

FREE SAMPLER

SEVEN GUESTS. ONE KILLER.
A HOLIDAY TO REMEMBER...



THE
**GUEST
HOUSE**

ABBIE FROST

Abbie Frost

The Guesthouse: Free Sampler

Аннотация

Read the opening chapters of a stunning debut psychological thriller in this free sampler *Seven guests. One Killer.* A holiday to remember... 'Dark, claustrophobic and full of suspense' Alex Lake

Seven strangers who find themselves cut off from civilization in a remote guesthouse in Ireland... Not all the guests will survive their stay... You use an app, called Cloud BNB, to book a room online. And on a cold and windy afternoon you arrive at The Guesthouse, a dramatic old building on a remote stretch of hillside in Ireland. You are expecting a relaxing break, but you find something very different. Something unimaginable. Because a killer has lured you and six other guests here and now you can't escape. One thing's for certain: not all of you will come back from this holiday alive... 'Dark, claustrophobic and full of suspense: The Guesthouse is a gripping mystery, and a fantastic debut' Alex Lake

Содержание

FREE SAMPLER	5
Copyright	6
Prologue	8
Chapter One	12
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	19

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THE GUESTHOUSE
Abbie Frost



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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

Copyright

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

Keep Reading ...

About the Author

About the Publisher

Prologue

Hannah's trainers skidded on the marble floor of the hall. She grabbed the wooden rail that ran along the wall to steady herself. Had to keep on her feet, had to get out.

Running on again, she strained to see through drifts of smoke. Sweat trickled down her neck in the heat. Smashed paintings and blackened chandelier fragments littered the floor. And the huge front door loomed at the end of the hall, smoke coiling around it in the gloom. She fumbled back the bolts, wrenched it open and sucked in a lungful of fresh air. Paused to listen for any sounds in the hallway behind her; any signs of life inside the house. Flames crackled and the building groaned as it began to crumble and fall apart in the heat.

Stepping outside, she pulled the door shut behind her, leaned against it and took in more clear air. The storm had calmed, but rain was still beating down onto the empty hillside that sloped away before her into the night.

She went to the heavy garden bench beside the door, gripped the cold metal of an armrest and dragged it forward. Her muscles burned, the iron legs of the bench screeched against paving stones. Hands shaking, she turned to the electronic security pad beside the door and tried to key in the code to lock it. *Hurry up. Hurry up.*

Then she heard something else, a noise that cut through the

howling wind. Footsteps inside the house. Hard shoes beating against marble floor, coming towards the door.

She turned and started to run.

Down the long path, through the wide iron gates, groaning in the wind, and out into the green emptiness beyond. The grassy slope rose above, miles and miles of wilderness in all directions. She could still make it to safety if she moved quickly. Every step took her further from the house, its door still shut, and with every step she felt her mind becoming clearer than it had been in months. Thoughts of her mother, Ruby, came back to her then. Those shadows around her worried eyes. That look of disappointment that she couldn't hide whenever Hannah failed, broke down or threw away a chance to make something of her life. Not even Ruby could save her now.

A gnarled root jutting from the ground caught her foot. She stumbled, regained her balance, just stopped herself from falling. She began to cry and the wind whipped her sobs away into the empty bog. 'Help! Someone help.'

But there was no one left to help her.

She scrambled onwards, her drenched trousers clinging to her legs, her shoes still soaked through with water. Flashes of memory from the last few hours began to flicker through her mind: dripping cold walls in the pitch-black guesthouse; her helpless body sinking through murky water, struggling for air, drowning. Water filling her nose and mouth. Limbs moving in the dark. Water churning. Screams.

She glanced back over her shoulder, then ran faster, moving along a rutted track that cut through the bog and led down the hill towards safety. In front of her, a stretch of water blocked the path and she picked up speed. Leapt over the dark puddle but landed awkwardly. One foot slipped out from under her and she flew backwards. Slammed into the ground, her momentum carrying her onwards, slithering down through thick weeds and mud into a ditch full of icy water. She gasped, scrabbled at the earth around her. Let out another cry for help that nobody heard. Even she could barely hear it above the howling wind.

Her leg was trapped. With each jerk she could feel her trainer being sucked from her foot, the foul-smelling mud clutching at her skin.

Chin pressed into the ground, she dug in her hands and tried to yank herself free, but the icy water wouldn't let go.

She wiped mud from her face and stared back towards the guesthouse.

It was a sharp silhouette against the grey sky. Flames bloomed from its roof and illuminated patches of marsh across the hillside. For a moment she remembered how the building had first appeared to her. Pale, stately and beautiful, surrounded by green, and framed by trees and the distant blue hills. As her breathing began to slow, she recalled her excitement when she first clicked on the web page and saw pictures of the guesthouse online. Its sweeping rooms full of dark-wood bookcases and roaring fires. Artistic shots taken on summer days of ivy-covered stone walls,

windows glowing a welcome to visitors.

The windows were lit up now too, but with sparks of red and orange. With fire.

Was it her imagination or could she really feel the heat of the flames on her face? Hear them crackling as white smoke and black embers billowed into the sky? She watched, hypnotized: too exhausted to keep struggling.

Then the fire illuminated another, smaller silhouette. A dark figure. Moving away from the open front door and down the slope towards her. A shadow walking calmly through the rain. As if it knew she wouldn't get far, knew she would be waiting here in the mud.

Waiting to die.

Chapter One

Six days earlier

A shriek of sound cut through the silence. Buzzing and whirring. Hannah forced her eyes open, fumbled for her phone on the bedside table, then on the floor. Finally she had it, dropped it, groped for it again. *Shut up. For God's sake shut up.*

A croak. 'Hello.'

'Han, at last. I've been ringing and ringing.' It was Lori.

Hannah pressed the phone to her ear and lay back with her eyes closed.

'Where are you?' Lori's voice was harsh.

Where was she? Her eyes blurred as she tried to focus. Sunlight cut through the drawn curtains and fell across the bed. She looked at the clothes strewn around the room. Her own room.

'I'm at home. Why? What's wrong?'

There was a pause. 'So you made it back all right.' Lori sighed. 'I feel like shit today – probably those cheap cocktails. How are you coping?' She didn't wait for a reply. 'Look, I was really worried about you last night, and then you just disappeared. Who was that guy you went off with?'

A sudden flash of memory, of nausea and hot shame. Sweaty plastic seats in a taxi somewhere in London, hands groping. The stranger's lips on her mouth, on her neck, his hands down her

top and up her skirt. The taste of cheap booze and cigarettes, the taxi spinning with something like desire. Not thinking for once, not feeling bad for once.

Then the world had tilted further, her hand had gone to her mouth and she'd had to push him away. 'Stop ... I'm going to be sick.' Swearing from the driver as he braked to a halt. The door opening and her stumbling out onto the street. Vomiting cocktail after cocktail, shot after shot. Down her skirt and her bare legs, onto her shoes.

Then the shameful walk back to the taxi that seemed to last a lifetime. Strangers in the street pointing and laughing. The desperate urge to get warm, to swallow some water, to be back home.

She'd pulled at the door handle of the taxi, but nothing happened. She tugged at it again. The driver wouldn't even look her in the eye as he started the engine and began to pull away. Her bag flew out the window and onto the street, its contents spilling into the gutter. The guy, whose hands had groped her just moments ago, had sat dead still in the back seat, staring ahead as they drove into the distance.

Hannah swallowed and stared at the ceiling of her bedroom. Her mouth dry as she sat up and looked around for a glass of water. 'Yeah, just some wanker. I told him to drop me off and get lost.' She coughed into the phone. 'Sorry I left you like that.'

Silence on the end of the line. Then Lori began to talk, starting off gently, but quickly getting into her stride. The nagging tone,

one thing after another about all that Hannah had done wrong. She tuned it out after a while and pulled the covers over her cold shoulders. When she stretched her leg over the side of the bed she saw the red, angry scrape on her knee, and remembered weaving and stumbling her way home. She'd fallen through the garden gate, her knee smacking onto the path. Terrified her mum would hear. Twenty-five years old and back living with her mother. Back getting shit from her school friends.

Lori was still speaking, the words blending into one. 'I know you've had a hard time, but I'm sick of it. Just sort yourself out. You can't keep fucking up your life.'

Then, finally, a long silence that Hannah couldn't face trying to fill. The phone felt sticky with sweat in her palm.

Lori spoke again, her voice softer now. 'Look ... you're my best friend. We've known each other for years.' Another pause. 'But ... I'm tired, Han, really *really* tired. I didn't want to say this, but I'm starting to get why Ben and you broke up ... why he was so angry with you.'

Hannah tried to speak but Lori drowned her out, loud again, firm. 'Listen, until you sort yourself out, I'm done with you. I don't want to hear from you. Don't bother calling me. Texting me. Just leave me alone!'

Then the phone went dead. Hannah stared at it for a moment, then let it fall from her hands to the floor and watched it thump into a pile of dirty clothes. Some peace and quiet at last. Her head fell back onto the pillow and she closed her eyes.

When she woke again, all she could think about was water. And something to still the hammering in her head. In the bathroom she put her mouth under the tap and washed down a couple of paracetamol. Her knees shook as she sat on the edge of the bath, the floor swaying beneath her, thinking back over her conversation with Lori. *Why Ben and you broke up ... why he was so angry with you.*

The bathroom door rattled. ‘Hannah. Are you all right?’ Her mum.

‘Yeah, I’m fine. Just an upset stomach.’

Footsteps in the corridor as her mum walked away. In the mirror Hannah saw last night’s make-up smeared around her mouth and eyes. Her stiff and unwashed hair hadn’t been trimmed or coloured for ages. It looked yellow rather than blonde, the roots dark. No wonder the job interview yesterday had been such a disaster. It was a surprise she’d even got as far as an interview this time.

She stepped into the shower and turned the power on full. Stood in the hot water for as long as she could, letting it numb her throbbing head, then dressed and went downstairs. Better go and face it.

Her mum, Ruby, was sitting at the kitchen table with a coffee pot in front of her. As always there were papers and a laptop open next to her. Hannah poured herself some coffee and sat opposite, pulled out her phone and began to scroll.

‘Morning.’ Ruby took off her reading glasses and pushed back

her dark hair. It was streaked with grey now, but to Hannah she looked the same as always. Except those tiny new creases around her mouth and eyes, the ones that Hannah had caused. There was no denying it: Hannah's lifestyle over the past weeks and months had aged her mother.

Ruby reached for her hand and it felt so warm and familiar that Hannah had to look away. 'How did the interview go?'

Her throat felt raw. 'It was all right. They'll let me know in a week or so.' She remembered the way the panel had looked at her as she stammered through their questions. The silence while she muttered her thanks and stumbled towards the door. She still couldn't meet Ruby's eye. 'I didn't really fancy it though.'

Ruby sighed. 'Have you seen anything that you *do* fancy?' Hannah gritted her teeth, but her mum continued speaking. 'And what time did you get in last night?'

'*Mum.*' A deep breath, trying not to let it turn into a sigh. 'About one, I think.'

Ruby shifted, closed the laptop and began loading papers into her bag. Hannah stood up and walked to the sink, staring out at the immaculate lawn and the freshly painted brown fence. Her mother had probably been lying awake last night, listening for the key in the lock, thinking about all the things that could have happened to her daughter. Even though Ruby had worked right through Hannah's childhood, she had always been there. Always came to school plays, sports days, parents' events. Took time off when Hannah was sick and read to her every single night.

The years of hard work had all paid off and her mum was now a successful financial consultant, working long hours, but still finding the time to keep this house spotless – and to worry about her daughter’s life. Hannah knew she could still rely on her; she just didn’t want to. Because Ruby couldn’t help her now. There are some things that even your mum can’t cure.

‘Hannah, are you listening to me?’ Ruby was fiddling with the handle of her bag. ‘I don’t think you’re ready to start a new job yet. It’s too soon. Why not have a couple of weeks off?’ A stiff little smile. ‘Take a holiday. I can help out if you can’t afford it.’

There was a pause and eventually Ruby sighed. ‘After what happened with Ben ... you’re probably still in shock. That’s why you’re behaving like this.’

Hannah turned back to the garden and took a few cautious sips of her coffee. She felt her stomach begin to churn and tipped her mug out into the sink. Watched the brown liquid swill down the drain, then moved towards the door. ‘I’d better dry my hair.’

‘I’ll make some food,’ Ruby called after her. Hannah wanted to say she couldn’t eat anything, wanted to look her in the eye and tell her how she really felt: how guilt was eating away at her insides, making her drink more and more. How she wished she could have kept the flat that she and Ben had shared. How she still cried herself to sleep thinking about him.

Instead she went slowly upstairs, feeling a hundred years old. Ruby was right: she couldn’t face the thought of a new job. She’d lost the last one because she’d been arriving later and later,

hangover most of the time: making mistakes. And because she didn't care enough to try. Didn't care about anything.

The next day, Hannah tried ringing Lori four times and left messages, but there was no response. By evening, she felt abandoned, like she was back in the playground at school and all the popular girls were whispering about her. But Lori wasn't like everyone else, she was always there. Hannah locked her bedroom door and sat on the bed, her hand shaking as she held the phone, dialled the number she knew by heart, listened to the ringing until it went to voicemail.

'Lori ... it's me again. Listen, I'm sorry. I'm going to fix this ... I just need some time to get my head together.' She swallowed. 'You're my best friend.'

The only one she had left. Everyone else hated her almost as much as she hated herself. She ended the call and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

Her phone vibrated in her hand and for one second she thought it was Lori, calling her back to say sorry and to tell her it was all going to be all right. Or maybe it was another hate-filled message from one of Ben's friends. But she had turned off notifications for Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, so it couldn't be that. She unlocked her screen and found the tiny red notification next to the image of a house on her screen, an app she hardly ever used: Cloud BNB.

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