

Chapter 2

The next incident of note in those early days occurred during Neil's barbecue – it was during that evening that I was confronted with the unpleasant reality of the woman I had the misfortune to call my neighbour. It was early June – I remember because I'd only been in the house three weeks – and the weather was bright and warm, for once, and just right for a barbecue.

I smiled as I heard his friends arrive. My windows were open and I heard laughter, cheeks being kissed, wine unwrapped from crinkling paper. A barbecue with my neighbours would be a perfect start to a friendship, and I'd been on my own in the house for long enough. They probably assumed a last-minute knock on the door would suffice, as I was so near to them an official invitation was unnecessary – it goes without saying.

When I smelled the meat cooking I brushed my hair and hesitated behind my front door for their knock. It wasn't forthcoming so I slipped off my shoes and went into the kitchen to wait in a spot where I could hear them in the back. It was warm enough to leave the kitchen door ajar: all the smoke and cooking smells were drifting right in over their garden fence. It made me hungry and I put the cooker on to grill some sausages for myself. Perhaps they'd decided on a more formal meal, and I'd be invited round for drinks afterwards. It would be better to eat now, I thought, rather than go hungry and demolish a plate of nibbles on my own. Mr Tips coiled around my legs as I cooked, and, indulgently, I dropped one of the sausages into his bowl and listened to him purr as I stood at the cooker.

I took my plate and glass out into the garden and sat on the back step to eat. The sounds of people chatting came over the high fence and I tapped my foot gently to the music. I'd burned the sausages a little, and didn't have anything like salad in the fridge, so I'd put a dollop of mayonnaise on the side, a couple of slices of buttered bread, and, because I like to be healthy, some broccoli I had in the freezer. It was lovely. Something told me Neil wouldn't mind me sharing the music and I was pleased the afternoon had presented me with an opportunity to get to know him a little better. For a while I sat like that, listening to the music and losing myself in my thoughts, tracing my finger around and around the Greek Key pattern that circled the edge of my plate.

After the incident with the milkman I'd given serious thought to my goals in life and so had renewed my membership at the library. I availed myself fully of the facilities on offer, using the internet, borrowing inspirational DVDs and in particular, had started reading certain books on the subject of personal development. I'd grown in confidence and was certain that my behaviour where the milkman was concerned was an isolated mishap. From my books I'd learned that the best way to form new friendships was to develop an attitude of willingness, to fit in and be flexible; in other words, to try things you ordinarily wouldn't. I remember thinking, as I finished my own food and put the plate down beside me on the step, what a good idea a barbecue was. Maybe the idea of throwing my own party was forming in my mind that afternoon. I sat admiring the clink of the wine bottle against the glasses as drink was generously poured, imagining how nice it would be if I had a house full of people too.

At first I couldn't hear much of what was said, but as the guests drank more they started to get louder and I felt more confident getting nearer to the fence, knowing that I wouldn't disturb them. I hovered there for quite some time, feeling

happy hearing them laugh and imagining myself as a kind of guardian angel to ward off accidents while they could relax and have fun. They talked about their jobs a lot, and people they knew. It sounds silly, but even though I wasn't joining in, I liked the company. It wasn't that I'd been lonely: apart from the milkman I'd had two or three chats with library assistants and a woman who worked behind the counter in the cream-cake shop.

When it got cooler I realised evening was coming and I probably wasn't going to be asked for drinks. Dejected, I fetched a cardigan and went back to my lookout post. It was better than nothing. Eventually I heard them talking about me.

'Have you met your new neighbour yet?' someone asked.

'No. Neil has, but she's only been here a couple of weeks,' replied a female voice, high-pitched and happy sounding. I'd heard Lucy's voice before; out shrieking at spiders in the garden or yelling commands up the stairs to Neil.

'We should go round, really, and take her something for the house,' Neil said. Someone else asked a question, but the words were indistinct.

'No, I don't know what she does. I thought she was coming with a family too, but she says Charlotte must have had her wires crossed. You don't like to ask too much, do you? She hangs around the place a lot during the week. Doesn't work, by the looks of it,' Neil said, and I was touched that he'd been feeling the connection growing, assisted by nothing more than proximity. I was looking forward to us becoming friends and I wracked my brains. Where had I heard his voice before? If he'd played some part in my past I wanted to know about it and be prepared before I got any friendlier with him.

I put my glass down on the step and stood up. It seemed like a good idea to get closer to the fence, and I tried to move silently. If I bent my head at a certain angle I

could see in to Neil's garden through a gap between two warped boards. There were four of them sitting around the plastic table. The two guests were sitting with their backs to me but between them I could get a fairly good view of Neil. I was surprised to see that the girl with the laugh, Lucy, was sitting on his lap. He had a hand on her bare calf, and was stroking it possessively.

I looked at her as closely as my limited point of view would allow, noticed her short white dress, flip-flops, and a crocheted navy cardigan that didn't match thrown casually over the top. It was too big for her, and every time she brought her glass to her lips she had to move the cuff out of the way of her mouth. She lifted her head from Neil's shoulder and started playing with the hair on the back of his neck. She was young, very young, but the skin around her eyes and mouth had already started to fray and I wondered if she was a smoker.

'I've never met her,' she said, 'heard her thumping about all hours, though.' She sniffed, 'Even in the night. Still, I suppose she'll be unpacking.'

The woman with her back to me said, 'Well, why don't you invite her? There's food left, isn't there? Get her to bring a bottle and come over for a while.'

I held my breath and quickly checked my appearance. There was a spot of grease on my sleeve from the sausage, but I could have quickly changed my blouse. Yes, why not? I could have gone over. It's only fair: I didn't get to go to parties very often.

Lucy shook her head and said something, I didn't quite catch it, and the other woman spoke again. 'What's wrong with her? It's nice to get to know your neighbours. You're sat in front of your computer all day, Neil – stuck in the house. If you'd invited her round for a meal when she first moved in you'd be inseparable by now!' Someone laughed, and tried to interrupt her, but she carried on. 'You're anti-

social buggers, you two. It won't always be like this, you know – wrapped up in each other.'

I saw her turn towards the man she was with and start gesturing at him drunkenly with an unlit cigarette. 'Do you remember when we were like that? Quite happy to lock ourselves in all weekend so we could stay in bed and eat pizza? Where does it all go to, eh?' she laughed bitterly and looked at Lucy, who wasn't listening, as far as I could tell. 'You've only been together a year. You wait and see. It'll get to the point where you don't even like each other anymore.'

The man with her, I assumed he was her husband, touched her arm gently as if to warn her but she recoiled. 'What?' she said, incredulous, 'it's true!'

There was a pause when no one spoke, and then she shook her honey-coloured high-lighted hair out of her face and said, 'She'll know you're having a party anyway, all the noise we're making,' and I knew she was talking about me again.

'You make it sound like *The Good Life*,' her husband said abruptly. 'There's a good reason people don't duck into each other's houses these days.'

'And what's that?'

'They're always nuts!' he laughed, and leaned back in his chair. 'Nuts, or single mothers with kids that are going to trash the garden, or asylum seekers, or squatters, or drug dealers, or paedos...'

'You're being ridiculous,' she said, 'if she was a terrorist they'd have known about it by now.' She turned to Lucy, 'Go on, invite her over. It'll be nice. You got on with the last lot, didn't you?'

The glasses clinked, and I saw Lucy put a finger to her lips and point at the fence. She was wearing pink nail varnish, but no engagement or wedding ring. I felt exposed, and stood up straight, thinking that if I made a move to go into the house, I'd

be heard, and it would be obvious. I wasn't sure what to do. I kept still, standing there and looking at my reflection in the glass of the kitchen door, and decided that if I was asked, I'd say I was merely checking the fence for safety against burglars. Lucy was whispering something about me. Because she was drunk it wasn't much of a whisper, I could hear everything, every wet hiccup and throaty giggle.

'She hangs about and *listens*,' she said, putting her hand over her mouth, and spluttering between her fingers.

There was a muffled laugh from the other girl. I was disappointed with her, because I'd decided that Neil's female guest seemed like a decent enough person and someone to whom I could chat quite easily, should they decide to invite me over.

'Maybe she fancies you, Neil. Doesn't everybody?' she laughed again, asked for a light and more wine. 'Or maybe, Lucy, it's you she's after!' This set everyone off, and there was a period of time, I'm not sure how long, when all I could hear was hard, retching laughter. They settled, and Lucy went on.

'No, I mean it, it's really creepy. When I'm in the kitchen I can hear her sometimes, doing her washing-up, and it makes me feel as if she's following me about the house. I was taking a shit the other day and I was convinced she was standing in her bathroom with her ear to the wall!'

What can I say? There wasn't the opportunity to defend myself, but if there had been, I would have pointed out that first, I didn't much care for her language, tipsy or not, and secondly, our bathrooms *were* next door to each other and where else was I supposed to go? They laughed drunkenly, and it hurts me to say so but there's no point in covering up the truth: Neil's rumbling, friendly laugh was the loudest. Still, Neil was obviously one of those people who are apt to laugh at anything once they've had a couple of drinks inside them. I've behaved the same way myself.

The man with them stood up, and tapped on the fence with a finger. The panels vibrated and I had a terrible feeling that some part of it would fall away and I would be left standing there for them all to see.

‘Do you think she’s there now?’ he said, in an exaggerated whisper. ‘Maybe she’s waiting until we go so she can throw her knickers over at the pair of you. You should ask her back for a threesome!’

‘Have you seen the size of her?’ said Lucy, and laughed again. ‘She’s massive!’

‘Come on, don’t be cruel,’ Neil said mildly, and I was grateful.

‘Throw her knickers over?’ Lucy giggled. ‘I’ve seen them on the line: like bloody parachutes. Tents! Duvet covers! She must get them specially made!’ There was another bout of laughter but Lucy, perhaps realising she had gone too far and was only embarrassing herself, stood up to change the music.

It’s true, I am a large woman, although I’m very happy with my size, thank you very much, and true beauty, as we all know, comes from within. Still, when I heard those words I tiptoed inside and closed the door gently behind me. It must have clicked too loudly because even with it shut and a chair against it I could hear them banging on the table, laughing their guts up.

In the dim, sausage-smelling quiet of my kitchen, I held on to the edge of the draining board so tightly it left white ridges on my palms. I looked at the taps, at the plughole, and the chrome top of the new pedal bin caught my eye. I lifted the lid, eyeing a bruised banana skin and some chicken bones. My head started to throb: feeling as hot and swollen as an over-filled hot-water bottle. I bit my lip and tried to think about water and aspirin.

I was angry, to tell you the truth. To have to stand there in the sanctuary of my own garden, doing nothing more sinister than enjoying a warm evening, and then suffer the verbal assault of a woman I'd never even met, well, it was more than I could take.

My hands started to hurt again and I looked at them, surprised at the grazes on my knuckles. I'd been hitting the wall above the pedal bin with my fists, over and over without realising it. I can't tell you how long had passed, me standing looking into the bin and thumping the wall like that. It couldn't have been more than a matter of minutes: when I held my breath I could hear, above the sound of my own blood booming in my ears, the continuing music and laughter from outside.

I took a few deep breaths in an attempt to get myself back on an even keel. There was a dark, sweetly tempting smell inside the bin, like the sour air between my body and the duvet in the morning, or the dead space in the back of airing cupboards. It reminded me of my mum emptying the bin every night when I was a child. She was a fastidious woman and lived by many rules, one of them being that rubbish would not sit in the house overnight. All the bins were emptied last thing, and I don't think she could get herself to bed and rest until it was done. Even when it was snowing, or she was ill, she'd do it all the same, and I stood there inhaling the stink from my own waste and remembering my mother struggling to lift out the bags, wincing at the pain in her side as the carrot tops and potato peelings spilled onto the floor. More deep breaths, and then the memory and the smell together made me want to get the rubbish out of my house as quickly as I could.

I scooped out the contents softly, filled both fists and went out the front of the house to push the whole lot through Lucy's letter box. They were making so much noise out there in the garden she wouldn't even notice, and by the time they did

there'd be a filthy mess to clean up on the hall carpet. I went back into my house, and returned to the pedal bin, making silent trips back and forth until it was empty.

'Annie reacts with appropriate anger when her human rights are infringed,' I recited, which was an assertiveness affirmation I'd picked up from one of the new books. You were supposed to write them on slips of paper and stick them to all the mirrors in the house, but there were too many, the scraps of paper kept falling off and drifting to the carpet like oblong snowflakes, and so I just spent some time learning them instead. I said it ten times as I washed my bloody and dirtied hands with lily of the valley liquid soap then I went to my bedroom for a lie down. I stayed up there for a couple of hours, only coming down to get a tub of ice cream and a tin of condensed milk because I hadn't eaten anything since the sausages, and I was hungry again.

You don't need to tell me: I know I demeaned only myself that evening. When I got up the next morning I knew it, and pushed my new couch over to the window so I could look out of it while I nursed my sugar hangover. I saw Lucy leave the house, and return a few hours later laden with shopping bags. I didn't dare to go out myself in case Neil approached me and asked me what I was playing at. I decided that Lucy herself deserved putting straight on a thing or two, but my actions, the incident with the rubbish, affected Neil as well as her and so was manifestly unfair.

Now that I think about it again, it is also possible that I may have misunderstood the snatches of conversation that I heard, or my memory was playing tricks on me. It is likely that, not sleeping well in my new house, surrounded by items of flat-packed furniture I hadn't yet been able to assemble, I was slightly unsettled and more emotionally sensitive than is usual for me.

As I reflected on my behaviour and realised how out-of-character and unreasonable it was I grew more and more embarrassed about how volatile I had been, and began to feel guilty. I probably blew what I'd done out of all proportion; it was just a slip, a minor one, like the incident with the milkman, but I started to wonder how I could make it up to them, and thought about knocking on their door, confessing, and asking for their understanding and compassion. I probably would have done too, but out on an errand two days later, I met Lucy on the street, swinging her hair about and wearing a clingy white vest, which left the protrusions of her nipples highly visible.

'You're Annie, aren't you?' she said, smiling brightly. She didn't seem to notice my nervousness and welcomed me to the neighbourhood. She even introduced herself to me as if we were about to embark on some great friendship. We chatted for a few minutes, and then she told me to watch out for the boys who hung about at the bus stop, got drunk on bottles of cider, and were apt to play pranks.

'Little beggars,' she said, 'I was on my hands and knees soaping the hall carpet for half an hour. I was never allowed out at that time when I was their age, were you?'

'It does sound worrying,' I said, uncomfortably. 'Did anyone see anything?'

She was much taller than me, as tall as a model, perhaps, and I felt squat and clumsy standing in front of her, all too aware of her previous comments. I pulled my cardigan around my chest and knotted the cord tightly.

'We had people round, so we were out in the garden. You should have been there, we had a right laugh. Come over sometime,' she said, 'once you get yourself sorted out.'

'I'm almost there,' I lied, 'just a few more boxes to go.' I was carrying a bag of empty food tins, which I was planning to take down to the recycling bins that were outside the shop on the main road. The smell of ripe cat food and fermenting tomato juice wafted up between us and made me feel nauseous. I took a step backwards, worried that she might think the odour was coming from me, but not wanting to explain. She didn't seem to notice.

'I know, it takes ages, doesn't it!' she said. 'Let us know if you need a hand with any lifting or carrying.'

I smiled and went on my way, but her hypocrisy had jolted me out of my guilt, and I knew that from then on I'd have to watch out for her.

The very next day, I spoke to Neil again and finally remembered where I'd come across him. I was getting ready for a bath when the light bulb in the bathroom blew, and try as I might, I simply could not reach up to replace it. This discouraged me more than I liked to admit, and I was forced to acknowledge how dependent I'd become on a man's help in the previous years. I considered leaving the bathroom door open and bathing in the light from the bulb in the landing, but I didn't like the idea of that and so, reluctantly, put on my dressing gown and went next door to ask for Neil's help.

He came with me into the house. I led him up the stairs and gave him the bulb. I was feeling a little silly, standing there in my dressing gown with a man I hardly knew balancing on the edge of the bath, but he did it cheerfully enough. Becoming too independent, as I tried to remind myself, wasn't in my best interests. *Alone But Not Lonely: Starting Again*, had advised that however painful it was in the short term to have an empty space at the table, to struggle with the shopping bags and fill the

long evenings when it seemed everyone else was surrounded with loved ones, it was better than filling the gap left so completely that there would never be room for anyone else.

Neil jumped down from the bath, slid on the bathmat and bumped his elbow on the radiator. He swore, and I flinched, thinking he was angry with me.

‘Sorry, sorry about that,’ he said, noticing me shrink away. ‘My elbow. Got me right on the funny bone. My own fault: gymnastics in a room this small! I only just got it in, Lucy does this kind of thing normally – she’s loads taller than me.’

‘I didn’t think to stand on the bath,’ I said, feeling sheepish.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ he replied, smiling, ‘we wouldn’t want you falling and getting stuck, would we?’

He had a nice, deep, friendly voice, with a vaguely southern accent, and he spoke slowly, which I liked. It was as if he wanted to think very carefully about everything he was going to say before he spoke and he didn’t mind taking a bit of time doing it. More than that, he didn’t mind me taking up a bit of his time; he wasn’t in a rush to leave or anything like that. I thought about offering him a cup of tea, but the water in the bath was cooling.

‘You’ve got a lot of books in here,’ he said. I coughed gently, embarrassed about the stacks of thin romance novels piled up on the toilet cistern. Their pink and purple spines screamed in the white tiled blandness of the room, and I resisted the urge to throw a flannel in their direction in order to hide the cover of one of the more lurid ones. It wasn’t that I was ashamed: those who aren’t experiencing relationships in real life might as well read about them in order to keep their hands in; it was just that some people make judgements about others based on the smallest things and I wanted to make a good impression on Neil.

‘They’re not real books,’ I said, ‘not clever or anything. Just a bit of escapism. I like having a soak every now and again and reading something while I’m in there.’ I laughed for some reason, I don’t know why.

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ he said, and moved towards the door. ‘I’ll let you get on with your bath. Don’t worry about seeing me out.’ He was on the landing with his hand on the banister and something about the expression on his face had made me remember, all of a sudden, where I’d seen him before.

Back when I was still living on the other side of Fleetwood, in the house of the brown sofa, I’d got into a bit of trouble one afternoon. It wasn’t my fault, just one of those things, and I needed to get myself on a bus as soon as possible. I’d broken one of my own rules and actually ran to the bus stop, everything I had jiggling about – much to the amusement of the teenagers who crammed the pavement queuing for chips. To add insult to injury, when I’d got to the stop and managed, through blurred vision, to consult the timetable, I realised I’d just missed the bus I wanted and had another twenty minutes to wait.

I was sitting there, trying to appear inconspicuous but actually feeling very shaken and distressed, when a man walked past me, obviously on his way to somewhere else. I looked up, and when our eyes met he drew his breath in quickly and stopped.

‘Do you need any help, love?’ he’d asked, and come right up close to me. I wiped my hand across my nostrils and patted the hot skin over my eye gently. Blood was trickling from my lips between my teeth and because I was in public, I was resisting the almost overwhelming urge to spit, and letting the greasy, metallic liquid slip down my throat. I was having trouble sitting on the bench in the shelter because

of my ribs, and had propped myself against it, unable, because of the pain, to even bend and tie my shoelaces or rearrange my clothing. It would be an understatement to say I was quite dishevelled and in no fit state to meet new people. I moved my hand gingerly and tried to wave him away, but he frowned and came closer.

‘Look at the state of you,’ he’d said, and, when I didn’t answer, raised his voice. ‘Can you hear me all right?’

I’m afraid that given my state, I was probably quite rude to him, because I remember him frowning, and saying, ‘I’m not trying to interfere in your business. But you can’t walk about like that: you should be on your way to hospital!’ He was right: I was bleeding quite heavily and he took a tissue from his back pocket and gave it to me.

‘I’ve got a phone in my bag; let me call someone for you. Is there someone I can get, someone to pick you up?’ I’d taken the tissue, held it against my nose, and shook my head.

‘I’ll be fine very soon,’ I said thickly, through swollen lips, ‘it’s not as bad as it looks.’

‘Are you waiting for the bus?’ he said, and I nodded, my head jangling. He dipped his hand back into his pocket and pressed some folded money into my fist.

‘Do yourself a favour and get a taxi,’ he’d said. ‘If you aren’t going to let me call someone, at least do that for me, eh?’

A few people had passed me by while I’d been sitting there, avoiding my eye and walking more quickly as if the sight of me offended them. Once Neil had started to talk to me, it seemed to open the floodgates and soon three others were standing in a neat semi-circle behind him, carrier bags resting on the pavement, faces stretched with curiosity. I turned my head away, clung to the popped buttons of my blouse and

started to cry. The wailing hurt, and the blood and saliva leaking out of my mouth embarrassed me, so I started to cry more and it was a few minutes before I could get myself under control or was aware of anything except what I was feeling.

Neil had turned to the others and waved them away.

‘She’s all right,’ he said loudly, ‘she’s going to get a taxi to the hospital.’

When a persistent straggler remained, he stepped towards her and shook his head.

‘What this lady does not need is an audience. Now,’ he turned back towards me and helped me stand, ‘are you going to let me walk you to the taxi rank?’

I shook my head and after a few minutes of protest, the money going back and forth between us and him searching his rucksack for another tissue, he sighed, and left me standing at the bus stop with his paper money getting sticky in my hand.

I’m certain that man was Neil: I’d spent minutes watching him walk along the street and saw him look over his shoulder at me once or twice until he turned a corner and disappeared. And there he was, standing in my house with an empty light-bulb box in his hand and he’d just helped me again. I didn’t know what to make of it but I knew I didn’t need to worry about him recognising me: my face was so swollen that afternoon my own mother would have had trouble knowing who I was.

‘I’ve decided to have a housewarming party,’ I said abruptly as he started to go down the stairs. ‘You and Lucy are invited, of course.’

‘That sounds nice. Get all your old friends around to see the new pad?’

‘I’ll put an official invitation through your door,’ I tried not to think about the barbecue, ‘but just so you know.’

‘I’ll tell Lucy,’ he said, ‘she likes an excuse to buy earrings.’

I nodded and closed the bathroom door behind me, hearing him slam the front door a couple of seconds later.

My decision to throw a housewarming party wasn't as impulsive as it sounds, although it was only after Neil had left that I started to think about the matter seriously. Like I say, his barbecue had given me the idea, and the fact that I'd been established in the new house almost a month by then and had yet to receive any visitors spurred me on. It was time, I thought, to become proactive, and create the kind of life I wanted for myself. Having a party would be the first step on the path to achieving this, and would also, I realised, be a good way to keep an eye on Lucy, if, as I already suspected, she sensed the power of that chance connection between Neil and I, and was planning to do something to spoil it.