

THE PROPERTY LADDER

by Ruth Ware

The house was perfect – that’s the first thing I thought when the email landed in my inbox. My heart started beating a little bit faster as I scrolled through the details. Two bedrooms... garden... beautiful family room overlooking the lawn – and holy crap, the price! Was it possible? We might actually be able to afford this one.

There must be a catch.

My fingers were actually shaking a little as I clicked through to the website, just waiting for the belching power station in the back garden, or the bone-rattling train line up against the back wall of the house. But... nothing. Nothing visible to make me recoil. Yes, the decor was a little tired, and it could use a new kitchen. But it was nothing a bit of elbow grease couldn’t sort.

I rang Mark. “Honey? I think I’ve found it.”

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When the estate agent’s email came back, I forwarded it to Mark at work, and then before the email had even left my inbox, rang him to rant.

“Did he not understand when I said we’d like to book a viewing asap?”

“I think he understood,” Mark said patiently. “That’s why he’s made the point that it’s not up to him. It’s not his fault if the vendor wants 48 hours notice of viewings.”

“But why?” The injustice of it stung. “Are they playing games? Don’t they want to sell?”

“Maybe they’re just tenants, or perhaps they have a rabid dog?” Mark suggested helpfully. I hung up.

I spent the following two days jealously refreshing the estate agent’s listing, watching like a hawk for the “under offer” flag to go up, showing that another

buyer had got in there first. But hour after hour ticked by, and still “for sale” showed reassuringly.

In the meantime, I brooded over the photographs. All the rooms were lovely, and I had already begun furnishing them in my imagination, talking with Mark about how our sofa would look in that bay window, and the exact shade of curtains that would go in the dining room, but there was one in particular that already felt like mine. It was the second bedroom, the smaller one, and I could imagine my desk by the window, and already see the dove grey wall paper I would put up.

Again and again, I found myself coming back to it in the little gallery, enlarging the pictures on the agent’s website, trying to imagine it in different lights. The only odd thing about it was the books. There was a bookcase against one wall, but half a dozen books had been picked out, and were individually ranged along the windowsill, face out, in two groups. Somehow the little display seemed out of place, in comparison to the neatness of the rest of the house. The other rooms had almost no personal possessions on display, bar a few photos. Was it some kind of collection? A quirky child? They looked like children’s books. One was Heidi, I was sure of it. I had had the same edition as a child. The others, I couldn’t recognise. The writing was too small to read.

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When the day of the viewing at last came round I put on my best “responsible mortgageable adult” clothes, and wore socks in case the vendor wanted us to take our shoes off indoors.

But he – or she – was out. The estate agent greeted us in the porch with a broad grin.

“Hi, I’m Phil. Nice to meet you guys. Sorry, you were a bit more prompt than I was expecting. I hadn’t opened up. Avert your eyes for a sec...”

We turned our heads away while he felt discreetly under a plantpot and removed a key.

Inside, Mark went around the house commenting on slipped lintels and lead wiring. But I didn’t care about any of that. This was our house. It had to be. After fifteen years in rentals we were ready for a place of our own, and this already felt like the one. The current owner was obviously an older man and the place hadn’t been refreshed in years. I had a picture in my head of a man in middle age, children grown up, maybe his wife had left him... now he was cashing in and

making a fresh start. Mark and I would give it the TLC it needed. I could see myself here, staring out of the window at the apple tree. It would be a step on the ladder.

Phil and Mark were in the upstairs bathroom discussing whether the boiler needed renewing, when I went ahead of them into the second bedroom - my room.

There were wooden letters on the white-painted bedroom door. "E M ... A" - with a flake of paint broken off where the final M must have fallen down. I pushed it open, almost holding my breath, and the room inside was just as I had imagined. The decor was tired, a girl's room of nearly 20 years ago, pink sprigged wall paper, a little grubby with age. Posters from forgotten bands. An abandoned teddy bear leaning drunkenly on a shelf. But the slanting light through the windows, the polished boards, the view of the apple tree in the garden. All this was just as I had imagined it.

I was about to call Mark in, when I noticed the books ranged on the windowsill, the ones that had caught my eye in the photo. I paused. Would it be too weird to tidy them away? They just felt so out of place, and they were blocking the view of the beautiful tree..

There were four grouped together on the left of the windowsill - Heidi, Emil and the Detectives, Little Women, and Pippi Longstocking. They were arranged face out, one by one, as if staring at the room. And then on the right hand side, My Family and Other Animals, and Emma.

What was the logic? And why the display? They weren't particularly old or valuable editions, from what I could see. Pippi Longstocking looked like the oldest, and seemed to be from the 70s. The others were the kind of paperbacks I remembered from my own childhood. The left hand ones were more classically children's novels, I guessed. Was that why they had been grouped together?

There was a shelf of others beside the bed, rather dusty, their spines cracked from long reading. The Wind in the Willows. Winnie the Pooh. The Farthest Shore. Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing. I could see no reason why the six books on the sill had been picked out.

I was still looking at the shelves when Mark and Phil entered the room and began discussing the state of the windows, and whether repairing the wood would be possible, or if a complete replacement was the only option. When they left, I trailed after them, down the stairs, half reluctant to leave my house, but I could tell that Mark didn't want to look too eager. He was making teeth-sucking

remarks about the roof, and Phil was looking surreptitiously at his watch, evidently ready to wind up. But as we headed towards the front door, I realised something.

“So sorry,” I said to Phil, rather breathlessly, looking in my handbag. “I think I might have dropped my keys in the upstairs room. Do you mind if I cut back?”

“Go for it,” he said, though he glanced again at his watch. I guessed he had another appointment. “Do you see yourselves making an offer then?” he was saying to Mark, as I ran up the stairs, towards the back bedroom. I looked again at the books, frowning, and sure enough, my memory had been right. My subconscious had been working on the puzzle even while Mark and I discussed storage and loft conversions, and it had supplied the answer almost too late – but not quite.

Heidi.

Emil.

Little.

Pippi.

My.

Emma.

Help me.

My heart was racing as I glanced down the stairs, to where Mark and Phil were still discussing other properties on the books. Was it a joke? Someone’s idea of a bit of fun?

Quickly, I gathered up the books and put them all back on the shelf, except for Heidi. Then I picked up Winnie-the-Pooh, and scoured the shelves for a final copy.

“Liz, what are you doing up there?” Mark’s voice floated up the stairwell. “Phil’s got another appointment at 12, and I need to get back to the office.”

“They’re not here. Just looking in the other room!” I called back, trying to keep my voice light and level.

There! I had it. Oh, the Places You'll Go, tucked away on the bottom shelf. I arranged them on the window sill. Heidi. Oh, the Places You'll Go. Winnie-the-Pooh.

How?

I ran back down the stairs, my heart thumping, holding my keys up like an alibi.

"Sorry, got them. Thanks Phil!"

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"I think we should definitely put in an offer," Mark said in the car. "What do you think? Ten grand under asking?"

"No way," I said firmly. "Listen." And I told him about the books in the bedroom. Mark snorted, even before I'd finished talking.

"Liz, you're nuts. This is crazy, even for you."

"What do you mean, even for me? What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look, you know you're prone to let your imagination run away with you."

"Mark, you saw those books. They're in the photograph on the website, for God's sake. That's not my imagination."

"Secret messages through the medium of children's literature? Yeah. Right."

"The spines spell out 'Help me'. I can't see what's up for debate about that. Why would you do that if you had nothing to worry about?"

"It's a kid's room - they're kids' books. Probably some kid having a laugh."

"No-one has lived in that room for fifteen years, Mark. Look at those band posters. Whoever the girl was who lived there, she'd be my age by now."

"So?"

"So this isn't some nine year old with a precocious reading age."

"So what do you want to do about it?"

I thought. That was the question. What did I want to do about it? The book thing was weird – but not quite definite enough to call the police. I had a horrible feeling they'd laugh at me, just as Mark had.

And then, suddenly, I knew.

“I want a second viewing.”

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“Great news that you guys are interested!” Phil gushed as he let us into the property for the second time, two days later. The 48 hour rule hadn't been relaxed, and I'd had to wait two more agonizing days, listening to Mark talking about deposits and mortgages, when I couldn't think of anything except for those books.

Inside the house I could hardly bring myself to fake interest in the kitchen layout, and the possibility of damp in the bay window. I had only one thing on my mind: The books. But as we trailed around the rooms on the ground floor, I found myself noticing things that had escaped my attention the first time. The locks on the ground floor doors and windows. The sad series of pictures in the hallway, of a girl in 90s school uniform looking wistfully out at the world. The pictures went up to when she was about 15 – and then stopped. After that there were no more. No graduation photos. No weddings. No grandchildren.

At last, we had trailed around every room on the ground floor and I was free to race upstairs ahead of Mark and Phil to the second bedroom – my room. The first thing I noticed was the bars on the windows – nursery bars, I had thought before, but now they looked very different.

The second thing I saw was that the books had changed. There were only two there now.

Emma. And Kidnapped.

My heart began to race.

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Back home, I called the police.

“And the books, this time they were Emma, and Kidnapped. I googled and it looks like an Emma Wright did go missing around the time the photographs

stopped being updated – 1998. The implication on the news stories is that she ran away – there was a supposed sighting of her in London a few weeks later. But what if she didn't? What if she's still in that house?"

There was a silence on the other end of the line, and I could hear the operator's scepticism even down the phone line.

"You don't believe me, do you," I said.

"We'll investigate your allegations," the operator said. But my heart sank. I got a call back a few hours later.

"Just to reassure you, Ma'am, you have the right house, but I've had a look at the original file and the investigators at the time were satisfied that Emma Wright did indeed run away. There were several sightings of her in London, and her bank card was used. She was sixteen at the time, and there was no evidence of anything other than a planned departure on her part."

"Then explain the books," I said angrily. "He could have used her bank cards, and there are always unconfirmed sightings, aren't there? Sixteen year old girls look a lot alike. I'm telling you, she's in there!"

"Ma'am," the operator said wearily. "Don't you think it's a bit far-fetched that this woman can get out to rearrange these books, but not raise the alarm in any other way? And what's he doing with her during viewings?"

"It's not far-fetched!" I said. "He's keeping her somewhere in the house."

"Miss," said the policeman, but I hung up.

I called back Phil the estate agent next.

"Phil?" I said as soon as he answered the phone. "It's Liz. I want to book another viewing."

"Ah..." Phil said. His voice sounded regretful. "Sorry to tell you this Liz, I've got some bad news on that front. The owner – Mr Wright – he's taking the property off the market."

"What?"

“Yeah, sorry. Bit irritating for us too, truth be told. We’d had several expressions of interest. But it’s my understanding he’s gone away. Gone abroad, I think. I’ve got this house in Portland Way that might be of interest-”

I made my excuses and hung up, my hands shaking.

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All that day at work, I couldn’t stop thinking about the house, about Emma. Her photo stared back at me from the newspaper report of her disappearance – young, pale, fair-haired – so much like the gawky, awkward teenager I had been myself, that I felt my heart hurting for her. What had happened to her? She must have tried to run away and been stopped – and she had been in that house, a prisoner for almost twenty years.

The listing had been taken off the internet, but Phil had given us a print out that first time we visited, and now I found myself brooding over it, as if the answer lay there – in the photographs of the rooms and the arrangement of the furniture, but however long I stared I could see nothing – nothing out of the ordinary except those six, odd books. HELP ME. A message displayed there on the internet for all the world to see.

The locks on the internal doors, the bars on the windows – it all made sense. Emma, the long lost daughter in those photographs, was still there. She was being kept prisoner somewhere in the house, allowed out only when no-one was around to raise the alarm. That was why the forty-eight hours notice. To give her father time to get her out of the main house and secured somewhere else.

But where? The house was down the end of a long lane, but people would have noticed if a kidnapped woman was being ferried to and fro. It didn’t look like the kind of neighbourhood where people came and went. The houses had the air of places lived in for years, and people like that had long memories – they would remember a girl who went missing years before, they would remember her face.

No, she must still be in the house.

It was when I flicked through the pictures for maybe the hundredth time, that I noticed something.

The photographs of the rooms showed two windows facing the garden and the apple tree – one in the bathroom, and one in the second bedroom, the window where the books had been displayed.

But on the pictures of the exterior of the house, there were three windows on the first floor.

What had happened to the middle window?

Hands shaking, I turned to the back of the details, where the floorplan was. It showed the two rooms - the bathroom and the second bedroom - meeting at the end of the hallway, each of them with a little shallow alcove to take up the unused space. But there had been no alcove in either room. I had a clear memory of that - of looking at the blank, straight wall in the bedroom and wondering where I'd put a wardrobe.

And I had a clear memory too of climbing the stairs and remarking to Mark how dark it was without a window, and Phil saying that it would be easy enough to put frosted glass in the bathroom door. Someone had blocked off the end of that corridor and the window that belonged to it, creating a space - maybe three foot by two. And I knew why.

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I parked the car a little way up the lane, and walked the rest of the way to the house, taking the opportunity to peer in at the neighbours, trying to assess what kind of people they were. Phil had told me the owner was away, but I wasn't taking any chances and I knocked long and hard at the door of the house, waiting as the sound echoed along the hallway, listening attentively for any movement from within.

There was none. And his car was gone from the driveway. It was just as Phil had said - he had gone away, abroad maybe. This was it. This was my chance.

My hands were shaking as I lifted up the plant pot by the front door, hardly daring to hope that the key would still be there. Was it possible...?

But it was.

I fumbled getting it into the lock, scraping the metal work, my fingers trembling with nerves, but at last I got it in, and it turned with an ease that felt almost too good to be true.

Inside, the house was completely quiet. Just the ticking of the clock on the kitchen wall disturbed the silence.

I ran up the stairs, past the photographs of Emma. Was it my imagination now, or was there something sad and a little wary in her expression as she looked back at the photographer? She seemed to be almost pleading with the viewer – help me. Get me out.

The landing was exactly as I remembered it – except that at the end of the hallway was something I had seen, but forgotten – something which now made a horrible kind of sense. It was a cupboard – built in, with a padlock on the door.

How – how had I missed this when we viewed the place? How had I thought it was normal for anyone living alone to padlock their hall cupboard? My heart was thumping so hard I felt almost sick with nerves – but I had come too far to give up now. As I got closer I saw that it was not a padlock with a keyhole, but a combination lock, an alphabetical one, with four slots.

The possible combinations were endless, and I thought of the tool shed out the back, wondering if there was a crowbar or something I could use to break the lock – but even as I turned to run back down the stairs, a thought occurred to me, and I turned back. There was one thing I wanted to try first...

The dials on the lock were small and almost unbearably fiddly, and I almost gave up half way, and went for the crowbar after all – but then the last letter clicked into place. E M M A.

It opened.

Before the door opened, I had felt scared. But at the sight of the boarded up window and the rope ladder descending into the darkness I felt an overwhelming surge of something even more powerful, cancelling out my fears – triumph.

I had been right. I had been right. In spite of Mark's ridicule and the disbelief of the police, I had been right. Together, Emma and I had done it. And now I was going to save her.

“Emma!” I whispered into the darkness as I set my foot on the ladder, my heart in my mouth. “Emma, I'm coming!”

There was no answer. Was she gagged? Drugged? Or maybe the owner had taken her away – but it didn't matter, now that I had discovered this place, this dungeon, the police would have to believe me. They would have to investigate the place properly, put out a search warrant.

I got out my phone, ready to take a photo – evidence, if they thought I had lost it completely – but as I did the rope ladder swayed beneath me and I dropped it, cursing as I heard it fall, and then land with a crack far below. This shaft went a long way – and when I thought about the layout of the house, I realised there must be a space behind the larder in the kitchen, concealing a shaft that led deep, deep below, right down to a cellar not shown on the plans.

“Emma,” I whispered. “Hold on!”

I began to climb into the darkness.

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I was about halfway down the shaft, climbing steadily, the smell of damp earth growing stronger, when I heard something – something that made my heart stutter, with terror.

It was the sound of the door at the top of the shaft moving.

I began to climb, as fast as I could, my shoes slipping on the rungs, the rope tearing at my hands. But it was too late – I was just a few feet from the top when the door shut, plunging me into completely blackness. For a moment I just stood, paralyzed, clinging to the rope ladder, too frightened almost to breathe.

Then I heard the click of the padlock outside.

The sound jolted me out of my frozen state, pure terror flooding through me.

“Stop!” I screamed, banging at the door. “Let me out, I’m trapped in here.”

There was no answer, and I banged again, blindly in the inky darkness, thumping until my fists hurt.

“Let me out! My husband knows I’m here! I have a phone!”

The voice that came back through the crack in the door was a sibilant whisper, too hoarse to tell even if it was male or female, but it was one that I was sure I had never heard in my life before.

“Husband?” it whispered. “You have no husband any more. You are Emma now. Welcome home...”

