

New friends, old secrets...

'A
gripping,
edge-of-your-
seat story'

KIMBERLY
BELLE

THE NEIGHBOURS

HANNAH MARY
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Hannah McKinnon

**The Neighbours: A gripping,
addictive novel with a twist
that will leave you breathless**

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The Neighbours: A gripping, addictive novel with a twist that will leave you breathless / H. M. McKinnon — «HarperCollins»,

‘Filled with a tangled web of twists and turns, The Neighbours is a gripping, edge-of-your-seat story all the way to the shocking end.’ Kimberley Belle, bestselling author of The Marriage Lie
New friends, old secrets... After a night of fun back in 1992, Abby is responsible for a car crash that kills her beloved brother. It's a mistake she can never forgive, so she pushes away Liam, the man she loves most, knowing that he would eventually hate her. Twenty years later, Abby and her husband, Nate, the driver who first came upon the scene of Abby's accident, the man who could not save her brother in time, are struggling to live with their guilt. When Liam moves into the neighbourhood with his own family, Abby and Liam, quickly agree to pretend never to have met. But they cannot resist the pull of the past – nor the repercussions of the terrible secrets they've both been carrying...
Readers love McKinnon: “Brilliant domestic suspense, keeps surprising you right till the end!” “a really exceptional read” “a good story to keep you on edge” “a really gripping read” “The story is perfectly paced” “I thoroughly enjoyed it and would fully recommend it!”

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Abby looks forward to meeting the family who just moved in next door—until she realizes they're the one couple who could expose her deepest secrets

After a night of fun back in 1992, Abby is responsible for a car crash that kills her beloved brother. It's a mistake she can never forgive, so she pushes away Liam, the man she loves most, knowing that he would eventually hate her for what she's done, the same way she hates herself.

Twenty years later, Abby's husband, Nate, is also living with a deep sense of guilt. He was the driver who first came upon the scene of Abby's accident, the man who pulled her to safety before the car erupted in flames—the man who could not save her brother in time. It's this guilt, this regret, that binds them together. They understand each other. Or so Nate believes.

In a strange twist of fate, Liam moves into the neighborhood with his own family, releasing a flood of memories that Abby has been trying to keep buried all these years. Abby and Liam, in a complicit agreement, pretend never to have met, yet cannot resist the pull of the past—nor the repercussions of the terrible secrets they've both been carrying...

For additional books by Hannah Mary McKinnon, visit her website, www.hannahmarymckinnon.com.

The Neighbors

Hannah Mary McKinnon



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To the loves of my life—Robert, Leo, Matt and Lex

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[THEN: JULY 18, 1992 ABBY](#)

“HELP.”

The faint voice floated toward me. Gliding smooth as a paper airplane from somewhere in the midst of the fog swirling through my brain. Orange lights flashed in a steady rhythm and—

“Please.”

I wondered if I’d uttered the words, but I hadn’t moved my lips. Hadn’t moved at all. Couldn’t. It hurt too much. Everything hurt too much.

Moments passed, and I tried to string together the few wispy fragments my mind allowed me to cling to. My arms, chest and legs were pressed against something hard and uncomfortable—the ground, not my soft bed—but the reason why I found myself in that position escaped me entirely. And I was too exhausted to care.

A breeze softly brushed across my cheek. The pavement beneath me felt warm, and despite the distinct taste of rust invading my mouth, I could smell freshly cut grass. Hadn’t I been—

“Help me, Abby.”

The voice was too low to be mine. A man’s then—it had to be. Why wouldn’t he let me sleep? My eyes felt heavy and impossible to open, so I let my thoughts start pulling me away, ever so slowly, to the deliciously inviting state of unconsciousness.

“Abby.”

Rest would have to wait. Against my better judgment I raised my head, each millimeter expending energy I didn’t think I had and causing pain to shoot through every part of my body like a thousand burning hot pins. I tried, but my legs and lower back stubbornly refused to budge even the tiniest amount, as if I’d been nailed to the ground.

I forced my eyes open.

And I saw him.

“Tom.” My own voice this time, barely a whisper. “Tom.” A little stronger, louder.

My brother lay a few meters away in what had been my blue Ford Capri, but which was now an upturned carcass of broken glass and mangled steel. The flashing of the hazard lights illuminated Tom’s bloody face and body every few seconds, a perverse freak show. He hung upside down. Unlike me, he was still in the car, somewhere between the front and back seats, his arms and legs bent at impossible angles. Eyes wide and glazed. Staring at me. Desperate. Begging.

“Abby,” he said once more, and I watched as he attempted to lift his arms, tried to reach for me. “I can’t get out.” Tears rolled up his forehead, mixing with a steady stream of blood from the deep gash above his eye that looked like a second mouth. “I can’t get out.”

“Tom,” I said again, before my eyes closed despite my efforts to keep them open. Fighting the beckoning darkness felt like a struggle I’d never win.

The light from the wreck somehow became brighter, warmer, too. Somewhere in my brain it occurred to me it wasn’t the sun—couldn’t be the sun—it was still so dark. Wasn’t it? My mind started drifting away.

But then the pungent smell of smoke and petrol filled the air.

I wanted to move. I needed to get to him. But I couldn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, my eyes open again, staring into his. “Tom. I’m so sorry.”

The last thing I heard were the screams, Tom’s and mine, as the car burst into flames.

NOW NATE

WHEN THE U-HAUL van arrived next door, I did what most sensible human beings would do: I ignored it. Once I’d made sure it was just the new neighbors moving in, not some crazy person stealing lingering Christmas decorations, I cranked up the fire, flopped back down on the sofa and buried my nose in my copy of *I Am Ozzy*, marveling at how the guy had lasted so long.

As far as I was concerned, moving in February, undeniably the coldest month of the year, was a ridiculous notion. And I wanted nothing to do with it.

The house was my peaceful kingdom that blustery Saturday morning. Abby had gone to pick up Sarah from a sleepover, and they’d planned on a Mum and Daughter shopping spree in town. Bad weather and potential conflict be damned.

I think Abby had her eye on the winter jacket sales, and knew Sarah wanted a pair of Steve Madden combat boots. I could tell from my daughter’s look she’d been impressed when I said I knew who Steve Madden was. In reality, I’d only heard about him when I’d finally got around to streaming *The Wolf of Wall Street*, belly-laughing as Jonah Hill struggled to pronounce the designer’s name whilst high on a bucket of quaaludes. Abby hadn’t been impressed by the film, not even by Margot Robbie in that scene. Well, never mind Margot’s perfect breasts. Apparently Abby didn’t like Steve Madden’s boots either.

“They’re awful,” she’d whispered last night as we lay in bed. Then she must have remembered Sarah was out because she said, more loudly, “Grunge, punk or whatever the hell gone bad. I hate combat boots.”

I lowered the stack of papers I’d promised myself I’d look over as soon as I got home but had barely made a start on. “I hope you didn’t tell Sarah.”

Abby pulled a face. “God, no, ’course not. I said they were great, and I might get a pair, too. Figured reverse psychology would stop her from wanting them.”

“Did it?”

“Nope. She gave me one of her looks.”

I laughed. “I think they’re pretty cool.” When Abby raised an eyebrow I added, “The boots, not the looks. And it’s her money. She saved up for them. Let her do what she wants.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” She wrinkled her nose.

“I’d wear them if they didn’t make me look like a middle-aged has-been.”

Abby smiled, rolled on top of me and kissed my neck. Her hair tickled my face and smelled of something vanilla and cherryish. She always smelled nice, even when she’d been on one of her insane, million-mile runs.

“You’re not a has-been, Nate,” she whispered.

I wrapped an arm around her, slid my other hand underneath her T-shirt, ran my fingers up and down the soft skin of her back. “And what about the middle-aged part?” I said before nibbling on her neck.

She raised her head and looked at me with one eyebrow arched, and a sly smile playing on her lips. “Let’s see...”

As her mouth traveled down my chest, I shoved the papers off the bed, letting them slide to the floor in a heap. Reviewing Mr. Rav Ramjug’s superior programming skills could wait. Frankly it had been a while since Abby and I last got busy. People say it’s normal for a couple’s sex life to disappear for a while after having a kid. What they don’t tell you is the vanishing act repeats once said kid hits teenage years because she a) doesn’t go to bed at seven and sleep like a dead man until dawn, and b) has the hearing of a greater wax moth.

I groaned as Abby kissed my stomach. Despite us having the house to ourselves and the entire night ahead of us, we ended up in a frantic quickie, with Abby collapsing onto my chest afterward, the two of us breathing heavily.

“I think we both needed that,” she said, before sliding off me and getting up. I never had the chance to moan about my wife wanting to spoon endlessly after sex. Three minutes in and she was about as cuddly as a piece of Lego.

I propped myself up on one elbow and watched her get dressed. I did that sometimes—watch Abby—and mostly she was unaware of it. When she was baking and I pretended to be engrossed in a book or—another favorite—when she was going over the monthly bills, hair scrunched up in a messy ponytail, brow furrowed at the latest phone statement, lips moving silently as she checked the numbers.

I liked to look at her, I mean properly look at her. Study her as if she was a Miró at The Tate I could stand in front of and ponder, cocking my head to one side, pompously tapping my lips with one finger, wondering what the artiste meant to express with the masterfully applied strokes and splashes of paint. Not that I had a bloody clue about art. I could barely tell a Picasso from a stick man even if the latter tapped me on the shoulder and kicked me in the nuts.

So I silently perused Abby’s long, slim legs with the scars she hated so much but were a huge part of her, the arch of her back, her elegant, swan-like neck. A classic masterpiece.

“What?” Her voice pulled me out of my trance. She’d turned around, and I’d missed it. Busted.

“Nothing,” I answered with what I hoped was a charming grin, and shook my head slightly. “Just looking at you.”

As she smiled her blue eyes sparkled, and her long blond hair settled in that sexy, tousled bed-head look, the one that screamed, “Oh, yeah, I got some.” I let my gaze linger as she went to the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

I lay back in bed and thought about my wife the way you do in a fuzzy postcoital state. Abby could give Jennifer Aniston a run for her money anytime. At forty-four she looked at least six years younger. It put me, with my slight paunch that I swore every January (the last one being no exception) I’d get rid of, to absolute shame. I wasn’t overly proud of the thinning spot on the top of my head either. But what can you do? I was almost halfway between my forty-sixth and forty-seventh birthday. Jesus, forty-seven—it had sneaked up on me like my slight paunch. I stretched, sighed and soon felt myself drift off to sleep, only stirring slightly when Abby climbed into bed a while later.

Back in my warm living room, I reluctantly dragged myself out of the memory, cleared my throat and concentrated on Ozzy’s extravagant tales. They kept me entertained for a further ten minutes, before, mug of fresh coffee in hand, I meandered to the window, fully intent on spying on who was moving in next door.

I sipped my drink and watched three jacket-, hat-and glove-clad figures slowly lugging boxes from the van to the house. Not professional movers, I decided. Not brisk enough. Difficult to tell for sure from the angle, but they looked like a standard family. Woman, bloke and, from what I could see, a gangly-legged teenage boy, hunched over, moving slowly, his body language screaming “get me out of here.” I couldn’t blame him. Like I said, moving at this time of year was a ridiculous notion.

I picked up my phone from the coffee table and sent Abby a text. Neighbors moving in. Look normal. How's the shopping? Should we re-mortgage the house?

A few seconds later my phone buzzed.

HAHA. Haven't left Camilla's yet! Are you helping them? You'd make a good impression.

Shit. I hadn't thought this through. Why did I send a message in the first place? Now I'd be a dickhead if I didn't do my share of carrying. I walked back to the window.

The teenager stood at the back of the van, gesticulating to someone inside the vehicle, his arms flying around. He appeared to cross them over his chest, and, although I could only see the back of his black-and-yellow hat, which made his head look like a giant and slightly angry bee, I'd have bet money he'd stuck out his chin, too. The woman walked over and put a hand on the teen's shoulder before waving her arms around, too, pointing to the house, the inside of the van and back to the house again, shaking her head.

I sighed loudly and made my way into the hall, where I pulled out my coat, boots and hat. I looked at the photograph of Tom, my wife's brother, whom I'd almost met before he died, and gave him a nod. "You think I'm a crazy bugger going out there. Don't you?"

He stared back at me with his forever boyish grin and early '90s boy band haircut, which made him look like he'd stuck a fluffy palm tree on top of his head.

"Yeah, exactly," I said, then opened the front door. The cold air whipped around my face, and the gravel scrunched beneath my feet, protesting each of my heavy steps. "Jesus, my balls will turn to ice cubes," I muttered as I pulled my hat past my ears and trudged to the van.

"...telling you. There's no way we can lift it, Liam," I heard the woman say to the person in the van when I got within earshot. "It's not happening. It isn't."

Her voice was soft yet determined. It reminded me of Abby, and what Sarah and I secretly called the tone. My daughter and I knew there wasn't an inch of wriggle room left when Abby used the tone. Capitulation was the only option. Capitulation or certain death—probably. We'd never dared find out.

I looked in the back of the van and saw the guy—Liam, apparently—put down the side of a green sofa. As he straightened his back he caught sight of me and smiled.

"Hey," he said, tilting his head. "Can I help you?"

I smiled back and shrugged. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

The woman and Beanie Boy turned around. I guessed him to be around the same age as Sarah. The woman smiled; he didn't. No surprise there. There's nothing quite like the downer of amputated teenage happiness.

"I'm Nate." I pointed to our house. "From next door. Thought you might need a hand."

The woman's smile broadened, showing off immaculate teeth. Brown curls stuck out from underneath her fire engine-red bobble hat. She stood around the same height as Abby but looked as if she weighed a few kilos more. It suited her—it was hard not to notice just how well.

"Thanks," she said and held out her hand to shake mine. "I'm Nancy. Nancy Jefferson." She pointed to the guy in the van, surrounded by boxes neatly marked Garage, Bedroom, Living Room—FRAGILE and so on. "That's my husband, Liam, and this is our son, Zachary."

"Zac," the teenager said, rolling his eyes around in his head so hard they started to look a lot like marbles. "I'm Zac." He shook my hand, too, and now that they'd stopped their dizzy spin, I noticed he had his father's intense eyes.

Liam jumped down from the van and gave me a hard clap on the shoulder. "Cheers," he said. "Appreciate it. The removal company got delayed, so we decided to bring a few things ourselves. A couple of people helped us on the other end but now, well..." He whistled. "You're a lifesaver." He smiled again, revealing teeth as white as his wife's.

I figured these people were either dentists or had a great family discount. Either way, Liam's jaw was what my mother would have called "strong," and his cheekbones probably had their own

exclusive page in *Esquire*. When he discarded his winter jacket, and although he wore a fleece, I could tell he was no stranger to the weight bench.

“Happy to help,” I said. Then I did that male-pride thing—sucked in my gut, straightened my back, all the while wishing I’d been a tad more diligent with my sit-ups in recent months. “Let’s start with that sofa.”

Liam and I made a couple of trips from the van to the front door, where Zac and Nancy took over dispatching boxes to the appropriate rooms.

“So where did you move from?” I asked Liam as we carried a TV the size of a small country up the driveway. The bloody thing felt as solid as a slab of gold and probably cost more. “You don’t sound local.”

“Lancashire. Preston area.” He navigated us toward the front steps. Christ, he didn’t even seem to be sweating while I could already feel my shirt sucking mine up like a sponge.

“Really?” I straightened the TV slightly so we could get it through the door without scratching it. “My grandparents lived in Longton.”

“Yeah? You grew up there?”

“No. We went north almost every summer, though.” We put the television down in the living room, my back screaming a silent thank god. “But my wife grew up near Preston. She moved here after we met.”

“Seriously? What’s her name?”

“Abigail—Abby—Morris.” He shrugged so I added, “Sanders before we married.”

Liam looked at me for a few seconds, then blinked. I thought I saw a flicker of something pass over his face, but it disappeared all too quickly, so I figured I’d imagined it.

I laughed. “Don’t tell me you know her?”

“No.” He turned and headed for the front door. “The name doesn’t ring any bells.”

In hindsight I should have stopped him. Questioned the look. At least asked what it meant. If I had, then perhaps none of what was to come would have happened.

And maybe, just maybe, I’d still be with my wife.

NOW ABBY

“THEY’RE MOVING IN TODAY?” Camilla wiped her flour-covered hands on her apron. “That didn’t take long to sell, did it?”

I nodded, and peered past her up the stairs, wishing Sarah would hurry up. Now that Camilla and I both worked at Sterling Engineering, seeing her on weekends could be, well, a bit much. She gossiped a fair amount and somehow got people to say more than they should despite themselves, including me if I let my guard down.

“The house was only empty a few weeks,” I said. “Not surprising, considering the price they were asking.” I heard Sarah and Claire giggling upstairs and imagined them speaking in hushed whispers about boys, music and music by boys. They’d declared themselves BFFs on their first day of school, but Nate always said nowadays they were more like conjoined twins.

“Let’s go, Sarah,” I called out, “We’d better get a move on if you want those boots.”

Sarah’s answer was a casual, “Yeah, coming,” and I pictured her rolling her eyes and Claire putting a hand over her own mouth—maybe my daughter’s, too—stifling another laugh.

“So who are the new neighbors?” Camilla raised her eyebrows. “Some hot guy who can mow the lawn for you?”

I scrunched up my face. “Hardly. Nate just said they look normal. And he cuts the grass.”

Camilla laughed. “Well, if a fit bloke moves in next door you might want to rethink that. But,” she said, “enough of my fantasies. In any case, they can’t be worse than Barbara, right?”

I knew exactly where this conversation was heading. Camilla always wanted the skinny on our neighbor’s latest antics, and there had been plenty to entertain her with in recent months. “I bet you’re glad they dragged her off to the home,” she continued, “and—”

“That’s a bit unfair. She wasn’t well, you know? We all need to—”

“I know, I know.” Camilla shrugged. “You’re going to tell me to be more compassionate. Someday I’ll be old and senile and glad of people being patient with me.” She laughed. “But even you have to admit she was a nightmare. Sarah said she’s refused to go near the old bat for years. You never told me it was that bad.”

I opened my mouth in contradiction, then closed it again. After all, I could hardly deny it, Barbara Baker truly had been a nightmare. She’d been our neighbor since we’d bought the house in Bromley almost seventeen years earlier. At first she’d been charming and eloquent, brought us succulent mince pies at Christmas and soul-warming chicken-noodle soup when both Nate and I got the flu. She’d babysat Sarah whenever we’d desperately needed a night out—and even when we hadn’t. The perfect neighbor. Except, over the years, as Barbara slowly lost each of her cats and most of her marbles to old age, she’d gradually morphed into a shrieking banshee who wore the same white flannel nightie that had taken on a distinctly yellow sheen under the arms. It was sad, it really was, and we helped her as often as she would allow, which, lately, had been hardly ever.

Camilla leaned in and only slightly lowered her voice. “Did she honestly shout, ‘Eff off and die, you shits’ at you before she left?” Her eyes were wide, anticipating the latest morsel of gossip.

I nodded. “We’d been counting the days until she left for the home.” Why had I said that? Now Camilla would tell everyone we hated our old neighbor.

Camilla laughed. “You mean the godforsaken place where you come out stiffer than the box they shove you in, isn’t that what Barbara always called it? And Sarah said she threw the contents of the litter tray over the fence, too? God.” As she stopped to catch a breath, her face flushed, and I couldn’t tell if it was information overload or something menopausal.

“Yes, she did.” I’d have to educate Sarah again on the lost art of discretion, not that I was exactly leading by example. I cleared my throat. “But Barbara wasn’t well, the poor love.”

“So sad,” Camilla said, floury hand on hips, her voice grave. “Old age is a friend to no one.”

“Absolutely,” I said, determined to change the subject. “So how’s Josh?”

Camilla clicked her tongue. “Oh, fine. Out with his bowling league again. Some tournament or something. Can’t keep track where.”

I smiled. “Isn’t it great that you have your own interests? When you don’t have to live in each other’s pockets?”

Camilla’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Fantastic. So do you still work out as much?”

“Yeah.” Sensing an impending interrogation, I called out, “Sarah, forget it. The weather’s horrible anyway. We’ll go home instead.”

My daughter immediately appeared at the top of the stairs, her bag in her hand. “Nu-uh,” she said, pushing her blond hair away from her face. “I’m coming. I want those boots.” She hugged Claire, then kissed her on the cheek with a big, lip-glossy mwah noise. “Bye, thanks for everything.” She bounded down the stairs, patted Camilla on the arm, walked directly past me and opened the door. “Come on then, Mum. What’s keeping you?”

I refused the bait, said my goodbyes and followed my daughter outside, wondering how we’d make it through the day without wanting to throttle each other.

NOW SARAH

Dear Diary,

I think Benjamin Franklin said, “Guests, like fish, begin to smell after three days.” Well, me and Mum would never make it that long. We stink after three hours.

People say I’m like her. I suppose we have the same hair, nose and maybe eyes. But that’s it. Thank god my personality’s much more like Dad’s because Mum’s a nightmare.

For example, even though I was shattered this morning, I was still looking forward to spending time with her and getting my boots. That lasted about thirty seconds until we got in the car. First

of all, Mum had a go at me about the Word of the Day calendar she gave me for Christmas. The conversation (not that it was a proper conversation) went something like:

Mum: Why aren't you using it? Don't you want to be a journalist? I thought it would help.

Me: I haven't had time.

Mum: Oh, come off it, Sarah. You spend forever on that phone of yours.

Ugh!

And when I tried on the combats, Mum went all passive-aggressive with eye rolls and huffs. We studied the behavior at school when Ms. Phillips tried to show the class how pathetic it was, hoping we'd stop. Except of course we didn't because we knew how much it peed her off.

So, when I asked Mum what was wrong she huffed again and said the boots were "aggressive looking" and "not very feminine." I told her not to worry. That during the summer I'd only wear flip-flops and micro shorts where half your bum hangs out.

Me: What do you think, Mum? Those shorts are really feminine.

Mum: You will not be wearing those, young lady. Absolutely not. Over my dead body.

She even used the tone. God. I'd meant it as a joke. Like I'd ever be seen dead with half my bum hanging out. Not that it's a bad butt. Actually I think it's a quite okay butt, thank you very much, but (and that's a lot of butts, ha ha) I wouldn't walk around with it on display. I thought Mum would get the joke. I mean, doesn't she know me at all?

Anyway, I bought my combats (black leather, funky, sassy, kick-ass and 60% off, yes!). Mum found a coat (black wool, single-buttoned, boring, predictable, 40% off, still not bad). And then, of course, we couldn't agree on lunch. I wanted a burger. She wanted sushi. We ended up at Pret. Sandwiches must be the gastronomic equivalent of neutrality. Hey, that's not a bad line. Must remember that one for my next essay.

We're home now, and she said we should visit the new neighbors. She texted Dad, and he's helping them put furniture together or something. Hardly a surprise. Dad's always fixing stuff. I thought he was Bob the Builder until I was six. Might even have called Mum Wendy once (oops!). Speaking of, she told me to hurry up again. I'd better go before she flips her lid.

Later,

Sarah x.

PS. Word of the day: fantod, noun.

1. plural a: a state of irritability and tension.

b: fidgets.

2: an emotional outburst (fit).

As in: Going shopping with my mother gave me the fantods! Hahahaha!

NOW ABBY

"COME ON, SARAH." I stood by our front door with a bottle of chilled white wine in my hand. Nate always said people liked chardonnay. I hoped he was right. Sarah trudged down the stairs in her new boots at a glacial pace before giving me an uninspired look.

"Why do I have to go?"

I stifled another sigh. "It's the polite thing to do."

She glanced at the bottle. "What if they don't drink?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine."

"You don't drink."

My eyes darted involuntarily to Tom's photograph. "No, I don't," I snapped, then took a deep breath. Sarah hadn't had anything to do with the accident—she hadn't even been born.

"But what if they're recovering alcoholics?" she gasped and put a hand to her mouth in a deliberately dramatic gesture. "Or Muslim? Or Amish?"

"Don't be a smarty-pants, Sarah."

"Wowzers, Mum. I can be smart without even trying."

I counted to ten in my mind. Slowly. I knew exactly what she was doing. She thought if she annoyed me enough I'd lose my temper and tell her to stay at home. Too bad for her, I used to play the exact same game with my mother. For once I was half a step ahead of her.

I smiled. "Yes, you can be. Come on. Time to go."

She pouted as she pulled on her jacket, and I made sure I kept my expression neutral to avoid another feud. A minute later we plodded over to the neighbors and rang the doorbell.

A teenage boy who looked like he'd been stretched like a rubber band opened the door. "Can I help you?" His voice was deep, gravelly and a little on the husky side.

"Hi." I smiled. "I think you still have my husband."

He gave a blank look, then flicked his shock of chocolate-brown, gold-streaked hair.

"Nate from next door," I offered, and put a hand to my chest. "I'm Abby. This is Sarah."

He smiled. Sort of. "Oh, yeah. Come on in," he said in a monotone, then turned and called out, "Mum, it's the neighbors."

A woman's voice came from the back of the house. "Great. Bring them in, Zac."

"Go on through." Zac gestured with his hand.

I walked into the eccentrically wallpapered hallway, which always reminded me of The Who's Magic Bus. Barbara had loved bright colors and flowers, and almost every room was papered in a different pattern. She used to say it meant spring sprang eternal in her home. We always assumed she'd eaten a lot of magic mushrooms in the seventies.

As we made our way down the hall, the sweet perfume of apples and cinnamon filled the air, warm and inviting. Zac disappeared up the stairs, and Sarah and I continued to the kitchen. A candle—one of those scented ones—glowed in the middle of a table otherwise covered in stacks of plates, glasses and cutlery.

Nate leaned against the fridge with his arms crossed and a half-full Heineken in one hand. "Hey." He smiled.

A woman with long, curly brown hair in an untidy ponytail took two steps toward us. When she smiled, her face lit up like a very pretty fairground.

"Hi." She threw a rag on the counter and wiped her hands on her jeans before stretching one out toward me.

"This is Abby." Nate winked at me. "Abby, this is Nancy."

"It's great to meet you." Nancy shook my hand, and I noticed how warm and silky her skin felt. "Nate's told us so much about you already. And your daughter." She looked past me. "You must be Sarah. It's such a pleasure, really, it is." I didn't know the woman, but she seemed incredibly nervous, almost desperately keen to make a good impression.

"Uh, hello," Sarah mumbled back. She still got embarrassed when introduced to strangers. It concerned me sometimes, especially if she wanted to follow her dreams and become a journalist. Nate always said she'd be fine; she'd make her own path. I worried she'd never find it to begin with.

"Liam—that's my husband—went out for more beer." Nancy laughed. "We only had two in the house. Not nearly enough to get rid of the pain from lifting all those boxes."

"I told you we had some." Nate grinned at Nancy. It was his charming smile, the one he used to disarm people, the one that made them feel comfortable. I swear he never noticed how effective it was. Sometimes I didn't think he realized he was doing it.

"No way." Nancy wagged a finger. "You've already helped so much. We couldn't take your beer, as well. It would add more abuse to your injuries, or whatever the expression is."

"Insult to injury." I caught Nate's look. I often did that. Corrected people, even when it was irrelevant. Such a bad habit. I plastered my own smile on my face and mouthed, "Sorry," at Nate. I waved the bottle of wine around in midair. "I brought this. Hope you like chardonnay."

"Absolutely love it." Nancy took the bottle from me and set it on the table. "That's so sweet of you. And thanks for lending us your hubby." Nancy pointed at Nate. "He's a hero, you know. Helped

us carry the heavy things inside and even fixed the leaky toilet upstairs.” She laughed again. It was a warm laugh, nervous perhaps, but kind and genuine. I had a feeling I’d like her husband, too, if he had a personality similar to hers. She clicked her tongue. “It would have taken Liam six months to get around to it. But Nate? He rolled up his sleeves and voilà.”

When Sarah hummed the Bob the Builder tune, I poked her in the ribs, and she huffed as if I’d deflated her like a balloon.

The front door opened. “I’m back,” a man called out. “Who needs a drink?”

A shiver shot down my spine. That voice. That unmistakable voice. Deep and silky. Sexy. You never forget a voice like that. Not when the memory of words spoken, even after all this time, still made my knees buckle. I tried not to gasp, and bit my tongue as images flashed into my mind, the ones I tried hard not to think of when I was in bed with Nate. Arms and legs entwined. Gasping, groaning, sweaty backs and my cries of, “Fuck me, Liam. Harder. Harder.”

It’s not something I’d ever said to Nate. He probably would have blushed.

The footsteps were coming down the hallway, had almost reached the kitchen.

And there was nowhere for me to go.

No escape.

No place to hide.

THEN ABBY

IT WAS NEW YEAR’S EVE, and I’d decided if the last few minutes were anything to go by, nineteen ninety-two was going to be absolute crap.

My boyfriend of eight months, Dwayne Mazerolle, had just—literally just—dumped me. Standing in the middle of Rowley’s Irish Pub with a group of his friends, he’d pulled me to one side.

“...so...tell you...going...buy land.” His voice boomed in my ear, making me wince. I couldn’t make out what he’d said because EMF’s “Unbelievable” blared from the loudspeakers. Turned out the song was quite fitting.

“What?” I shouted back. “Why are you buying land?”

“Thai-land,” he yelled. “I’m going to Thailand.” He held up two thumbs, swaying a little, not to the music, but because of the many vodka and Cokes. “On a trip.”

“Thailand?” I felt my face scrunch up into a puzzled look. “When?”

Dwayne pulled me to one side of the bar and away from the speaker where it was marginally quieter. “Day after tomorrow,” he said, taking a sudden interest in his size eleven feet.

“Eh? You’re kidding!” I wondered if he was going to start making fun of my expression, tell me it was all a joke. If it was, I didn’t get it.

He lit up a Benson & Hedges and blew the smoke out of his nostrils, kind of like a cartoon bull. “It’s a spiritual trip,” he said. “You know, to reconnect with nature. I need to find myself.”

“Find yourself?” He was twenty-three, worked as a mechanic at a local garage, lived with his parents. Where, exactly, had he lost himself?

“We’ll start seeing each other again when I’m back.” He dragged deeply on his cigarette, the orangey glow lighting up his face. I’d always hated the smoky taste when he kissed me, even after he’d munched his way through half a packet of mints.

“When will you be back?” I tried to keep the whine out of my voice.

“I don’t know, babe.” He blew out a steady stream of smoke, then pulled me closer. “When I feel at one with Mother Nature. Or when I run out of cash.”

“But when did you decide?” I shouted as the music switched to R.E.M.’s “Shiny Happy People,” telling us to throw our love around. Oh, yeah? The only thing I wanted to throw was a slap in Dwayne’s direction.

He shrugged. “I booked it last month. I—”

“Last month?” This time there was definite whining, and I cringed.

“See.” Dwayne shook his head, and I realized he must have confused my self-directed contempt for emotional upset related to his imminent departure. “This is why I didn’t bring it up. I knew you wouldn’t understand.” And then he actually pursed his lips.

God, I hated it when he sulked. Come to think of it, over the past few weeks I’d hated pretty much everything he’d done. A few days ago I’d told him I was ill so I didn’t have to endure The Last Boy Scout. I’d watched Fried Green Tomatoes alone that night instead. The week before I’d said my period had come early because I wasn’t in the mood. Again. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last time I’d been in the mood. But all that aside, dumping me on New Year’s Eve was a shitty move by any standards.

“You know what, Dwayne? Have a great trip and a happy bloody 1992.”

I pushed past him, fully intent on retrieving my coat from the back of the bar so I could go home, curl up in bed and ignore the rest of the world’s celebrations. But the bar’s resident DJ Joe had other plans. The music stopped.

“Okay, everybody,” he said into his mike. “Grab your partner—or whoever you’d like to have as your partner tonight—and get ready. Only a few more seconds. Gird your loins, people, because... Here. We. Go!”

Everybody chanted, “Ten...”

As I pushed past a few more sweaty bodies I felt a hand on my arm.

“Nine...”

I was ready to turn around and tell my now ex-boyfriend to let me go. But when I heard a man’s voice in my ear, it wasn’t Dwayne’s.

“It’s bad luck to start the New Year without a kiss.”

“...eight...seven...”

Oh, come on. Did I have a Lonely Hearts Loser sign stuck to my back? Nice voice, though.

“...six...five...four...”

I turned around. Eyes, those eyes. Gray. Clear. Mesmerizing. I couldn’t help but stare.

“...three...two...”

“I’m Liam,” he said. His face moved closer. He put his index finger underneath my chin.

“...one.”

“And I’ve wanted to kiss you all night.”

I didn’t recall hearing the shouts of, “Happy New Year.”

All I could remember were his arms sliding around my waist, mine around his neck, and the multicolored fireworks going off in my head when our lips touched.

NOW ABBY

HE STOOD IN the doorway of Barbara Baker’s kitchen. Liam. My ex. The one man I’d loved more than life itself. I’d walked away from him, twice, and the last time I’d told him we’d never, ever see each other again. And yet, here he was. Living in the house next door.

“Hello,” he said, and swallowed. He looked at Sarah, then at me with those gray eyes. Wolf eyes, I used to call them. Hypnotic, hungry, searching.

I took a deep breath, realizing I’d held it since I’d heard his voice. My legs were planted firmly on the ground, heels pushed in, my arms crossed. A statue. What the hell should I say?

“Hello,” I muttered. “I—I’m...pleased to meet you.”

Had I said that out loud?

After a second he turned to Nate and shrugged. “I’m sorry.” He smiled, and I noticed his laughter lines had become a lot deeper since we’d last seen each other, but they suited him. “I’m hopeless with names.” He looked at me again. “Nate told me, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten.”

“Abby,” Nate, Nancy and I said together, my voice twice as loud as theirs combined.

“Abby,” Liam said slowly, deliberately. “So sorry. I’m Liam.”

“Well, yes, we—” I stopped myself. We knew each other. Of course we did. I wanted to laugh, make a joke about it being a small world and wasn’t it a strange coincidence, ha, ha, ha. But I kept quiet. I should have said something. Made it abundantly clear there was history between us. A shared past. I had the opportunity. But I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to say anything.

Liam held out his hand, and when I shook it I swear an electric current passed between us. It flowed out of him and into me, washing over my entire body like a surfer’s wave. I hadn’t felt his touch for so long, but it was as if every pore of my skin remembered him. I looked into his eyes, tried to gauge his reaction, wondered if he’d felt it, too. He must have, surely. It had been too intense to ignore.

“Pleasure to meet you, too.” He let go of my fingers, his eyes giving nothing away, and turned to my daughter. “You’re Sarah?”

Sarah nodded.

“Can I get you a Coke?” Liam asked, and she nodded again. “How about you, Abby?” He held out a Stella, and I watched a drop of condensation run down the bottle neck and onto his hand. I wanted to reach out and touch it, but instead I cleared my throat.

“Water would be great.”

It seemed impossible to take my eyes off him as he grabbed a can from the fridge and handed it to Sarah. When he passed me a glass of water his fingers seemed to linger that little bit too long. My mouth went dry as old toast, so I swallowed a big gulp to compensate, almost emptying the entire glass in one go.

He’d hardly changed since I’d seen him. He always used to keep in shape—ran four or five times a week along with frequent visits to the gym. His dark blond hair had grayed slightly at the temples, and I liked it cut in that style, short at the back and slightly longer on top. Something I could run my fingers through when...

“So, Abby.” Nancy smiled brightly, plucking my mind away from the restricted area. “Nate said you grew up around Preston?”

“Uh...yes.”

“How funny,” she said, smile brighter still. “Like we told Nate, that’s where we’ve moved from.”

“Really?” I tried not to look at Liam but noticed my voice sounded a little shrill.

“Broughton,” Liam said.

“And Nate mentioned you’re from Hutton, Abby?” Nancy said, and all I could do was nod.

“Don’t let her accent fool you,” Nate said. “She’s a Northerner, born and bred. You might even know some of the same people, maybe—”

“Look,” I said, “I’d better get back and start dinner. I just wanted to say a quick hello.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Nancy waved a hand. “We ordered pizza. There’ll be enough for all of us. Should be here any minute. You’ll stay, won’t you?”

“I can’t,” I said quickly. “I’ve got some work to finish.”

“Babe.” Nate frowned.

“What do you do?” Nancy asked.

“I’m an accountant for Sterling Engineering but—”

“It’s Saturday night,” Nate said. “Can’t it wait?”

“No. But you and Sarah can stay and—”

“Mum,” Sarah half whispered out of the side of her mouth, giving me the evil eye at the same time. “Don’t leave me here.”

I ignored her, and everybody else. “I have a bit of a headache anyway.”

“Oh, no.” Nancy furrowed her brow and tilted her head to one side. “I hope you feel better soon.”

“I’ll come with you.” Nate put down his beer.

I had to get out of there. Alone. “No need. I’ll just lie down for a bit. See you later.”

Nate smiled and blew me a kiss. “Later, hon.”

"I'll see you out," Liam said.

"I'm fine."

"I insist."

As we walked away from the kitchen where Nate and Nancy had started talking about the abysmal winter and how they couldn't wait for spring, Liam whispered, "God, Abby, this is a surprise, I—"

Zac came down the stairs, nodding his head to the music coming from his bright orange headphones. We watched him make the peace sign toward us before disappearing into the kitchen.

I spun around to face Liam. "What the hell are you doing here?"

He stared at me and held up a hand. "Hang on. I could ask you the same thing."

"I've lived here. For years."

"I didn't know."

"Are you sure?"

Liam exhaled. "Abby, please."

"So why here?"

"Why are you being so hostile?"

I pressed my fingers over my eyelids until I saw stars, then looked at him again. "Why here?"

Liam ran a hand through his hair and lowered his voice. "Internal promotion at the bank. Nancy found the house. It was a good deal. She wants to redecorate and—"

"That's it?"

"What do you mean?"

He was so close to me now. I could barely stop myself from pulling him toward me. I stepped back until my shoulders touched the wall, hoping I might disappear into the garish paper. "You honestly didn't know we lived here?"

"No, I didn't. Christ, it was such a shock. When Nate said his wife's name was Abby Sanders and that she was from Preston...well...I decided it couldn't be you. Too much of a fluke, you know..." I blinked rapidly and he put a hand on my arm. "I'm sorry I didn't say anything in there. It was a gut reaction."

"I know. Me, too."

Liam swallowed. "Should we go back and tell them? We could say we only just recognized each other."

My eyes widened. "No," I whispered. "That's crazy. Not after..." I couldn't bring myself to say it. "No."

He leaned in a little closer. I could smell a hint of his aftershave. I wanted him to reach out and touch me, but instead he put his hands in his pockets and said, "It's good to see you. Completely surreal and unexpected, but good."

My shoulders dropped a little. "You can't stay here, in this house."

"Abby." He smiled that bloody gentle smile of his. "We don't have much of a choice. Whether we like it or not, we're neighbors now."

Head shaking, I said, "I can't see you. I told you last time... And before when...when Tom..." My eyes filled with tears, and I willed them to dry instantly. I had to be strong. I couldn't give Liam an excuse to comfort me, however much I wanted him to.

"Oh, Abby." He looked at me. "You're not even close to getting over losing Tom, are you? Even after all these years." When I looked away Liam sighed. "Listen—"

My eyes flashed back to his. "No. You listen. We have to stay away from each other."

"Hey..." The hurt in his eyes almost took my breath away and made me want to put my arms around him, hold him close and whisper I was sorry.

"Keep away," I seethed instead as I glared at him and yanked open the door. Once outside I filled my lungs with gulps of crisp, cool air.

And then panic took over. I'd left my husband and daughter with my ex-boyfriend. Should I go back in, say I'd miraculously recovered from my headache? No. I couldn't be in the same room as Liam. I'd told him to stay away, but they were just words. Words to convince myself the feelings spilling out of my heart weren't real. But I knew him—all of him—inside and out, and he'd never say anything to Nate. He'd never say anything to anyone.

I ran back to our house—the one I shared with my husband—my heart pounding, and all I could think of was Liam. Liam. Liam. Liam. I tried to slow my breathing as I stepped inside and flicked on the light.

“Tom.” I looked up at the picture of my brother. “Oh, shit, Tom. What am I going to do?”

But all I got in return was his permanently youthful smile, and I imagined him shrugging and saying, “I don't know, Shabby. You're really fucked this time.”

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