

The New Neighbours

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For Laura

PROLOGUE

He's always known that he loves her too much. Nobody else has ever compared to her. They haven't even come close. If there are such things as soul-mates, then she is his. The way he feels about her is both a blessing and a curse. He's sometimes wondered if this need for her, this *obsession*, is all to do with growing up without a mother, without any kind of strong female role model. But no, his feelings for her go way beyond that. It's primal, almost spiritual. When they first laid eyes on each other there was this spark, this mutual recognition that they'd finally found their person, their kindred spirit, and a sense of calm had washed over him because he was no longer alone in the world. He'd finally met someone who would understand him completely. All of him, even the bad bits. *Especially* the bad bits.

But lately another emotion has begun to creep in. Something unwanted, insidious, playing over and over in his mind until it's impossible to ignore.

Fear.

He's realized he's scared of the power she has over him. And of what she can make him do.

PART ONE

I

LENA

July 2024
Bristol

The new neighbours are in their front garden. I stay in my car a little longer just to observe them, the aircon blowing in my face. They moved in just a few days ago so I haven't met them properly yet, but I've heard on the grapevine (well, Phyllis at number fifty-two) that they are a 'retired, well-to-do couple in their late sixties'.

Their front door is open, allowing me a tantalizing view of the newly refurbished hallway and the huge chandelier that catches the late-afternoon sunlight. Our houses are set on a pretty Victorian terrace on a tree-lined street in the Redland area of Bristol, although theirs is at the end of the row and is larger, with a loft conversion and modern glass extension at the back. It once belonged to Joan but when she went into a nursing home her daughter sold it to a developer, who renovated it to a high specification and must have sold it on to this couple. Ours feels like the less attractive smaller sibling. The runt of the litter.

For the last ten days the weather has been getting progressively hotter and every move I make causes sweat to break out in places I never knew you could sweat. Yet the neighbours look cool and fresh: she is slim in a pale-yellow linen sundress that contrasts with her dark auburn hair and he is in chino shorts and a linen shirt, not a drop of perspiration in sight. He's tall and handsome in that old-Hollywood matinee-idol way, his white hair slicked back from his perma-tanned face that screams of hours spent on golf-courses and beaches in the Caribbean. Parked outside their house, just behind my car, is a classic blue Jaguar that my teenage son, Rufus, is already coveting.

The woman notices me and smiles warmly. I wave, embarrassed to be caught gawping but this could be a great opportunity to introduce myself. I step out of the car, my dress already sticking to the backs of my thighs, and go to the boot to retrieve two paper bags of groceries for my movie night with Rufus. Every Thursday we do the same and I cherish it more than ever, especially as next year he'll be leaving for university. Our house, which had once felt so poky and overcrowded, will seem as empty as a beach out of season.

I close the boot with my elbow, and as I turn towards their house ready to welcome them to the neighbourhood, I'm startled to see the woman just inches away from me, a bright smile on her face.

'Hi. I'm Marielle Morgan. We've just moved in next door.' She holds out a hand but laughs when she realizes both of mine are taken up with shopping bags and drops it down by her side.

‘So lovely to meet you. I’m Lena,’ I say, sounding higher-pitched and more excitable than I was aiming for. I’ve never been very good at giving the impression of aloof or cool. I immediately warm to Marielle. She has beautiful greeny-grey eyes, symmetrical crow’s feet that fan towards her temples, high cheekbones and a honeyed voice, like Joanna Lumley’s.

‘Henry!’ she calls to her husband. ‘Come and meet Lena!’

The bags are heavy but I adjust them in my arms as her husband joins us. He seems more reserved than Marielle and softly spoken, but he has a calm self-assurance. He says hello, then stands silently by his wife.

‘Do you have any children?’ she asks. ‘I’ve seen a teenage boy coming and going.’

‘Yes. Rufus. He’s seventeen. He’ll be off to uni next year.’ I grimace and Marielle nods knowingly.

‘It’s so hard when they fly the nest. Is it just the two of you?’ I think of my husband, Charlie, who moved out late last year and say yes. She must notice the tension in my face, as she moves swiftly on. ‘It seems like a lovely neighbourhood. We’re new to the area and wanted to be close to family. We’ve recently become grandparents.’ She flushes with pride as she says it.

‘Oh, wow, congratulations. That’s lovely.’ I feel a small tug of envy. I love babies. I’d wanted a house full of children but sadly it wasn’t to be, which makes Rufus extra special and why I’ve always been a little overprotective of him.

She beams and Henry gives a half-smile tinged with embarrassment, then glances at his feet. He looks a tad

uncomfortable and I'm reminded of my dad. He always hated small-talk too.

'You must come over for a drink one evening,' continues Marielle. 'Rufus too.'

'Thank you, we'd love to.'

'Great. Well, we'll let you get on.' She turns to Henry and they are about to go back into their front garden when one of my bags decides to split open and my shopping spills on to the pavement. I stare down at it in dismay.

'Oh dear,' says Marielle, as I thrust my leg out to prevent a bottle of Coke from rolling into the road. 'Hold on, I'll go and fetch another bag.' She dashes into her house, leaving Henry and me alone, my shopping strewn on the pavement. I'm mortified by all the junk food.

'Here, let me help,' Henry says, picking up a box of Jaffa Cakes and a packet of custard creams and handing them to me.

'It's a Thursday-night treat,' I say, flustered. I set the other bag on the pavement. 'For me and Rufus. There *is* fruit in this bag.'

'Hey, I'm not judging,' He chuckles, which illuminates his whole face. 'You should see the junk Marielle and I get through. My wife has a very sweet tooth.'

'My mum's coming this weekend, and she's also got a sweet tooth, so this is for her too . . .' He looks slightly bemused as I blabber on about my mum and how she can only stay for one night because of her dogs, even though her partner, Mick, will be at home to look after them. I'm totally over-sharing but there is something about him that makes me feel like a child, not the forty-three-year-old mother of one that I am.

Marielle emerges from the house holding a hessian bag from the posh deli around the corner. Between us we scoop up my multipack of biscuits, the family-sized bag of crisps, a huge slab of Dairy Milk, and deposit them in the bag.

‘Thank you so much. I’ll go and dump this lot now but it’s so lovely to meet you both,’ I say again, aware I’m gabbling.

‘You too,’ says Marielle.

I let myself into the house and close the door behind me, my armpits damp. God, that was embarrassing. What a great first impression they’ll have of me, flapping, sweating and over-sharing.

I notice Rufus’s trainers chucked by the doormat and I’m pleased he’s home from college already. I carry the shopping to the kitchen and Phoenix, my latte-coloured Cavachon, trots over to greet me, acting like I’ve been gone all day and not just an hour at the supermarket. I put the shopping on the worktop and throw open the patio doors. Our rear garden is a sun-trap and the lawn is already patchy and dry after the last ten days of intense heat. According to the forecast we can expect the heatwave to go on for another week or two.

Rufus is in the sitting room with the blinds closed. When I come in, he pauses the TV on a close-up of James Stewart’s face and turns to me, looking guilty. He’s watching *Rear Window* again. Tonight it’s *The Third Man* because Rufus is doing a *film-noir* module for his media-studies course. I love how we’ve made watching a movie a regular Thursday-night event since last November, which coincided with Charlie moving out. I know it’s Rufus’s way of

offering his support: our love of movies has always been our thing. With his father it's music.

'Have you started without me?'

Rufus shakes his head. 'Ah, sorry, Mum. I can't tonight. I totally forgot, Dad's got that gig later and he asked if I'd help out. He's gonna pay me and Freddie to be his roadies.' Freddie is a new friend from college whom Rufus has been talking a lot about these last few months. He seems a nice enough lad. Rufus had got in with the wrong group in year eleven and one of his supposed 'friends' bullied him so I'm pleased he's making new ones. It was unfortunate he didn't go to the same school as my best friend Jo's son Archie as the two of them always got on, despite being quite different. Rufus couldn't wait to move to sixth-form college instead of staying on.

'But it's a Thursday night and you have college tomorrow . . .'

He runs a hand through his thick mop of hair. 'I know, and I'd never usually miss it but Dad said this gig's important. It's, like, a really big crowd.' I brush away my disappointment. Rufus is young: he should be out with his friends, not stuck in with me.

'Okay. What time will you be back?'

'I'll stay at Dad's tonight and he'll drop me to college in the morning.'

My heart sinks. I hate being in the house at night on my own, even though I'll have to get used to it when Rufus leaves.

To hide my feelings, I move to the window to open the blinds. Marielle and Henry are still in their front garden.

‘Also, Mum, been meaning to ask. Could I have some guitar lessons?’

I turn to face him. ‘Isn’t your dad teaching you?’

He pulls a face. ‘Dad only knows the basics and I need someone . . . more experienced.’ Charlie is a brilliant drummer but not so great on guitar.

‘How much are the lessons?’ Since Charlie and I split up money has been tight. I don’t earn much as an adviser at Citizens Advice and the modest inheritance my dad left me eighteen months ago has dwindled.

He gets up from the sofa and turns off the TV. ‘Not much. This guy is offering discounts if we sign up to a term. I shouldn’t need that many lessons. Dad knows the guy. He’s said it’s okay by him but I have to ask you too.’

‘I’ll talk to Dad about it,’ I promise. In my peripheral vision I can see Marielle pulling out a weed. ‘Hold on a sec. I need to give a bag back to the new neighbours before I forget. Long story,’ I add, when he frowns. ‘They seem nice. Older. Posh.’

I leave the room and go to the kitchen, grab the bag off the worktop and rush out of the front door. I’m about to cross to our boundary wall when Henry’s expression makes me hesitate. Marielle has her back to me, her shoulders slumped.

‘I’ve already said, we can’t discuss this now,’ he hisses. ‘It’s too dangerous.’ He notices me and lowers his gaze. Without saying another word he stalks off into the house. Marielle turns to face me and . . . Is it my imagination or is her smile a little wobbly?

I walk towards her, holding out the bag. 'Sorry for interrupting. I just wanted to give you this back.'

'Oh, you weren't.' She leans over the wall, takes it from me and clutches it to her chest.

'Oh, okay, good. Thanks.' I give a pathetic little wave and retreat into my house, wishing I'd waited before returning the bag.

I wonder what they were talking about and why Henry was so cross.

2

Rufus is in the back garden with his recording equipment. He's had it on loan from college for the past few days, and we've had fun using it to gather sound for his project. I'm not very technical but Rufus patiently showed me how to use it and last night we managed to pick up the cries of foxes and the hoot of an owl, which he was really pleased with.

'What time are you going to Dad's?' I ask, joining him on the lawn, where he's faffing with the fluffy boom microphone. 'I thought you were going soon.'

He adjusts the height of the mic's pole, frowning in concentration. 'I was hoping to do some more recording before I head off. When's the next bus?'

'Six forty.' The bus stop is only a street along, but Rufus still hasn't packed his bag. He has no concept of time, just like his dad.

'Ah, okay. It's just this is quite urgent.'

He's been home from college for more than an hour and of course he's trying to do it now, ten minutes before his bus. 'Here, give me that.' I sigh. 'Go and get your stuff and I'll do it for you. You'll miss the bus otherwise.'

He hands me the pole. 'Thanks, Mum.' He smiles ruefully. 'I've only got night sounds.' He winces at the high-pitched shriek of a far-off child and laughs. 'But I

could do with more stuff like this.’ He throws up his arms as though to encompass the cacophony that makes up this summer evening on a Thursday: the buzz of a lawnmower, an aeroplane overhead, the tinkling of cutlery, the sizzle of a barbecue, the splash of a paddling pool, the low murmur of conversation and the excitable squeals of children playing.

‘No problem, I’ll do my best. Remember Bess is coming this weekend. She won’t want to miss seeing you so make sure you’re around a bit on Saturday, won’t you?’ He’s called my mum by her Christian name since he could speak as she always refused to be called Nan or Gran. Says it would make her feel ancient, and I don’t like to break it to her that, at seventy-one, she’s not exactly a spring chicken even if her partner Mick is nine years her junior.

‘Sure.’ He unravels the tape deck’s strap from around his neck. When he’d first brought it home we’d laughed at how archaic it was, how it reminded me of the one I had in the early 1990s when I used to record the Top 40 every Sunday night.

I take it from him, surprised again by its bulk. ‘God, can’t they at least get some more up-to-date equipment at that college?’

He helps thread the strap over my shoulder. He’s shot up in the last year and towers above me now. ‘I know, right. And they’ve only got, like, five, so we have to share them. Harrison’s group are having it next. I promised him I’ll be done with it by Saturday so he can use it.’

‘Lucky them.’ I reach up to kiss his head, resisting the urge to hug him so tightly he’s forced to stay with me. I

smile to hide the sorrow that has lately been sitting just below the surface. 'Now go, or you'll miss the bus.'

He waves as he does a backward jog across the lawn then darts into the house. I can hear him thundering up the stairs, Phoenix chasing him, thinking it's a game. A few minutes later he calls goodbye and I hear the front door slam behind him. For a few beats all is silent, then Phoenix trots out to greet me and I bend down to cuddle him. 'He's gone, I know,' I say quietly, into his fur. Then I stand up, leaning on the boom mic. Right, I can't wallow. I might as well get on with this. I clamp the headphones over my ears and fiddle with the dials, like Rufus has shown me, and press record. I move across the sun-bleached lawn, nearly tripping over Phoenix, who is running in circles around my legs, as I point the mic towards the cloudless sky. The microphone instantly picks up the amplified sounds of a clunky piano, the slam of a car door, the low thrum of drum and bass, and . . . something else. Voices speaking in hushed, urgent tones.

'... I don't know, Mari ...'

'You promised me you'd take her. I've got everything ready. The room ...'

'I know ... but ... after what happened before ... should we really try again?'

They're coming from the direction of next door. Mari-elle and Henry. I lower the microphone, mortified that I'm picking up my new neighbours' private conversation, and move towards my back gate, determined to put distance between the microphone and where they might be.

I can see their upstairs window is slightly ajar, and a shadow moves behind the glass. They must have gone into

the house. I move further back so that I'm almost in the bushes. When I think I'm far enough away not to pick up any more of their conversation I tentatively raise the mic again.

'... we have no choice ...'

Damn it, I can still hear them. I press stop on the tape deck so I'm no longer recording.

'... You said you'd see this through to the end. You promised. And you know what I think about broken promises, Henry?'

'Marielle, please ...'

'It's not going to go away. And I'm not going to forget about it. This has to happen as we planned. It's the only way.' Her voice takes on a high-pitched, almost wheedling tone, at odds with the strong, independent woman I had taken her to be. *'I don't know what I'll do if you break your promise, Henry. I don't know how I'll live ...'*

She sounds genuinely upset and I'm flooded with shame. God, is my life so boring that I have to get my excitement from listening in on someone else's private conversation? I'm just about to lower the microphone when Henry says something that makes me freeze.

'It's too risky. We could get caught, Mari.'

'We didn't last time.'

My pulse quickens. Getting caught doing what?

Their voices are replaced by a rustling sound. Slowly, I turn and look up at their house, and see Henry moving at the window. Shit, has he seen me? I lower the boom mic with a prickle of unease and, head down, I hurry back into my kitchen.

What on earth are they planning?