

PHOENIX

An Original Screenplay
by Louise Geraghty

First 15 Pages

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Louise Geraghty
E: writer@screenlouise.com
T: +353 87 665 2691

Peter McFarlane
E: Peter@macfarlane-chard.co.uk
T: +44 (0)20 7636 7750

EXT. FIRE - NIGHT

Flames. Beautiful. Crackling. Voracious.

As we pull back to see them mercilessly feed on a small suburban house.

CHILD

(off)

He's in there! He's still in there!

VERY YOUNG CHILD

(off, crying)

Max! Maaaaxx!

INT. TV NEWS AND NEWSPAPERS - DAY

MONTAGE:

A police van pushes towards the Courthouse, through an angry crowd carrying placards declaring "MONSTERS!" and "THROW AWAY THE KEY".

FIRST NEWSREADER

It's the crime that's shocked
Britain.

More newspaper front pages declare "BURNT THEIR OWN BROTHER ALIVE" and "ANGEL-FACED ARSONISTS". Pictures show a family photograph of two adults and four young children. The children's ages are impossible to guess behind the pixellation hiding their faces, but it's clear all are under ten and one, on his mother's knee, is about four.

SECOND NEWSREADER

How could three children burn down
their own house knowing their
father and young brother were
inside?

A child shrouded in an over-sized hooded coat is helped out of a van.

People lay flowers and teddy bears at the burnt-out house.

Again, the flames rage. A child screams.

A different child, holding their hood low over their face, is ushered into a doorway.

A third child, cloaked in a blanket, is hugged close to an adult escorting them from another van.

A studio panel of four people argue heatedly

FIRST PANELLIST

But they confessed! They were proud
of what they'd done!

SECOND PANELLIST

I think we're forgetting that the father had been charged with domestic assault several times.

FIRST PANELLIST

So what about the four-year-old boy who died? Did he assault them too?

The fire again, merciless.

A Reporter on the street struggles to be heard above the crowd.

REPORTER

As Child X, Child Y and Child Z are sentenced today, their devastated mother visited the graves of her husband and youngest child.

A different news studio.

THIRD NEWSREADER

As expected, the embargo on revealing any identifying information about the child perpetrators will remain in place until they reach the age of eighteen.

Yet again, the fire. Raging.

The crowd howls outside the courtroom.

SECOND REPORTER

...separate juvenile detention facilities and they are to have no contact with each other.

Another panel discussion.

SECOND PANEL MEMBER

Separating them doesn't change anything, they're evil together and they're evil apart.

The protestors outside the court are furious, waving their "THROW AWAY THE KEY" placards.

PROTESTOR

I just weep for the poor little boy who was burnt alive.

SECOND PROTESTOR

They should get life!

The Court doors slam with the heavy clang of a prison gate.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE MANOR GROUNDS - DAY

A blue-blue, cloudless sky.

CAPTION: NINETEEN YEARS LATER

The scorching sun beams down on the Manor, a stunning Grade II listed Georgian country house. To one side, a six-car garage backs onto thirsty parkland dry from lack of rain. To the other, landscaped gardens have been fed with sprinklers and remain expensively green.

On one side of the immaculate lawn, identical twins LUCAS and LAWRENCE (5) splash delightedly in the swimming pool.

Sitting on the side of the pool, legs dangling elegantly in the water, is MARIANNE (28). Beautiful in a tasteful designer bathing suit, laughing at the boys' antics, a long-ago secret hidden behind her eyes. Lucas climbs out to stand on the side of the pool.

LUCAS

Mummy! Mummy look at this.

He jumps into the pool, arms and legs splayed out. Marianne applauds.

LAWRENCE

Now me, now me.

On the terrace, OLIVE (60) overweight and expensively dressed, sits at a table under a large sun umbrella and watches them. A designer handbag sits at her feet. She sips from a large glass of iced fizzy orange and cools herself with a tiny battery-powered fan.

GARY (33), muscular and gym-fit, wearing tailored grey trousers and an open-necked white shirt, comes around the corner and up to Olive.

GARY

'Allo Mum.

OLIVE

'Allo love. Will you take over? I need the loo.

GARY

It's all that fizzy orange.

OLIVE

Tch, cheeky.

GARY

Steve'll be home soon anyway.

She gives him a look and he laughs. She goes off. He takes her place at the table, with the view of Marianne and the boys.

In the pool, Marianne sees the change of watcher and pauses. Her eyes briefly meet Gary's, but there is no warmth between them. She turns her attention back to the boys, swinging Lucas around by the waist.

EXT. COUNTRY ROAD - DAY

A silver Ferrari convertible speeds along a road that winds gently through a countryside parched from weeks without rain.

STEPHEN

(over, on phone)

Those bastards turned me down twice on the Upper Crust IPO. They backed that wanker Nigel Worthing-Smythe instead and they lost every penny they put in. But hey, his uncle's a lord.

INT. STEPHEN'S CAR - DAY

STEPHEN (35) handsome and tanned in a designer linen shirt and sunglasses, has his phone on speaker on the dashboard.

CHRISTIAN

(on speaker)

I happen to know he put that particular investment up his nose. And didn't even share.

STEPHEN

Then they backed him again last year with that crypto shit he knows nothing about.

CHRISTIAN

Harrow boys only ever invest in things they know nothing about. You don't get that with us Etonians.

STEPHEN

I don't get it at all Christian, I didn't even have a school tie. I had a school hoodie! That's why I want Khan. He's like me, locked out of those posh boy clubs but earned his way up anyway.

CHRISTIAN

But Khan's impossible to get a meeting with, even for me.

STEPHEN

That's why you're going to get me in to his cancer charity dinner.

CHRISTIAN

Stephen! Tickets are like vegetarians at a fox hunt. Not to mention that it's on next Saturday. I could start working on next year for you...

STEPHEN

No! It's a charity fundraiser, so money talks. Buy me onto the guestlist. Oh and send over a dossier, I want to know everything about him so I can make small talk. Send one for Marianne too.

CHRISTIAN

I'll have to buy somebody else off the guestlist first. Or blackmail them...

STEPHEN

I have total confidence in you Christian.

He hangs up. He grips the steering wheel tighter and mouths "yesss".

EXT. THE MANOR GATES - DAY

The Ferrari speeds along the road and comes to the ornate gates of the Manor. It pauses and the gates open regally to admit it.

EXT. THE MANOR GROUNDS - DAY

Stephen drives in, past the small Gate House and up the curving drive, past trees, two brick outbuildings and an old stable block.

EXT. FRONT OF MANOR HOUSE - DAY

Stephen pulls up by the front door and honks the horn. He waits. In seconds Lucas and Lawrence round the corner.

LUCAS & LAWRENCE

Daddy! Daddy!

Beaming, Stephen gets out of the car and receives them with open arms, scooping them up.

STEPHEN

Hello scoundrels!

Lucas clammers on his back and Stephen grabs Lawrence and swings him around, much to both boy's delight.

Marianne comes around the corner, smiling at the sight and tying a sarong around her waist. Stephen stops swinging Lawrence and bends to kiss her. She brushes an imaginary hair from her forehead.

MARIANNE

You're in a good mood.

STEPHEN

Well I have a beautiful wife.

(to Lawrence)

And sons who-- wait. Where's the other one?

He turns around as if looking for Lucas, who is still clinging to his back. The boys shriek with laughter, Marianne smiles.

MARIANNE

Stephen, Gary's been smoking near the house again. I don't like it around the boys.

STEPHEN

I'll have a word.

Gary saunters around the corner.

GARY

Hey Steve.

He and Stephen nod easy hellos to each other.

STEPHEN

Hey Gary. Lay off the smoking around the boys, will you?

GARY

I never smoke around the boys. Wouldn't do it.

STEPHEN

I know.

He swings Lucas back to the ground. Marianne and Gary make brief, chilly eye contact.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

Come on scoundrels.

He puts his arm around Marianne and they go into the house with the boys.

INT. MANOR ENTRY HALLWAY - DAY

The hallway, like the rest of the house, has been thoughtfully restored. A wide staircase sweeps down from a picture window on the landing to original tiled floors. An antique hall stand holds hats and canes that look like they came out of an antique shop (which they did). A large circular table holds an artful display of flowers and oil paintings on the walls reflect the horsiness of past owners.

Olive lumbers into the hall from one of the side wings. She beams when she sees Stephen, and he bends to kiss her cheek.

STEPHEN

Evening Mum.

OLIVE

'Allo love.

STEPHEN

Are you staying for dinner?

OLIVE

No, it's Bingo tonight. And you know I don't like that fancy stuff you have for tea.

STEPHEN

You and Gary just have to educate your palates.

OLIVE

My palate's plenty educated thank-you very much. And you grew up just fine on proper English food.

STEPHEN

'Course I did. Nothing beats your cottage pie Mum.

OLIVE

And don't you forget it.

(to the boys)

'Bye you two.

She bends to kiss Lucas and Lawrence.

LUCAS & LAWRENCE

'Bye Granny.

STEPHEN

See you tomorrow.

OLIVE

'Bye love.

He kisses her and she goes out, ignoring Marianne. Marianne watches her leave.

INT. MANOR DINING ROOM - EVENING

The walls are panelled to half-height, with gilt-framed art. The table is mahogany and seats 18, lit by a glittering chandelier overhead. Stephen, Marianne and the two boys - on booster seats - sit at one end. Marianne is now wearing a designer summer dress. The boys struggle with their full-size cutlery.

LAWRENCE

I can hold my breath for *ages*.

LUCAS

I can hold my breath for ages and ages and ages.

LAWRENCE

I got more coins.

Stephen and Marianne laugh.

STEPHEN

(to Marianne)

Those gold things at the bottom of the pool?

LUCAS

They're dubbons!

STEPHEN

(laughing)

Dubbons!

Marianne smiles. It's the perfect family dinner.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

No. Lucas. Hold it properly.

MARIANNE

Stephen. It's hard enough to get him to eat vegetables.

Stephen ignores her, laser focussed on Lucas, who pouts and tries to hold his fork properly.

STEPHEN

Properly.

The atmosphere at the table abruptly cools.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

Are you an animal?

And then freezes.

LUCAS

No...

STEPHEN

Have you never seen a fork before?

Lucas shakes his head.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

You haven't?

LUCAS

(realising his mistake)

I have.

STEPHEN

Are you just stupid then?

Lucas starts to cry now.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

Are you?

He grabs the boy by his upper arm, the part covered by his t-shirt. Lucas cringes in pain. Marianne and Lawrence watch, terrified but paralysed.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

Are you??

LUCAS

I'm sorry!

STEPHEN

D'you think I've worked my arse off
so my son can eat his food like he
lives on some sink estate?

A beat. Lucas cries quietly.

Stephen lets go of the boy by thrusting him abruptly away from him, slamming him back into his chair. He goes back to eating his dinner. Marianne and Lucas also start tentatively eating again. Lucas sits miserably in his chair, his food untouched, his cheeks wet with tears.

A beat.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

C'mon, leave that. Let's play some
golf.

He stands up from the table. The boys look at him, uncertain. But his warm cheerfulness convinces them it's safe now.

STEPHEN (CONT'D)

C'mon! I want to see my little
Tiger Woodses in action.

Lucas dries his eyes quickly, perking up at the chance to redeem himself.

LAWRENCE

Lucas can hit really far Daddy.

LUCAS

We both can.

STEPHEN

Great, you can show me.

Both boys hop down from their chairs and follow Stephen through the open French windows to the lawn. Marianne watches them go.

EXT. MANOR BACK LAWN - EVENING

Gary sits at the patio table with a bottle of beer, watching Stephen with the boys. They have child-sized metal clubs and golf-bags and have clearly played before. Lucas sends a ball into the trees.

STEPHEN

Yes! Very good.

Gary claps.

GARY

Go on Lucas, do the victory dance I showed ya.

Lucas immediately goes into an impression of a footballer who has just scored, fists to the heavens and pulling his t-shirt over his head. Stephen and Gary laugh.

INT. BOY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The room is smaller than you would expect, decorated with dinosaur murals on the wall but strangely lacking in visible toys. The boys, in summer pyjamas, are tucked into race-car beds under dinosaur-patterned sheets.

Marianne, at the door, turns out the light and the two nightlights take over.

MARIANNE

Don't let the bed-bugs bite.

LUCAS

Mummy? Can you help me learn the knife and fork tomorrow?

MARIANNE

'Course. Goodnight. Love you.

LUCAS & LAWRENCE

'Night. Love you too.

INT. BOYS' PLAYROOM - NIGHT

Marianne closes the boys' bedroom door behind her. This adjoining room is where the toys are - and there are a lot of them. Shelves line the wall, stuffed with soft toys, action figures and bins of lego. A small table is covered with art supplies. Discarded foam bats litter a sofa and there is a three-foot high model of a Minion.

Marianne puts a golf-bag upright and tosses a football into a basket before she turns out the light and goes out.

INT. MARIANNE'S DRESSING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is lined with open wardrobes filled with clothes and shoes. A window at one end is framed with heavy brocade curtains, swagged back with soft rope ties. A velvet armchair sits beside a large island unit with drawers.

Marianne, now dressed in a long silk nightgown, sprays some perfume on her wrists.

INT. MARIANNE AND STEPHEN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

The bedroom is furnished with dark wood bedside tables and over-stuffed armchairs. It is dominated by a huge four-poster bed, dressed with 800 thread-count bedlinen with a double border in pale grey. On the bed is a slim red A4 folder.

Stephen, a towel wrapped around his waist, comes out of the en-suite bathroom. He smiles at the sight of her.

STEPHEN

Mmmmmmm.

She smiles and sees the envelope.

MARIANNE

What's this?

STEPHEN

It's everything there is to know about Maqbool Khan. I want to you know all of it by heart before next Saturday.

Marianne picks up the folder and opens it. Again she brushes an imaginary hair from her forehead. The first page is a picture of Maqbool Khan: 63, handsome and steely-eyed.

MARIANNE

What's on next Saturday?

STEPHEN

A cancer charity dinner where you charm him and I get him to invest in JuiceJam.

MARIANNE

He used to be on Dragon's Den, didn't he? I thought he was a recluse.

STEPHEN

He is the other three-hundred and sixty-four days of the year. This is my one chance. I'll show those posh boys.

She kisses him.

MARIANNE

I know you will.

STEPHEN

Do you have your phone and receipts?

MARIANNE

Oh yes.

She goes out. He sits on the bed and waits. She comes back in with her phone and two receipts. He looks at the receipts without comment. He scrolls through the list of calls on the phone.

STEPHEN

Who's this incoming call?

He shows her.

MARIANNE

Wrong number, a cab company. They called me to confirm a booking but I hadn't made a booking.

A beat.

STEPHEN

So if I dial this number now, a cab company'll answer?

MARIANNE

Yes.

STEPHEN

You're sure?

MARIANNE

'Course.

A beat.

He presses the number and looks at her as it dials. It rings.

DISPATCHER
(on phone)
'Allo, ABC Cabs.

Stephen hangs up, his eyes never leaving Marianne's face. He smiles and hands back the phone.

STEPHEN
I like you in that nightdress.

MARIANNE
I know.

He laughs and pulls her close. They kiss.

EXT. FIRE (DREAM) - NIGHT

The flames rage. A MAN (35) turns, his shirt is on fire.

A child's hand is put out, palm down. Another small hand lands, palm down, on top of it. And a third. A fourth tiny hand, in flames, lands palm down on top of the other three.

A flaming curtain in the burning house disintegrates and little Stan is there at the window, screaming.

INT. STEPHEN AND MARIANNE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Marianne wakes up with a start. But this is an old nightmare and she's used to it. She calms her breathing and turns over to go back to sleep.

EXT. FRONT OF MANOR HOUSE - DAY

Gary, in grey suit and sunglasses, stands by the car smoking a cigarette.

Marianne clicks down the steps in another designer sundress, sunglasses and carrying a Birkin bag.

Gary looks at her as he takes another slow drag of his cigarette, then grinds it out under foot and exhales the smoke. He walks around and gets into the driver's seat of the car. Marianne opens the passenger door and gets in. Gary drives off.

EXT. BEAUTY SALON - DAY

The street is lined with high-end shops. Gary pulls in across from the Beauty Salon.

INT. GARY'S CAR - DAY

Marianne puts her hand on the door-handle.

MARIANNE
You don't have to wait, I'll call you when I'm finished.

GARY

I'll wait.

A beat.

Marianne gets out of the car and he watches as she crosses to the Beauty Salon.

He pulls a small fan out of the glove compartment and plugs it into the dashboard, angling it for best effect.

INT. BEAUTY SALON RECEPTION - DAY

The Reception is all dusty pinks, marble and brass mirrors. There are several candy-striped chairs and a nail bar where a JUNIOR BEAUTICIAN (19) in a tunic is attending to the nails of a glamorous CUSTOMER (40).

Behind the counter is ANGELA (45), also in a tunic with perfect makeup and hair in a chic bun. She smiles when Marianne walks in the door.

ANGELA

Morning Mrs Briggs, how are you?

MARIANNE

Fine thanks Angela, how are you?

ANGELA

Hot, like everyone else. Er, I have something for you. It was addressed care of the Salon.

She holds out an envelope addressed to Marianne Briggs, c/o Angela's Beauty Salon. A logo on the envelope says "Finch Solicitors". Marianne is both shaken and embarrassed.

ANGELA (CONT'D)

I don't mind, really. Go ahead.

Marianne opens the letter and scans it. She hesitates.

MARIANNE

Can I use your phone? The battery on mine is...

ANGELA

Oh, of course.

She puts it on the counter. Marianne hesitates.

ANGELA (CONT'D)

I'll just be over here.

She goes over to rearrange the nail varnishes.

Marianne dials the number on the letter.

INT. FINCH SOLICITORS - DAY

The office is cramped, filled with filing cabinets and half-dead plants.

ROGER FINCH (62), sits behind a cluttered desk in an open necked-shirt, tapping at a computer and frowning at a screen.

FINCH

Oh for goodness sake. Undo. Undo!!

The phone rings and he picks it up.

FINCH (CONT'D)

Finch Solicitors.

(beat)

Kayla. You did get it. How are you?

(beat)

'Course. Well I do have some news. There's no easy way to say this I'm afraid. But... your mother's passed away.

INT. BEAUTY SALON RECEPTION - DAY

Marianne stands frozen for a second.

MARIANNE

Good. Is that everything?

INT. FINCH SOLICITORS - DAY

Finch leans back in his chair.

FINCH

Well, with her death, whatever familial reason the three of you had for staying apart is gone.

He waits, but there is silence on the other end of the phone.

FINCH (CONT'D)

Kayla, legally speaking you could have resumed contact when you turned eighteen.

He waits again, but still there is nothing.

FINCH (CONT'D)

I understand that this brings up a lot of old emotions. But you were a child, and heaven knows you paid a heavy price. Bree and Max are the only family you have left.

(beat)

At least take their phone numbers.

(beat)

Kayla.