



The Girl Next Door



'A wonderfully well-written book,
full of emotion' *Daily Mail*

Elizabeth Noble

NUMBER ONE BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THINGS I WANT MY DAUGHTERS TO KNOW

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The Girl Next Door
by
Elizabeth Noble

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'Green lungs'. Isn't that what they call parks in big cities? It isn't true in New York. In New York, Central Park – almost 850 acres of priceless real estate in one of the world's greatest cities – is not the lungs. It's the heart. Walk around any of the paths, away from the hullabaloo, the tourists studying maps, the omnipresent runners, the pretzel sellers, and you'll find benches everywhere. There are more than 9,000 of them. Since 1986, the Central Park Conservancy has run a programme called Adopt-a-Bench, allowing residents of the city to dedicate one to someone they have loved, and love still. Here is where you feel, and hear, the heart of the city beating. There's a marriage proposal on a bench by the Zoo. Statements of joy and happy memories and grateful thanks on rows of benches by playgrounds – at the Alice in Wonderland statue, facing the Carousel, along the water. Since 9/11, there are benches that can make you tear up, just reading the plaques. For young men and women, dead too soon, and those they left behind. 'To the world you were one person. To one person you were the world.'

I chose Cedar Hill for mine. It was one of your favourite places. In the winter, children toboggan there, filling the air with their laughter. In the fall, the colours are extraordinary. In the summer, it's close to the ice-cream truck that parks on 5th, and shady. But I may like spring the best of all. Full of promise and new beginnings. Not for me, maybe, but for the people I watch.

I wondered for a long, long time how to inscribe the plaque. Whitman, or Emerson? Puccini? A declaration of my own?

In the end, though, I chose just your name. Everything else belonged to me, and I kept it inside, written on my heart, and not in this one.

Eight a.m.

The night doorman, Jesus, was coming off his shift. Before Raoul, his replacement, arrived, he mopped the marble foyer, and diligently polished the brass tread on the door threshold. The day-shift doorman changed into his smart grey uniform in the staff bathroom. The porter travelled to each floor in the service elevator, collecting the black sacks of trash and sorted recycling that people left out there. In the basement, the super checked his list to see who was on, who was away, who was having things delivered or taken away. He'd done this fifty weeks of each year for more than fifteen years. He and his wife lived in a small apartment at the back downstairs. They'd raised their boys there, though they were grown up and gone now.

In apartment 7B, Maria Piscatella kissed her husband Earnest goodbye, chastely on the cheek, smoothing his hair down habitually as he left for work, and contemplated the breakfast dishes and another day. Her two children smiled down at her in their high-school graduation outfits, from the 8" × 10" photographs that hung on the kitchen wall. She knew they'd both still be asleep, in their college beds in their college dorms far

away. Up late, no doubt, last night studying or partying. Bradley had been gone from here two years, and Ariel since last September, and she still missed them every, every day. The apartment was still too quiet. There wasn't enough mess. She had two plates, two glasses and two mugs to load into the dishwasher. One bed to make. And no laundry today. If you'd told her ten years ago how much she would miss all of that, she'd have laughed and told you you were crazy.

Upstairs, in 8A/B Blair Stewart's housekeeper Mary would also have laughed. She'd been up since six, waking alone in the windowless maid's room off the laundry, as she had done for the past six months, and now she was serving waffles – each plate configured slightly differently – to the Stewarts' three kids, while Blair issued the day's instructions, and Bobbie moaned that the dry cleaners hadn't returned his grey pinstripe. Mary didn't mind being told what to do (wrong career path, if she did), but she hated the way Mrs Stewart did it. When she said 'clean the laundry room', she always added 'really well, please, Mary' as though there were any other way to do it, or as if she ever did anything else. You'd think a woman who was so damn particular about how things were done would do some of them herself. But, of course, Mrs Stewart was perpetually busy. Today was a luncheon. Mary had still to figure out what elevated a regular lunch by those three letters into a luncheon, but she figured it had something to do with money. Mrs Stewart would go to that gym, on the corner of Madison and 85th, the one she went to every

day during the week, and then get her hair blown out and get dressed up to go out and ‘do good’. Forget about doing any good in her own home. Mary didn’t like Blair Stewart at all. God knows she needed a job, and the money wasn’t bad here, but if it weren’t for the kids, she’d be thinking about finding something else already. The kids were okay. A little lazy, a little spoilt maybe – but whose kids weren’t, these days?

Dr Hunter Stern, in 4A, slept on. He never had a patient until 11 a.m., and since he saw patients in the apartment, he never needed to get up before 10.30. An insomniac since his twenties, he was never asleep before three or four in the morning, and he wore earplugs so that the cacophony of a Manhattan morning didn’t disturb him once he had dropped off. He couldn’t take sleeping pills. He had an addictive personality, like so many of the patients he counselled. That ruled out red wine, too, which would also have worked. He read biographies avidly, and usually dozed off, eventually, on the sofa, heavy tomes rising and falling on his chest.

Across the hall, Violet Wallace fried an egg and two rashers of bacon, as she did every morning of the week. She carried the plate through to the dining room, where she had laid the table the night before, with a linen napkin and silver cutlery, and switched on the BBC World Service on the radio. Cat, the smoky Abyssinian cat she had resisted getting for so long, refusing to conform to the stereotype of the single old lady, and whom she still tokenly resisted loving by calling her Cat, curled her tail around Violet’s chair, rubbing her back against

Violet's legs, oblivious to her mistress's ambivalence.

Above her, in 5B, Gregory Cole fed Ulysses, his chocolate-brown Labrador, who licked his hand appreciatively, while his partner Todd took a shower. Todd ate breakfast with his assistant, Gabrielle, at the office every day, so Greg made a bowl of granola with yoghurt for himself, and flipped open the *Times*, leaning against the granite breakfast bar in their kitchen.

'Sit down to eat,' Todd called from the bedroom.

'You can't even see me!'

'Doesn't mean I don't know what you're doing . . .'

Charlotte Murphy peered into the mirror, as she did every morning in 2A, and was, as she was every morning, disappointed to see herself peering back. Through the thin partition wall in 2B, built before building codes came into effect, Madison Cavanagh had the opposite reaction as she tossed her mane of Bergdorf Blonde hair, and carefully applied another coat of lengthening mascara to lashes that already almost hit her eyebrows.

Upstairs in 3A, newcomer Emily Mikanowski stretched her body into the Cat on her yoga mat, trying to ignore the pile of boxes in the living room that still needed to be unpacked, while next door Arthur Alexander dreamed his troubled dreams and snored, spittle settling into the corners of his mouth, and on the other side Hung Hamazaki, just back from a fast three-mile run, turned on the shower and hoped the hot water would come through fast. He liked to be at his desk at work by 8.45.

The furnace burned, and the pipes ran. Kettles boiled on stovetops, and radiators creaked.

The building was waking up.

April

Eve

Four Seasons Hotel, East 57th Street

'Good morning, New York!' Ed's Robin Williams impression reverberated around Eve's poor head.

Last night, celebrating their new life with dirty Grey Goose martinis in the hotel bar had seemed like the obvious – the only – thing to do. They'd had a few drinks, and a late dinner, and very sexy hotel sex, and about five hours' sleep. This morning . . . not so much . . . the dirty Grey Goose martini may be a very New York drink, but Eve was clearly still a very Guildford girl. Dirty was the word. Eve's mouth felt like the proverbial bottom of the parrot's cage.

She pulled the down pillow over her head in an attempt to keep out the bright sunshine pouring in through their twelfth-floor window wall, but it was insistent, like Ed, who was now running through his Sinatra repertoire, oblivious to the fact that she might just have to kill him soon. Thou shalt not – not ever – drink three vodka-based cocktails. The Eleventh Commandment.

The doorbell rang. Ed was obviously in better shape,

as usual. It took more than three drinks to fell her husband. He answered the door with a cheery ‘Good morning!’, and admitted their breakfast, brought in by a waiter so discreet that he laid a table, arranged an orchid in a vase, and silver domes on porcelain plates, then left again without ever acknowledging the groaning woman-shaped lump under the duvet.

‘Come on, lightweight. Breakfast.’ Ed, who was, she now noticed, already showered and dressed, flipped up the bottom corner of the counterpane, exposing a foot. He squeezed her big toe.

‘Ugggh.’

‘Tea?’

‘Mmm.’

‘Wasn’t sure what you wanted, and wasn’t about to risk waking you up, so I ordered pancakes, bacon, fruit salad, egg white omelette . . .’

‘Who would ever want to eat an egg white anything? The yolk’s the only fun part of an egg.’

‘And the only part that will kill you . . .’

Eve sat up grumpily and accepted the cup of tea he proffered. ‘And so it begins . . .’

‘So what begins?’

‘You’re turning American. Joining the cholesterol police.’

Ed laughed. ‘So I guess you want the pancakes and bacon?’

‘Kill or cure.’ Eve came to the table and peered under the silver dome on her side of the table.

‘I’m hoping for cure. Busy day in prospect . . .’ Ed

raised his glass of orange juice in a toast, and clinked it against Eve's cup. 'Here's to the new house!'

Except that it wasn't a house. Eve and Ed *used* to live in a house with a name, on a street with a name. In a house with a garden and a driveway and a garage for a car. Their car. Ed had a shed in the garden. Eve had a job. Eve used to live twenty-five minutes from her sister and her nieces and nephews.

That was then. This was now. She took her tea to the window and looked out, at the tall grey buildings, and the blue, blue sky. Steam rose from manhole covers, just like in films. She couldn't kick that feeling – like she was herself in a film. But this was real. This was it! They were here . . .

Two pancakes, three rashers of very crispy bacon, four mugs of tea and a fifteen-minute power shower later, Eve felt human. Ish. When she emerged from the bathroom that was bigger than her bedroom at home, Ed was on the phone and it was obviously work. She frowned at him. Today was their day.

He raised a conciliatory hand, and shrugged apologetically. But he said, 'Yep. Right. Yep. I'll be there in,' checking his watch, 'half an hour. Forty-five minutes tops. Great.' When he'd hung up he came and sat next to her on the bed, and put his arm around her shoulders.

She glared at him reproachfully. 'You promised.'

'I know. I won't be there all day, I promise. Just a couple of hours.'

Neither of them believed him.

‘You’d better be there when we pick up the keys.’
That was 3 p.m.

‘Definitely.’ Ed was pulling on his jacket. ‘I’ll meet you there.’

‘Okay.’

Ed took her face in his hands and kissed her deeply. ‘I’m going to make love to you in every room tonight.’

She crinkled her nose up and sniggered. ‘Cheeseball. Good job it’s a classic four, not a classic six.’

‘Get you, with your New York realtor talk.’

‘Oh, I know all the lingo.’

He smacked her bum. ‘And, fyi, I reckon I could manage a classic six, or, indeed, a duplex.’

Eve laughed. He probably could, actually. When they’d moved into the cottage, he’d managed every room, the patio table, and the shower, although, truthfully, things had gotten a little half-hearted by the time they’d got to the old larder with the freezing cold marble countertop. She’d made him promise they’d christen every house they ever had that way, even the assisted living facility she was confident they’d end up being Darby and Joan in. He remembered.

One more quick kiss, a groan of regret, and he was gone.

Back to bed then, just for a while.

She couldn’t believe she was here. Everything had happened so fast. Four months ago there had been no hint of any of this. Four months ago she’d been looking out

of the window at her garden, at the deep beds she'd dug the year before, thinking about springtime. She'd loved that garden. And the house. Their first house. A three bedroom cottage in a village four miles from the centre of town. Top of their budget when they'd bought it, it still needed lots of work – the old couple they'd bought it from hadn't done a thing to it in twenty years – so she'd become a rabid weekend DIY'er. She'd learnt to strip wallpaper, and tile and grout, and over the course of a year or two she'd eradicated all the Eighties décor and created a place she truly loved – all white walls and deep sofas. The garden had been the best part and the biggest revelation. She'd never taken the slightest bit of notice of the seasons before. She'd lived in her parents' house, where the garden was somewhere to play and lounge around, in university halls and in flats, where, on hot, sunny days, Clapham Common was the only garden you needed, and you ignored it for the other 360 days of the year. Now, she drank the first cup of tea of the morning on the little patio off the kitchen, almost every day, drinking in the sights and sounds and smells of the garden all year round.

She'd been on the patio when Ed had come home, that day. Wearing his Barbour and a rainbow-striped woolly hat that she'd had forever and that Ed called 'the teacosy'. Drinking a mug of Earl Grey, and inspecting her beds, daydreaming of bulbs. She was always home an hour or so before Ed. He worked in London, and was at the mercy of the capricious trains. Much as she loved him, that was often her favourite hour of the day.

All her own. A good day's work done (mostly). Time to indulge her new-found domesticity. Marinate something. Prune something.

He was later than usual, that day. She smelt beer on his breath as he kissed her. 'Evie.' She loved that he called her Evie. He had, since the first day she'd met him, and he was the only person in the world who did, since her mum.

'You've been drinking!'

'Sorry, Mum. Just one.'

'Who with?' She put her hands on her hips in a Lucille Ball sort of way, but she was smiling.

'The boys from work.'

'The Boys' were an amorphous lump of masculinity so far as Eve was concerned. She'd met them, possibly, at the Christmas party, at the Summer Family Fun Day (and the award for most misnamed day goes to . . .), but they were an indistinct lot – Ben and Dan and Tom and Dave and Tim and . . . the rest.

'Good day, then?'

'*Great* day.'

Now her curiosity was aroused. 'How so?'

'Come inside, babe. It's freezing out here. I want to talk to you.' Ed pulled her by both hands, walking backwards towards the door. She let him. Inside their kitchen, he went to the fridge, and pulled out a bottle of wine. 'We're celebrating.' He grabbed two glasses from the washing-up rack and poured.

'What?'

'I've got a new job. I've been promoted.'

‘Ed! That’s fantastic! I didn’t even know you were up for something . . .’

‘Nor did I. Well, not exactly.’

Eve picked up the two glasses, proffering one towards him. ‘You star. Cheers.’

‘Cheers, Evie.’ They both drank.

Eve pulled out a chair and sat down, still watching him. He looked so happy. ‘Tell me all.’

‘I haven’t told you the best bit . . .’

‘A raise?’ A raise would be great. They could really do with reducing the mortgage . . . all the spare cash they’d had in the last couple of years had gone to B&Q . . .

‘Yes, yes, a raise. A pretty massive one. But that’s not it.’ He widened his eyes, smirking at her.

She smacked his chest playfully. ‘Stop teasing me, you bugger. Wha-a-at?’

‘The job is in . . . *NEW YORK!*’ Ed did jazz hands. He looked strangely comical doing jazz hands. The moment was surreal.

‘What?’

‘New York. The job’s in the New York office. Manhattan. Two years, maybe more if we want. New frigging York, Evie! Can you believe it?’

Eve felt like all the air in her lungs had been sucked out. Her cold, garden cheeks were suddenly hot.

Ed stood in front of her, jazz hands frozen. ‘So talk to me. You look like a fish.’ He blew out his cheeks, and made ‘ohs’ with his mouth. ‘Say something . . .’

‘Wow.’

He shook her gently by the shoulders. 'Say something else.'

'New York.'

'A whole sentence would be good ...'

'You took this job?'

Ed's face fell just a little. 'Well ... I told them I'd need to talk to you first, obviously, but ...'

'But?'

'But I said I was sure you'd jump at it. You will, won't you? Jump at it? I mean, it's not like we haven't talked about something like this ...'

'We talked about it once, years ago.'

'But you were up for it then, weren't you?'

'Well, yes ...'

'And nothing's changed, has it?'

'There's the house ...'

Was that a flicker of irritation crossing his face? 'And we can keep the house, Evie. Of course we can.'

'I love the house.' She sounded wistful, even to herself.

'I know you do. I love the house, too. We'll keep the house, Evie. They'll rent us a place, sort all of that out. It's a really sweet deal. We'll be much better off. We'll rent it out, of course. Tenants will pay the mortgage. And we'll come back.'

'Will we?'

Ed knelt down by her chair, and put both arms around her hips. 'You don't sound happy like I thought you would, Evie.'

She laid her head on top of his, in her lap. 'I'm

just ... it's a bit sudden ... it's a bit of a shock, that's all.'

'Not a shock. A surprise. A wonderful, fortuitous, bloody marvellous surprise.' He rubbed her hair. 'Hey, Evie. We can talk about this as much as you like. We can say no.'

She looked at his face, trying to figure out whether or not he meant that. His lovely face. She knew she wouldn't make him say no.

Eve wasn't quite sure when it was decided that Ed had the career and she had the job. Or who decided. But she knew that that's how it was. And so she knew that they would go to New York.

And now she just needed to figure out how to be happy about it.

And so, four months later, here she was, (almost) completely happy about it. She was even (almost) a little ashamed of her initial reaction. It wasn't very intrepid of her. This was a huge adventure, wasn't it? A fantastic opportunity. The most exciting city in the world. She wanted to be the sort of woman who grabbed life. Who'd ride a bike downhill without the brakes on, and who'd sit in the front seat on the roller coaster, and who'd stand at the karaoke mike. She'd always wanted to be that sort of woman. And now she could be. This was the perfect place to be *that* woman. And today was a good day to start ...

Perhaps she'd start by calling her sister. Cath had always been *that* woman. In some ways it made no sense

that she was here and Cath was there, married to Geoff. Slightly wet Geoff. Who ever knew what alchemy was at work when two people fell in love? It made no sense, sometimes.

Cath answered on the third ring. She sounded out of breath.

‘It’s me. Eve.’

‘Eve! How are you? How’s it all going?’

‘Oh, you know, it’s hell at the Four Seasons. What to eat? What treatment to get at the spa. Just ordering from the pillow menu is exhausting . . .’

‘Shut up. I just cleaned poo out from under my fingernails.’

‘That’s disgusting. How are the poo machines?’

‘Smelly. Noisy. Adorable.’

‘I can hear one now.’

‘That’s George. He wants Cheerios in the car. I’ve only got a minute, actually, sis. School run, you know.’

‘I forgot.’

‘No worries. Sometimes I forget, and that’s much more serious. I’ve got a sec. How is it, really?’

‘Really? A bit weird. Ed’s gone to the office, even though he’s supposed to be off all day helping me, and I realize I don’t know a soul. I’m totally Dougie No Mates until he meets me later.’

‘Go shopping. No one can feel lonely in Bloomingdales. Visa can be your best friend.’

Eve laughed. ‘You’re probably right.’

‘So when do you move in?’

‘We get the keys this afternoon. The new furniture

should be coming tomorrow – the stuff from England is meant to have cleared customs last week, but I've got to check. So, today, I suppose, officially, although we'll sleep at the hotel for another couple of nights.'

'No room service in the flat, I suppose.'

'In the *apartment*? No!'

'Listen, hon. I'd really better go. Call me later – tell me again how fabulous it is?'

'Sure. I will. Love to everyone.'

'And back. We all miss you like crazy, Eve.'

Eve missed her sister, too. She could picture everything about Cath at that moment. George, with his plastic beaker of Cheerios and his untameable blonde cowlick; the chaotic kitchen, full of unread newspapers and sticky jars; Cath, tall and willowy and totally yummy mummy.

Suddenly a little tearful, she sniffed and reached for the remote control. Nurse Hathaway and Dr Doug Ross were arguing again. She lost herself in the County General ER, and eventually slipped back into sleep, not waking until the credits were rolling.

Apartment 6A

Avery Kramer was barking orders as usual. She looked like an angel but right now she was about as far from angelic as a curly blonde, blue-eyed toddler could get. The blue was icy, the lash-fringed lids narrowed in cold rage. She sat in the ungainly wooden high chair, legs

splayed as though to trip you on purpose, and demanded yet another breakfast option. Behind her, the kitchen sink was already piled high with dishes from rejected offerings. She'd wanted French toast, but hadn't eaten it, had demanded a boiled egg, but discarded it after the first dip of a bread finger. Now, it seemed, Cheerios, no milk, was what was required. Her mother Kimberley was reaching for the cereal box, talking to Avery, all the time, in the sing-song storytime voice Jason had grown to hate. He straightened his tie, taking in the domestic tableau, and wondered how it had all gone so wrong. His first meeting wasn't until 10 a.m., but he was ready to leave already. Kissing the top of his daughter's head, he gave Kim a jaunty wave, almost a salute, but moved no closer to her.

'See you tonight!' He sounded cheerier than he felt.

'Are you going to want dinner?' she asked, not looking at him.

What the hell kind of question was that? Who didn't want dinner? Why was he made to feel, should he dare answer that daily question in the affirmative, that eating an evening meal was an inconvenience? He ate breakfast at his desk. He was gone all day. His shirts and suits went to the dry cleaners. He just wanted dinner.

'No. I've got a lunch. I'll have a sandwich.'

'Good. My schedule is pretty full today.'

Full of what, for Christ's sake? This question, of course, he did not ask out loud.

'Say goodbye to Daddy, Avery.'

She didn't call him Jason any more. She called him

Daddy when Avery was awake and around, and when she wasn't . . . she didn't call him anything at all.

The door to the Schulmans' apartment opened just as Jason closed his own behind him. The hall between the two apartments, the only homes on the sixth floor, was about ten feet wide, and he could smell Rachael's perfume before he saw her. It wasn't one of those chemical, strident fragrances – it was flowery and soft and sophisticated. Just like Rachael Schulman.

Even their children were perfect. Jacob, Noah and Mia Schulman, bed-rumpled and sleepy, stood in the doorway to wave goodbye to their parents, their babysitter behind them. Mia looked like a bushbaby – all huge brown eyes – standing tiny between her two bigger brothers. 'Love you, Mama. Love you, Daddy.'

'We love you, too. See you tonight.' Always the 'we'. Envy swelled in his throat.

David patted Jason on the top of his arm. 'Morning.'

'How are you?' The elevator doors opened and they got in, Rachael pressing 1 with the manicured index finger of her left hand, diamond wedding band sparkling.

'How are Kim and Avery?' Rachael asked, her wide Julia Roberts smile revealing her small white even teeth.

They're horrible, he wanted to say. Out loud, 'Fine.' A pause, a floor of silence. Rachael brushed lint from David's shoulder in a quietly proprietary way. Jason coughed. 'Great weather we've been having.' God, could he be any more pedestrian?

'Fabulous. Felt like a long winter, this one, hey?'

We're going to go out to the country this weekend. So nice to feel the sun on our skin.'

Rachael's skin. Golden, even through the long winter. Smooth, even, glowing. Like the skin on the girls on the advertisements for body lotion.

'You must come out for a weekend. Mia and the boys would love to have Avery to play with.'

David nodded in agreement. 'We'll make that happen, definitely.'

Jason really, really hoped so. In the country, Rachael would wear a bathing suit. A bikini. More skin than he'd seen before. Last summer, Rachael in her short shorts had fuelled his dreams for weeks. Rachael in a bikini . . . he felt his heart racing.

The elevator had reached the ground floor. Che, the doorman, was mopping the floor at the end of his night shift. Jason reached into his jacket pocket for his Metro Pass, and waved to Rachael and David as they climbed into the Lincoln town car that picked them up each morning and delivered them to their respective offices downtown.

It was a beautiful morning – classic New York blue.

In their air-conditioned car, David put one hand on Rachael's knee. 'Did you mean that?'

'Mean what?'

'Mean that the Kramers should come to the country with us?'

'Shouldn't I have done?'

David shrugged. 'I don't know. He's always a bit . . . furtive . . . these days. And she's so uptight.'

‘She’s protective of Avery. That’s all. First baby.’

‘I don’t remember you being like that with Jacob . . .’

‘You’re biased. I think it could be fun. Besides, I feel bad for him. He always seems a bit sad to me.’

‘I see furtive, you see sad.’

‘You’re just naturally suspicious.’

‘And you’re just naturally a soft touch.’

Rachael laughed. David squeezed her knee. ‘Fine. Invite them. I bet Kim says no. Too much danger in the country, you know. Mosquitoes. Deer ticks.’

‘Bears!’ Rachael laughed.

‘Bears. Quite right. Avery could get attacked by bears. She’ll never come.’