

THE CREEPER

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The Creeper is his second full-length novel.

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The Watchers

THE CREEPER

A . M . S H I N E



An Aries Book

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Prologue

‘Emergency services. What is your location and the service you need?’

Fiona knew before hearing the operator’s voice that she was beyond saving.

There was nowhere she could hide that it wouldn’t find her. It was as though the stars themselves were its all-seeing eyes and the pale moon a searchlight. By day she had fled as far as she could. But no distance would ever be enough. It would always follow her, and the dread of this realisation eclipsed all else – the life she had known, her dreams for the future, and the belief that such horrors didn’t exist.

They were just meant to be stories.

Fiona was only being kind. The man had been so agitated, slapping his hands over his mouth, staring stupefied at the dirt between his feet. His simplicity was more pronounced than the others and she’d approached him out of pity, to offer a smile when no one else cared so much as to look at him.

You see him three times. You see him three times. You see him three times.

The words were spoken so quickly, slicing through the air like a scythe. She'd waved a hand over his eyes but the man was spellbound by delusion, repeating that same line over and over, terrorised by the sound of his own voice.

'Who do you see three times?' she'd asked, crouching close enough to make sense of him.

He'd grabbed Fiona's shirt, holding her down as he breathed the horror all over her.

She'd been running ever since.

It didn't make sense to stay in the city, not after seeing it outside her apartment. Her parents were away until the weekend, but home still seemed the safest place to go. It was there that her dad used to sit by the bedside whenever the nightmares came. He would stroke her hair with one hand and dry her cheek with the other. The monsters knew better than to mess with him, he used to say, stifling a yawn. Warm memories such as these were all she had to thaw the terror now closing around her life.

There was only one other person who could understand what was happening but he wouldn't answer his phone. Fiona wanted to empty her lungs with a scream, to vent all that frustration in one deafening blast. She didn't know if Tom was alive or dead. But he was studying in a different university, in another county. Maybe it hadn't found him like it had found her.

She couldn't afford to see it a third time. That's what she had been told. And now, in these lonely hours, with the night pouring down on her like black soil, Fiona knew it to be true. No matter what happened, she mustn't look outside.

She'd closed every door and sealed the curtains, leaving only a darkness so haunting it felt tight to breathe. That sense

of being chased never went away. Fiona hadn't slept. She couldn't remember when last she had eaten. She yanked down the kitchen blind, taking a moment to scan the surrounding fields. All was still. Only the hollow thrum of her heart broke the silence.

She scrambled up the stairs to her old bedroom, locking its door behind her and pocketing the key. Through its skylight – set high in the ceiling – the firmament above was darkening. Soon the stars would return to recommence their search. But spy as they might through the glass, they would never find her in the room's corner, where Fiona had slept as a child and watched them with a sense of wonder, not the fearful distrust that plagued her now.

If she could wait out the next few days, her parents would know what to do. Her dad would chase the monsters away. He would keep her safe like he used to. Until then, she would fear the dark wildering world outside as though night and death were one and the same. She had no other choice.

A square of moonlight shone from the skylight to the floor. Fiona was curled up on her bed, arms around legs, swaying back and forth. She couldn't calm her breathing. She could barely swallow, her mouth was so dry. She hadn't thought to bring any water. In the morning, she would grab everything she needed. This was her shelter and the storm would pass. That's why she chose this room. She could see the sky. She would know when it was safe.

Her phone was sunken into the duvet beside her feet. It still held some battery, if she needed it. But who would she call? What could she tell them that wouldn't curse their lives too? Maybe the Guards could come and take her somewhere safe until her parents returned. They could lock her up in a cell for

all she cared, so long as there was someone to stand between her and the one that stalked her relentlessly.

Fiona tried to focus on *anything* else. She pictured the downstairs rooms in perfect darkness. The kitchen's cold granite countertop. Unopened letters scattered across the floor from when she had run indoors. That vague but welcoming scent that hung in the hallway, where her mum burned candles throughout the year, never expecting any visitors but keeping their wicks lit all the same.

Even if she had been followed, how could it possibly find her here? There were no lights. No sounds. Nothing to lead it to her.

She reached for the phone. Maybe Tom was still okay. He had seen it that first night too. Fiona hadn't spoken to anyone else since then. She had carried the truth like a poisoned chalice, careful not to spill a drop. She wanted to call him again, if only to hear he was okay, that she was overreacting. But what if the phone was how it found her? If speaking kept the curse alive, then silence could be the key to lifting it. There was so much she didn't understand.

Fiona's tired eyes returned to the floor. They weighed too much to look any higher. She stared at that silver tile of moonlight in the centre of the room. Her heart contracted; its pace quickened. Something was wrong. But through the depths of her exhaustion, the revelation was slow to rise.

And then, finally, she saw it – the dark shape framed within the light on the floor.

Terror snapped the air from her lips. The phone creaked as her fingers clamped around it. Somehow, fumbling blind, she called for help.

The dial tone sounded only once.

‘Emergency services. What is your location and the service you need?’

Fiona’s eyes lifted to the skylight, to that which blocked out the moon and the stars, and the hope of ever seeing her parents again.

I

The doorbell chimed.

Alec glanced up from his desk to the grandfather clock in the corner of the room, sighing as he did so. Eleven minutes remained until the hour. He clicked his pen and carefully aligned it beside his pocket diary where this meeting had been jotted down for nine o'clock on the dot, not a second before or after.

'That is disappointing,' Alec whispered under his breath.

The hours of the day had been mapped out like a journey. That was, after all, the whole purpose of keeping a diary. Any delays or detours, such as this, made Alec uneasy. And uneasy men made mistakes. Too much time had been invested in this transaction to falter now.

He patted down his grey shirt and straightened its collar, pinching its stays in place. It was without fault. Smooth and sharp in all the right places. Lara, Alec's housekeeper, as per his request, had ironed it with due care the prior evening. The dear girl had an alchemist's touch – like her mother before her – making golden the simplest chore.

Again, the doorbell rang. So long had it been since he received a visitor, Alec had forgotten its two-note melody and how much he disliked it. The sound lingered as if it were now trapped in the room like a filthy insect, flitting against the study's many windows and buzzing by his ear. He would make a note to have it uninstalled.

'You've arrived earlier than you were expected,' Alec muttered, frowning at the door as he tugged a cuff over his slender wrist, 'and earlier than you're welcome. You will wait.'

No punctuality. No patience. For the sake of their transaction, Alec swallowed down his umbrage like a chalky pill. One more ring of that bell, however, and he might not have been so forgiving.

The room held no mirrors, and so he stepped by a framed landscape to consult his reflection. His eyes were met with that old familiar paleness. Ghostlike in the glass. Too many years with too few fond memories to add any colour to his cheeks – grey, even in the morning light when colours blossomed in the darkest places. Nothing ever changed and yet Alec had aged regardless – in this room, in this house – as one entombed ante-mortem. His father had a lot to answer for.

When he opened the front door, Detective Eamon Barry had his broad back turned to him, facing the grounds of the estate. A plastic folder was held in one hand. The other scratched around his neck as though shame were an itch that a man could dig out with his fingernails.

'Doctor Sparling?' he asked, as though Alec hadn't met his expectations.

'Yes,' he replied, standing aside, gesturing for the man to enter. 'You're early, Detective. Did we not arrange this meeting for nine o'clock?'

'I'm sorry,' Barry stammered. 'I didn't realise.'

'Are you aware of the significance of the number nine?'

The man's eyes practically crossed at the question.

'In Pythagorean numerology,' Alec explained, 'it symbolises the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. Perhaps you can appreciate that. Perhaps not.'

Alec walked over to his desk and Barry – understanding the unspoken invitation – followed, leaving his scruples at the door like a loyal dog abandoned. Given the man's profession, he was likely searching the study for some clue as to how Alec had accrued such wealth and why, in spite of it, still appeared so profoundly miserable. A chair had been set in place for him; an antique Chippendale that now cried beneath his weight.

Barry's face was solid and simple, as though chiselled out by an unimaginative stonemason. The closest shave wouldn't lift the shadow from his skin. His dark hair was cropped short with a few silvered flecks trailing back above his ears, and he was dressed in a well-worn black coat and brogues. The man's looks epitomised the model detective in a paperback thriller. But Barry was no hero. His reasons for being in Alec's home were far from honourable.

'You must understand, Doctor,' he said, shifting uncomfortably in his chair, 'I don't usually do this. As I'm sure you are aware, these files are not openly available to the public.'

Alec slid open his desk's top drawer. There he procured the unmarked envelope, weighty and sealed, and dropped it between them like a slab of meat for a hungry dog.

'I'm more than glad to support local law enforcement,' he said, looking the man directly in the eye, ignoring the

envelope's existence. 'I've no doubt that my donation will be put to good use.'

The detective sighed as he handed his folder over the desk. He took the envelope and quickly pocketed it inside his jacket, as if everyone who once respected him had lined the windows to spectate this moment of weakness. Both men forced a smile.

'What's your interest in this case?' the detective asked, rubbing his hands together, trying to clean them of a stain only he could see.

Following the succinctness that had defined their past exchanges, Alec assumed Barry to be the quiet sort – a man muzzled by defeat. He sat back, coolly as he could, and lowered his clenched fists out of the detective's sight. Alec was not in the habit of taking questions.

'It's just a hobby of mine,' he replied, careful not to glower too intently. 'Are you familiar with it? This particular case, I mean.'

'I didn't work that one.'

'Oh, but I didn't ask if you worked it. I asked if you were familiar with it.'

Judging by Barry's hesitation, the man was unsure if his compliance in conversation was part of the deal. Alec's eyes bored into him as though they could extract the answer regardless.

'The case concerns a missing student,' he began. 'Her name was Fiona Quinn.'

'And what do you know about Ms Quinn?' Alec asked, leaning forward.

'Good student, hard-working. She was always good at keeping in touch with friends and family. But in the days

leading up to her disappearance she dropped off the radar. It seems that she got herself involved in something she shouldn't have. Her parents were abroad at the time. They thought she was doing college work, but they didn't know any more than that. Nobody did.'

'And do you know what she was studying in university?' Alec asked.

'Archaeology,' Barry replied. 'She was in her final year.'

'And have you linked any similar cases to this one?'

That last question was enough to press Barry's back into his chair; it squeaked like a trampled field mouse. He had obviously been a detective for long enough to know when something wasn't right.

'Should I be concerned, Doctor?' he asked. 'Your interest in this case seems a little more than *just a hobby*.'

'Detective, I assure you that my interest is strictly above board. I like to imagine that I may be of assistance in someday solving one of these "cold cases", as they call them. It's tragic. It truly is. Whatever must—'

The grandfather clock tolled, startling Barry forward in his chair.

Alec rested both elbows on the desk and laced his fingers together, staring at his guest as the nine bells sounded aloud. Only when the silence returned did he pick up where he had left off, reciting the lines he had planned that morning like a part-time player.

'As I was saying, whatever must Ms Quinn's poor parents be going through? It's too short a time to heal such a wound, I'm sure you can agree?'

Alec emptied the folder's contents onto the desk, spreading them out before him like jigsaw pieces. There were pages

bound by paper clips, some loose photographs, and an audio disc with the case number scribbled on it in black pen. He picked this up and held it as if to advertise its importance.

'And who was the detective on this case?' he asked, leafing through the pages.

Barry probably guessed that Alec already knew the answer, and that was quite permissible. It would benefit both parties if the detective proved himself not to be a stupid man. There was, however, no way he could have understood Alec's reasons for testing his knowledge on the matter.

'That would have been Will Collins,' he replied.

'And he is...' Alec said, looking to Barry to close the sentence.

'He's dead. He died not long after that case.'

'I see,' Alec said, indifferent, placing the pages down carefully, pleased with his investment. 'Is *this* the only copy?' he asked, tapping his index finger on the disc.

'We only make one,' Barry replied, looking more and more like a schoolboy sitting in the principal's office.

'Have you listened to it?'

'No, I haven't. Like I said, Doctor, it wasn't my case. I have other investigations that demand my time.'

'But you know what's on it?'

'It's a recording of Fiona Quinn's phone call to the emergency services,' the detective replied. 'It's the last known trace of her before her disappearance.'

'And you have never been curious as to what she said?' Alec asked.

'No, Doctor, I haven't.'

After a moment's thought, Alec attempted another smile and rose to his feet. Barry eased out of his chair, visibly relieved

that the whole sorry transaction was over. Alec crossed his study and opened the door. Daylight washed across the floor, reaching like a tide as far as the Persian carpet; its pattern faded and worn like an epitaph, every wash of light leaving it a little less than before.

‘You understand the delicacy of this matter?’ Barry said, having stepped out.

‘Of course, Detective,’ Alec replied. ‘No one shall hear of this. I’m quite adept at keeping secrets, I assure you. I’ll be in touch when I need you again.’

Barry’s eyes widened as these parting words were spoken. It was as though he had just realised, in that moment, the gravity of his actions and the shackles they had cast. So dire was the man’s gambling debt that he had seen only his financial reward, not its ramifications. He wouldn’t tell another soul so long as his livelihood and reputation were at stake. Of this fact Alec was certain as he drew the door closed and turned its key, leaving the detective to drag his fresh chains behind him.

For months he had pursued some means to acquire the file and, more specifically, the only recording in existence of Ms Quinn’s phone call. This was the last loose end – that thread dangling from an otherwise flawless tapestry, now cut.

Alec took his time, teasing himself as he fed the disc into the system. He returned to his desk and there he opened his diary. A red scar was drawn through Detective Barry’s name. It had been a most productive morning. But as much as a celebratory brandy would do well to toast his success, Alec was not his father.

He reclined in his chair and closed his eyes, and only then did the man press play, with the sunlight glazing his grey skin,

alone as he always was until Lara's arrival at the stroke of midday.

'Emergency services. What is your location and the service you need?'

'There's something outside,' came the reply – whispered, terrified.

'Miss, please try to stay calm and tell me your location.'

'It's at the window. It's smiling at me.'