

**NO NUMBER NINE by F.J. Campbell**

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To S.R., M.B. and N.K.

This book is set mostly in Munich, with a mix of characters from Germany and all over the world. Most of them speak, to some degree or other, German and English.

For the purposes of not annoying the crap out of the reader, it's assumed that, unless otherwise indicated, everyone involved in every conversation understands the language being spoken, whether that's German or English.

## CHAPTER ONE

Munich, September 1999

Philippa Mitchell was eighteen years old when she left England. She left behind her bedroom, that cocoon of misery in which she'd imprisoned herself; her parents, with their forced, hollow cheerfulness; and the pieces of her heart, smashed to smithereens two years ago with a phone call that came in the middle of the night.

Without a backwards glance, Pip was gone. She'd spent most of the last two years in her bedroom, venturing out only to go to school. Now she was escaping from her bedroom, her house, her town, her country.

As she sat in the train speeding south from Munich airport towards the suburbs, she reread her instructions from Mr von Feldstein. She'd spoken to him on the phone and he'd written this letter, detailing her childcare duties and apologising for not being able to collect her from the airport. The letter was polite and businesslike. In it he'd written, *Mrs von Feldstein is currently living elsewhere.*

In other words, she'd left him.

There might be a million fascinating reasons why Mrs von Feldstein was Elsewhere, but Pip didn't much care about any of them. What she cared about was this job, which she needed, and which she would lose if Mrs von Feldstein took it upon herself to return from Elsewhere.

At Solln station, Pip stepped off the train, slinging her rucksack onto her shoulders. It wasn't heavy – she didn't own many clothes and she'd ditched everything else. Letters, books, photos, CDs. Too many reminders.

She walked along the quiet, tree-lined road away from the station, and within a few minutes found Number Three, Emil-von-Feldstein-Weg. It hadn't clicked before, but it now it did: the family she'd come to work for was ever-so-slightly loaded. Number Three wasn't a house, it was a mansion. And the street was named after someone in their family. Who has a whole street named after them?

She stood opposite the house, gawping at it. It was set back off the road, with high hedges surrounding it. Through the gates she saw a gravel driveway which swept around to stone steps leading up to an arched front doorway. She craned her head around the bars of the gate, up past two storeys to the roof, which was covered with four dormer windows of different shapes and sizes. The garden went on for

miles. And was that a swimming pool? Bloody hell.

'Hello, are you Philippa?'

A voice behind her made her jump. She turned to see a middle-aged lady with grey-streaked hair smiling at her. Pip gulped. Surely this couldn't be...?

She stammered, 'I prefer Pip. Are you... Mrs von Feldstein?'

The woman nodded and held out her hand. Pip shook it despondently. *So she's come back, has she? Oh, great.* Pip would have to go home again. 'I wasn't expecting... I thought you...'

Mrs von Feldstein waited, not understanding.

Pip searched for the phrase from the letter. 'I thought you were... currently living elsewhere.'

'Me? No. Oh... I'm not *that* Mrs von Feldstein. I'm Rosa. I'm the sister.' She peered in a kind way at Pip, who hadn't quite caught up yet. 'You're thinking of Dominic's wife, Elisabeth. I live—'

'Next door. Of course, yes, Mr von Feldstein mentioned you in his letter.' *My wife's sister Rosa lives next door with her family.* She thought, *Thank Christ for that,* and said, 'Sorry.'

'Nothing to be sorry about.' Rosa pushed open the gate. 'Come on in. So you know about the family situation, from Dominic's letter? He told you about everyone? The boys, too?'

Pip nodded as they crunched along the drive. The boys. *We have two sons at home, Maximilian (10) and Ferdinand (8). They go to the International School, a fifteen-minute walk away, where you'll take them and pick them up every day except Friday – on Fridays I like to do it myself.* 'I know all about them.'

Rosa said over her shoulder, 'You won't know what's hit you. Come next door to my house if you ever need a break from the testosterone.' She pointed to a wooden gate tucked into the hedge. 'We have two girls, Isabella and Anna. You're always welcome. I hope you know what you're letting yourself in for.'

Pip reckoned she could handle two little boys, whatever Rosa might think.

'So, Dominic will be back tomorrow evening with Max and Ferdi. They're away at the lake house tonight. Until then you can settle yourself in.'

She unlocked the front door and they stepped into a large hallway. Pip took it all in: a grand staircase of dark, highly polished wood ahead of them, and doors leading off the hallway to the left, right and either side of the stairs. Rosa opened them in

turn and motioned for Pip to follow.

'Living room, dining room, kitchen on this floor. That door,' she pointed to the left of the staircase, 'goes down into the cellar, where your room is. Leave your bag there – good gracious, is that all you have? I'll show you upstairs first.'

At the top of the stairs, Rosa pushed open the two doors to the left, which were covered with stickers and postcards. 'Max here, Ferdi there, or maybe the other way round, I can never remember. You'll need to get these boys in hand – I've never seen such chaos.'

It was true – in both boys' rooms, it was impossible to see the colour of the carpets. There were Lego models and train tracks, comics and bean bags, clothes, towels and shoes strewn over every surface. Pip liked the chaos; it made her smile to think that these two small worlds of disorder had been created. She thought – she hoped – that Max and Ferdi were going to be fun to look after.

Rosa sighed and closed the doors again, as if by doing so it would make the mess go away all by itself. 'Bathroom's there.' She pointed to the doors on the other side. 'You don't need to worry about those two.' And then she did the strangest thing. She winked at Pip.

Wrong-footed, Pip guessed the doors must lead to Mr and Mrs von Feldstein's room and maybe a guest room. Rosa was looking at her like she expected a reply, so she tried to smile. 'They're not fans of Lego?' It seemed like she'd said the right thing – Rosa chuckled and turned to go downstairs.

Pip, remembering the dormer windows, pointed to another door they hadn't been through. 'Where does that go? To the attic?'

'Yes, that's Dom and... well, Dom's room. Also his bathroom and office. You won't ever need to go up there; he likes to have his own private space. I can show you, if you like?'

'No, not if it's private.' Pip followed Rosa downstairs, where Rosa scooped up her rucksack and opened the door to the cellar.

'Essentially, this is all yours. Although as you'll see, there are other storage and laundry rooms down here. Martina – that's the cleaner – comes twice a week. She cleans the house and does the laundry. Your bathroom is here.' Rosa moved along the dark corridor, flicking on light switches. 'Door to the garden.' She ran her hand along a row of four closed cupboards. 'In here are winter clothes, spare bedding et cetera. The boys store their spare sports stuff here sometimes. It gets a bit smelly,

as you can imagine.'

Pip couldn't imagine. What stuff? How smelly could two small boys be?

Rosa continued, 'Of course, they have lockers at the club, but they have so much kit, some of it inevitably ends up here.'

Kit? Club? What was Rosa going on about? Pip couldn't remember reading about clubs in the letter. Must be tennis or golf, something posh. She pictured a country club with gym-toned socialites wafting around in pristine tennis whites and jewellery, drinking G&Ts. Elisabeth would no doubt be captain of the ladies' tennis team, highly competitive on the court and prone to cheat on line calls if she ever found herself at thirty-forty down. Pip, not wanting Rosa to think she was obtuse or inattentive, didn't ask – she wanted to read the letter again, make sure she hadn't missed something obvious. Her German was good, or so she'd thought, but there was obviously something she hadn't understood properly.

Rosa pushed open a door at the end of the corridor and switched on the light. 'This is you.'

The room was large, with a double bed low to the floor, a squishy-looking sofa covered in bright cushions, a widescreen TV, a DVD player, a desk with a laptop on it, and a huge wooden wardrobe. She stood rooted to the spot in shock. This house, this room – it was insane. She thought of the tiny house she lived in with her parents. You could fit the whole of the ground floor into this one room.

'This is all for me?'

'You like it? I can't tell.'

'I love it,' breathed Pip.

'Wonderful. For a moment it looked like you couldn't quite believe what sort of a place you'd landed in.' She gave Pip two keys. 'One for the front door, one for the back – that's your own private entrance, should you need it.' She looked at her watch. 'Oh hell, I said I'd be back at the shop at two. Can I leave you? Take a look around, settle in, unpack... enjoy the peace and quiet before the multitudes descend tomorrow.' She hurried to the door.

'Wait! All this is mine? The TV, the laptop? Or is someone coming to pick it up?'

Rosa waved her hand around the room dismissively. 'All yours to use while you're here.'

Pip blinked and started to say thank you, but Rosa had already disappeared. The sound of her footsteps faded up the stairs and across the hallway, the door

slammed, and Pip was alone in the silent house.

\*

She roamed around the house, exploring each room again. Everywhere except for the attic, Mr von Feldstein's private domain – she didn't dare. The two mystery rooms on the first floor were definitely guest rooms. On the wall of each hung one painting, different perspectives of the same castle; the beds were neatly made with crisp white linen; and the wardrobes were bare except for a pair of spare pyjamas and a couple of shirts, probably Mr von Feldstein's. In the boys' rooms, she hung up damp towels and folded crumpled clothes. She took some cups and bowls downstairs and stacked them in the dishwasher. May as well make a good first impression.

The kitchen was – apart from her own – her favourite room. Like something out of a magazine. It had an island unit in the middle, and along one wall there stood an enormous wooden table with six seats on one side and a bench on the other. Above that, the wall was a blackboard covered with chalked messages. She'd come back to those later. French windows, through which streamed late-afternoon sunshine, led out to a patio. Beyond the patio was indeed a swimming pool, a long, thin one for doing lengths in. Shame she didn't own a swimming costume. She'd grown out of her old one and never replaced it.

The house was light and modern inside, all floor-to-ceiling windows and stripped wooden floorboards. Everything looked understated but expensive. In the living room, there were shelves and shelves full of books and DVDs, which she felt like hugging, so she did. The walls were white and bare except for one single painting of the same castle as upstairs, with a lake in the foreground and a field of lavender in the background. Pip caught a faint whiff of fresh paint – maybe they'd redecorated recently. There was something missing. What was it? She couldn't decide, and it bothered her.

Outside, she'd expected the lawn to be pristine, but it was dotted with patches of bare, scuffed earth, reminding her of the makeshift football goals in the park near her parents' house. She found the back door, her own private entrance into the cellar, next to it an old stone bench covered in moss.

In her cellar corridor, where Rosa had said the spare 'kit' was, she opened a cupboard door to find winter coats and trousers, ski boots, skis and poles in different sizes. In the second cupboard, there were tennis racquets, golf clubs – aha –



Frisbees, footballs and some oars. There was a bit of a sweaty odour to it, but nothing she couldn't handle. When she opened the third cupboard, though, it nearly knocked her out – there were about twenty pairs of trainers and Rosa hadn't been kidding about the pong. It was like something had died in there. It was sour and rancid, like decaying vegetables and rotten eggs. Pip recoiled, slammed the door and didn't dare look in the fourth cupboard.

In the kitchen, joy of joys, there was a fancy-pants coffee machine. It looked like something you'd see in an Italian café – stainless steel, nozzles, buttons with pictures on, the works. Pip loved coffee. Was there anything better in the world than the smell of coffee? She peered at it, trying to locate the On button. Terrified of breaking the machine, her fingers hovered over a few buttons but her nerve failed her and she gave up.

The blackboard was a mess of scribbles and smudges. There were messages written by the children: *Dun my homework* and *Wear are my lukky sox*. There were dates and places: *Konstanz, Padua, Berlin, Amstelveen. 15 September – 1 October*, circled many times over. Why did those dates mean something to Pip? A section of the board was covered with random names: *Pim, Shiver, JJ, Henry, Obermann, Rollo* – some crossed out, others underlined. And there, in the corner, was her name. Someone had drawn a smiley face next to it. One of the boys, maybe, looking forward to her arrival? It startled her to see her name amongst these cryptic messages from strangers' lives.

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That night, Pip lay exhausted in bed, her senses bombarded by the newness of her life. The expectation of tomorrow hung over her like a thrilling promise. She fell asleep around eleven.

Next thing she knew, a banging sound woke her. *Shit. What was that? The front door?* Pip checked her watch – 2am. Who was coming into the house at this time? Rosa had said the family was arriving tomorrow evening. Were they back early? Pip didn't know what to do. Should she go up and say hello, or pretend to sleep? *What would a normal person do?* The door had slammed pretty loudly, so they must have known it would wake her. She dragged herself up out of bed and found a baggy old sweatshirt to pull over her pyjamas.

Halfway up the cellar stairs, she heard another sound. A giggle. Murmuring and another giggle, louder this time. She frowned. Was that the kids? It didn't sound like

children. It sounded like a woman. She paused. Better go back to bed. It couldn't be burglars, could it? Not laughing like that? She waited, listening to feet moving upstairs. Oh crap, if it was burglars, what was she supposed to do? Had her parents ever told her what to do in a situation like this? If they had, she hadn't been listening properly.

She crept back to the second cupboard and opened it quietly. By feel only, she found a golf club and eased it out without dislodging anything else. Those giggling burglars were going to get it, if they tried any funny business with her.

Slowly, slowly, Pip pushed open the door to the hallway. It was dark and empty and absolutely silent; the kind of silence where no one is there. She heard noises from upstairs, a thump and a laugh, a man's this time. She waited at the foot of the stairs, gripping the golf club, listening.

Before she knew what was happening she was at the top of the stairs, her heart thudding in her chest, edging swiftly and quietly towards the room.

A strip of light under and around the slightly-opened door. One foot in front of the other, closer and closer towards the room. Rustlings, a whisper and then nothing. With the tip of her finger, Pip nudged the door open, minuscule prods, just enough to see into the room. And when she saw it, she felt a great crashing in her ears, blood racing to her head as she gripped the door frame to stop herself from keeling over.

Lying naked on the bed, long blonde hair streaming over the pillow, was an unbelievably beautiful girl. Her eyes were closed, her hands pushed against the wall above her head, her hips slightly raised. Between her legs, a man's head with short muddy-blond hair; clasping her breast, one of his hands. From the girl's mouth issued a series of low moans, becoming ever louder, as she began to buck her hips and slam her head on the pillow.

Pip's eyes burnt as she reversed on iron-heavy legs out of the room. They hadn't seen her. They couldn't have. Please please please let them not have seen her. All she had to do was make it downstairs without them hearing her. She tiptoed down each step in time with the moans, to cover any creaking noises she made.

At the bottom of the stairs, she heard a sound that she'd never heard before. It was like the girl was dying. A long, coarse shriek that made Pip think of endless pain. Was he killing her? Was that what sex sounded like? It wasn't supposed to hurt, was it? She slipped through the cellar door, raced back along the underground corridor and dropped into her still-warm bed.

Oh God. What had she done? Who was that girl? Who was the man between her legs? She couldn't expel the image of them together. The girl's skin, her hair, her doll-like perfection, her eyes scrunched shut in absolute ecstasy. Was she real? Had Pip really seen it? It was outrageous, she felt sick, but why couldn't she stop thinking about it? The sound of it more than anything – that girl had howled like an animal. Jesus. And who the hell was the man? Surely it couldn't be Mr von Feldstein? For obvious reasons, she hadn't managed to see his face. But surely... what was he doing? That girl was Pip's age – no way was she the missing Mrs von Feldstein. He had a lover! Or was she a prostitute? Christ almighty, what kind of a place had she landed in here?

For hours, Pip lay trembling in bed, trying to calm down, forget about it and go to sleep. But racing through her head were the questions, the pictures, the utter mortification and panic if they'd seen her. She was dreading tomorrow – how could she meet Mr von Feldstein, how could she look him in the eye and take care of his children after what she'd seen?

\*

When she woke up in the morning, her first thought was of the couple. What to do? Not hide in her room all day, that's for sure. She'd promised herself that part of her life was over; she had to get up and face... whatever it was she had to face. She showered and dressed, took some deep breaths and walked upstairs.

There was no one in the hallway. She looked in the kitchen. Empty. The house was quiet. Outside she heard the faint whoosh of a car passing by on the road and some birds tweeting.

'Hello?' she tried. 'Hello? Anyone there?' Her German sounded like a made-up language – gobbledygook that a child might speak. It left her mouth and dissipated into the corners of the hallway.

No one answered. She looked out of the front door – no car in the driveway.

'Hello?' she said again, this time louder.

There was no reply from upstairs. No voices or strange, ethereal sex sounds. Nothing. *Right*, thought Pip, *that's it. I have to go and look*. She stomped up the stairs, loudly and slowly, to give them time to get dressed or whatever.

'It's me, Pip. The new au pair. Is anyone there?' Her heart was thumping as loudly as it had last night, but this morning she felt, more than anything else, angry that she had to act like this. Bloody sexers. Couldn't a person come to a new job

without having to see a live sex show within hours of arriving? What was the world coming to?

The spare-room door was wide open and when she looked in, there was no one. Last night – had she imagined it? Was it one of those dreams? A wet dream? But didn't only boys have them? Wait – she hadn't left the door open yesterday afternoon, when she'd been exploring. Or had she?

OK. Maybe she *had* imagined it. Weird. She'd never had a dream like that before.

Hang on. No – the room didn't look the same. She walked in and examined the bed: it was made, but not expertly. Yesterday, the white covers had been stretched over it and tucked in neatly. Today they were pulled in a more haphazard way over the bed. And there – aha! A blonde hair on the pillow. Bright, shiny, long – definitely the girl's.

Pip's mind was racing. Two people had been here, in Mr von Feldstein's house, having noisy sex. They'd entered and exited secretly, thinking no one had noticed. It couldn't have been Mr von Feldstein – why would he bring a girl back here and not use his extremely private bedroom in the attic? It must have been burglars. Sex burglars. Was that a thing? It was now.

Pip searched the house, examining every window catch, checking every lock. Outside, there were no ladders or footprints in the flower beds.

She couldn't wrap her head around it, so she had some breakfast. Making no more headway with the coffee machine than yesterday, she had to be satisfied with a couple of deep sniffs. Then she decided a walk might be just the thing.

The sun was out, bathing everything in a mellow glow. Emil-von-Feldstein-Weg was a street of large houses, Rosa's next door a match with Number Three, minus the attic windows. Pip wandered past the station, a bookshop, a bakery and – wonder of wonders – a small cinema. She peered in the window. It was one of those cool art house cinemas that showed interesting foreign films. There were posters in the window for films called *Lola Rennt* and *Todo Sobre Mi Madre*, which was being shown with German subtitles.

After half an hour, she found the river. Sitting on a bench, she watched the water rush by. Despite the sunny day and the pretty view of the tree-lined River Isar, the contented dog-walkers and the chattering families cycling by, she couldn't shift the feeling that this whole au pair idea was a colossal mistake. What was she doing here? This family, this house – even without what'd happened last night, she didn't

belong with them. But where did she belong? Would she ever be happy again?  
She'd forgotten what it felt like to be happy.

FADE IN

EXT. A BENCH, BY A RIVER - DAY

PIP MITCHELL, medium height, plain face, straight up-and-down body, mousy-brown hair - sits watching the river, fat tears rolling down her face.

PIP

(mumbling)

I wish you were still here, Holly. I miss talking to you. I don't have anyone to talk to.

HOLLY MITCHELL, 25 years old, beautiful, short dark hair, fit and tanned - sits next to her and puts her arm around her.

HOLLY

I'm here, kiddo. What d'you want to talk about?

PIP

I don't know what I'm doing here. I'm lonely. I'm sad. I'm a pathetic loser. And I don't know what those people were doing last night.

HOLLY

(laughing)

He was going down on her, kiddo. You should try it sometime. It'll make your

brain explode. But seriously, don't give up on Munich yet. This is a good place to be. You're not pathetic - you're brave.

PIP

I can't do this without you. It's too hard. I want to see you again.

HOLLY

Not going to happen, sis. Even I can't manage to come back from the dead.

PIP

You can. You have to. You're my hero. You're my big sister. I need you.

Pip sniffs and wipes the back of her hand under her nose. Holly hands her a tissue. She blows noisily into it.

PIP

Thanks.

HOLLY

Whatever you need me for, I'll be here. Tissues, careers advice, Sex Ed, anything. Stick at this job, you'll see, it's going to be just what you need. No more moping about me, OK? Promise me?

PIP

'K. Promise.

HOLLY

And remember what I always say: if it  
doesn't scare you shitless—

PIP

It's probably not worth doing. Yeah.  
Thanks.

HOLLY

That's what big sisters are for, kiddo.  
That and buying you booze when you're  
underage.

Holly stands and walks towards the river, turns and waves at  
Pip. She walks into the water until it reaches the top of her  
head. She disappears.

Pip sat a while longer, hating the scooped-out feeling she always had after she'd  
been crying. Then her stomach rumbled. She walked away from the river, following  
the path back up towards the house. Along the way she passed a beer garden, full of  
people eating at wooden tables in the sunshine. Her mouth watered. She wished she  
had enough money to eat there, but she had to save every last penny this year.  
Every last Pfennig. There was bread and cheese at the house and that would have  
to do. She wasn't allowed to eat out; she had to be careful or she'd never afford the  
flights to Australia for next year.

\*

All afternoon, Pip jumped at the sound of cars on the road, scampering to the front  
door to check if it was the family arriving. She steeled herself to meet Mr von  
Feldstein. If he had the same hair as the man in the bed last night, she would have  
to put a brave face on. She couldn't go back to England. She'd never find a job as  
well paid as this one, with free accommodation and food, so however strange the  
family was, she had to stick it out. Plus, she'd promised the fabricated ghost of her  
dead sister that she'd make a go of it.

At five o'clock, she was lying on the sofa with a book when she heard a car on the driveway, doors slamming and children's voices. *Brace yourself, Pip. Smile. Think of the money.*

She was in the hallway when the front door burst open, two boys careering into the house, shouting and jostling each other. They were alike, with dark curly hair and brown eyes.

'Dad! She's here! Hello. Dad! Are you Pip? Why are you called that? How tall are you? Do you know Harry Potter? Why are you a girl? Where are you most ticklish?'

'Umm. Yes. I don't know. About five foot seven. Who's Harry Potter? Because I am. None of your beeswax.'

'Dad, she doesn't know Harry Potter. Da-ad. Can we send her back?'

Pip heard footsteps clomping up the stairs outside the front door and held her breath. *Here we go.*

Mr von Feldstein's hair was curly, dark and greying. Definitely not him. *Thank Christ for that.*

He put down the suitcases and held out his hand to Pip.

'Welcome and sorry about these two monsters. (No, we can't send her back.) How was your journey? (Take your stuff upstairs and stop badgering her.) Did Rosa show you your room? (I don't know whether she likes *Star Wars*.)' He smiled wearily as the boys trooped upstairs. 'I'm dying for a coffee. Would you like one?'