and he wasn't going to rush it. After all, what might not be there one night might be there the next. It paid to be thorough.

Over the west side one night, the James Street side of the building, about halfway up the opposite building he found what he was looking for. The family must have just moved in and his focus was the daughter. She was young, maybe fifteen or sixteen, still a very cute schoolgirl and didn't mind getting about naked in her room. The difference from his last obsession was marked and he rubbed himself with satisfaction. Also, luckily for him, she must be new to the city as unlike most people she left her bedroom blinds open. Totally happy with himself he decided to make the move into the vacant apartment he was in and he would speak with the corporate body tomorrow.

It was when he lay in bed that night that he first noticed it. A waft of smoke, but not your normal smoke, scented the air. He knew what it was and cautiously resolved to investigate. This could complicate things. Dope wasn't tolerated and the guilty tenant could be asked to leave. Could be good or could be bad. At the moment he didn't want any unnecessary attention drawn to this section of the building.

He silently slid open the glass veranda door and with absolute caution poked his head out. To the right he saw it, over on the next balcony, the glow of a joint. He watched it flare and in the hazy glow he saw a man leaning over the rail. Not too much detail, scruffy beard and hair, strangely some-one he didn't recognise, but there was no doubt where he was looking, straight into the girl's apartment across the street and she was there, gorgeous, naked and parading. The guy just causally continued watching, smoking and occasionally hacking over the acrid taste. Marvin withdrew his head just as the man flicked his gaze around and quietly slid the door closed.

"Don't think he saw me," he thought bravely.

Thinking over all the possibilities he slowly made his way to the small bedroom.

“I could try to be quiet but eventually he will have to know he’s got a new neighbour. But, on the other hand, he doesn’t have to know who. He doesn’t seem to be the mingling type anyway.”

That settled, he flicked off the light and reasoned.

“Well,” he had got back to thinking about the girl. “I ‘spose I can share.”

(Laurie Healy)

Chapter 3

I saw you again tonight. Did you like my show? All for you, you smarmy bastard. Next time I'll get on the bed and really tip you over the edge. I know you always like to smoke when you watch me. You think you're hidden with all your lights out, but when you toke on your joint you're lit up in negative like the sinister demon you are. By the way, how was that batch?

Last night was hilarious - two for the price of one. Hey, you'd better watch out - betcha old Poole the Tool won't tolerate dope in the building! But I have a feeling he won't report you because you sprung him, too. It was a scream, watching both of you run for cover, you because you were smoking your joint and perving at me again, old Tool because he had his telescope out, and God knows what else out - perving at me again. It's all wearing a bit thin, a bit tiresome, but it will be worth it in the end, and the way you both bolted last night was priceless - pretty to watch.

Of course Marvin Poole, our 'caretaker' was on his watch again - perving. Did you know he lives next door to you now? Well, you know now. You won't like that one bit, you and your little habit, or should I say habits? The ugly old fart used to wank at the sight of my mother, she told me that. That was why she felt she had to move to the west side of the unit block. Wish she'd move away entirely - wish we'd move away. . . I don't think Poole even knows she's my mother, or that she's moved to another section of the complex. Because Mum doesn't go out much lately, especially since the fire. She has some kind of PTSD; you did that to her, the result of her trying to save Dad from the blaze. Bet you have no idea about that, about the problems you caused her, not that you'd care anyway. Why she likes living here is beyond me. She's been here at these units for years and years and refuses to leave - despite the fucked up people living around here. I'd been living with my dad near the Isa, home schooling, while Mum stayed here and dried out. (I always got on so well with Dad. . . Mum was a bit of a case when she was younger.) It took years before Dad's mining contract ended, and before we were game to give Mum another chance, but we eventually moved back to a reformed version of Mum. When Dad and I returned to Mum, things were starting to look almost okay for us - until you stuffed everything up. She's sober now, but agoraphobic - caused by a mixture of being stalked by Poole and Dad's murder caused by you. What a pair you two are. . .

You really think I don't know what you did? You think you know about my life, about everyone's lives, well I know some things, too. You're worse than Marvin Poole, do you realize that? Everyone knows about him. He's the running joke but it's tolerated here because he's otherwise harmless, harmless apart from fucking people's lives up, like my mother's, that is. Now you're watching me, and you're just a distraction. Poor simple tool - hardly the sharpest.

But *you*. . . I know what you did to my father. You knew he had taken up the post as the complex's fire warden. So you and your little smoking habit started a fire in the laundry and called Dad to his death. They blamed it on exploding chemicals, but you started it. I've seen you with his lighter, Dad's lighter, a little trophy of your pyromania, or was it simply a thrill kill? Do you really think you can extinguish the people I love without consequences, without my retribution?

I have friends here, more friends than you'll ever have, and they're looking out for me. The Kumars, they're watching you. And then there's my best mate - Big Jim. Do you know about our conversations? You think he's playing X-box when you see him at night on his little microphone? Well, he's not. He's giving me co-ordinates of your movements, keeping me up to speed about you, about your small life.

Are you enjoying your weed? You can thank Jimmy for that. You'll be back for more soon. Better watch out for what might be mixed in with those sweet heads. They'll mess with yours. Didn't your parents ever teach you not to take drugs?

(Jane Ireland)

Chapter 4

“Fuck me, Mr Hobbs.” Chastity purred while slowly raising her school shirt above her hips. Her white panties slowly revealed themselves as the skirt rose. Mr Hobbs licked his lips and felt an immediate erection, pulsing through his jeans. His arms hung by his side and his eyes widen in surprise. Isn't this what he always fantasied about? Indeed, he spent many nights masturbating over this very scenario. Why was he hesitating now?

Because something didn't feel right, or more importantly, something didn't sound or smell right. Chastity shifted in front of his eyes, almost like he was a man dying of thirst and could see the oasis that would be his salvation. But a strong smell kept filling his nostrils; it started pervading his thoughts. Something was definitely not right. He could smell gas. It was then that he heard a song in the background. One of those new pop artists. He couldn't remember the name of the guy, named after a planet or something:

*All you young wild girls
You make a mess of me
Yeah, you young wild girls
You'll be the death for me, the death for me
All you young wild girls
No matter what you do
Yeah, you young wild girls
I'll always come back to you, come back to you*

He felt uncomfortable listening to the song for some reason.

The song was real. He recognised the sound quality of his own Hi Fi. He was rousing quickly now and started to cough. That was when Ernest Hobbs realised just like the song, the gas was real too. He found himself looking down at his lap, jeans unbuttoned with the tissues sitting on the arm rest, unused. He had fallen asleep. There was acute disappointment when he realised Chastity and her panties had been just a dream.

Panic start to settle in as he realised the gas smell was getting much stronger. As he rose the gas smell pervaded his nostrils, his mouth and he retched. Panic turned to terror as he realised the gas was all through the apartment.

Did I leave the stove on somehow?

His next thought became an urgent, he must get out.

Quickly fastening his jeans, Ernest dropped to his knees while he started crawling to the only exit available, the front door. The gas still made him retch, he could not control the coughing even though he was close to the floor. He craned his head left and right, noticing that all the windows and doors had been shut to the other rooms. Only the open space of the kitchen, his small lounge room and hallway were left. The gas was being funnelled down the hallway by a fan. It was then he noticed the alarm clock sitting beside the stove top. What the hell was that doing there? Ernest was certain he hadn't moved it there but it was his alarm clock from his bedroom. It didn't make sense. Then he noticed some wires protruding out of the alarm clock, leading to the starter on his gas oven.

Oh Jesus.

Ernest scrambled quickly towards the front hallway, barely noting the timer on the clock reading one minute. The rational part of his brain breathed a little sigh, knowing he could easily make it to the front door before a minute was up.

Ernest was two metres away from the door, preparing to rise and grab the handle to get out when he heard the sound that froze his blood.

Click, click, cli...

That wasn't a minute, was Ernest Hobb's last thought before the oven starter ignited the fireball, engulfing him. Excruciating agony for a moment, then blackness.

Chastity looked across to the dilapidated unit block and saw the explosion fill the unit. Blood pounded in her ears and a smile slowly grew on her mouth. She released the trigger on the device her brother, Andrew, had made for her.

Her mind kept repeating the same phrase over and over, *You're next Martin Poole, you're fucking next.*

(James Culverhouse)

Chapter 5

OK – that was very loud.

I'd just finished stuffing the last of my gear into the old army green duffle bag. I'd decided it was best to 'get the fuck out of dodge' ever since last night, when that weirdo next door has seen me smoking on the balcony. Chastity was nice, but she wasn't doing it for me really and I wasn't really ready for Chaos' appearance again... not just yet anyway.

But that noise and the vibration through the building – it felt kind of good – exciting, powerful. I walked out to the balcony and in the reflection of Chastity's windows across the street, I could see the fire in my building, about three floors down and a bit across from me.

Movement through the reflected fire caught my attention. She stood naked as the day she was born, bathed in the red glow from the fire, a strange smile on her face. I knew right away that Chastity had caused the fire and my interest in her spiked again.

Oh! She would be so sweet when I gathered her and owned her. Who knows she may even like it; the crazy bitch.

So how was I going to do this? It had been easy with Prudence she was so naïve and maybe I was a bit younger and better looking when I was able to lure her. Now I'm a bit ragged and Chastity is a lot wiser... and dangerous by the looks of things. I smiled to myself. She would be so good when Chaos visited; she would calm me and let me get back out there nice and quick. If she were really crazy, maybe I wouldn't even need to put her in the ground like I'd done with Prudence? Maybe she would be strong enough to take it. That would be nice, we could even be some sort of evil team – matching uniforms and shit.

I came out of my reverie and looked back at Chastity's room – she was staring straight at me and that smile had not shifted. I dropped my pants and grabbed myself. Chastity looked very pleased – this was going to be fun, I thought as the little lights started dancing again at the corner of my vision. This time I welcomed them and I think Chastity could see that too.

(Andy Smerdon)