

# Newton Neighbors

By  
Suzy Duffy

**TWCS**   
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The Writer's Coffee Shop  
(Australia) PO Box 447 Cherrybrook NSW 2126  
(USA) PO Box 2116 Waxahachie TX 75168

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# Chapter One

## Sitting Pretty

“Hubba-hubba!” Rick said, making Maria smile.

She still knew how to work her charms—hands on hips, subtle breath in through parted lips to elevate bust, chin raised, head tilted. She could do it all in a microsecond but make it look natural.

Tonight she was wearing a brand new, figure hugging scarlet-red dress with a plunging neckline. “You like?” She pouted for extra effect.

Rick crossed the room in three strides. “Baby, you’re still my weapon of mass seduction.” His voice had dropped an octave already. Blood was on the move. *Damn.*

Maria pushed against his chest as he wrapped his arms around her, because she knew where this was going. “Ricky, I was looking for your approval, not sex. Look, Cody’s downstairs, the sitter’s due here any moment, and we don’t have time.”

“Oh, come on.” He kissed her neck and nuzzled into her long, wavy hair, but she pushed him away.

“What if your son walks in?”

“We can lock the door?”

Maria tried to laugh it off, knowing it was her fault for giving him the come-on.

“No! You grab a bottle of wine for the party and I’ll check on the baby.” She walked away without giving him a chance to argue. Everything she had said was correct—they didn’t have time for sex—but that wasn’t why she’d pushed him away. The truth was she had a secret. If Ricky thought she was a weapon of mass seduction, it was because Maria had upgraded her ammunition.

It looked like a gymnast's leotard, but it was made by NASA and the ad had promised to reduce her waist by at least two inches. The fact it took fifteen minutes to squeeze into and she had no idea how long before she might asphyxiate was academic. Maria was thrilled with the result. She looked like her old self, with curves hauled back into the right position, and that was all that mattered. But there was no way she was showing it to Ricky. The plan was to wear it to the party, look amazing, and then when they got home, she would peel it off in the bathroom before he ever saw. Easy but spontaneous seductions were not part of the agenda.

Alice's room was across the hall from hers, and the door was already ajar. Maria tiptoed in her room because her little girl was a light sleeper. *Who knew two children could be so different?* she thought, admiring her perfect little girl. With her eyes closed and gorgeous little body so still, it was hard to believe she was such a fussy baby. Alice was difficult to keep happy. She seemed to be either whining or crying all the time. Maria had brought her to three different doctors, but they had each said the same thing—Alice was a healthy little ten-month-old.

Cody was ten years old now, but Maria still remembered how mellow he had been as a baby. All she had to do was look at him and he smiled. No matter what she tried with Alice, the baby cried. It had been a very tough ten months, but none of that mattered tonight. Alice was asleep, and Maria and Ricky were going out for a good night with friends.

"Maria?" Ricky called her from downstairs. Alice stirred and Maria froze.

"Shhh, honey, shhh. Don't wake up." She rested her hand on the baby's stomach to try to lull her back to sleep. "Good girl."

"Maria!" he shouted even louder. This time she ran out of the room and closed the baby's door quietly.

Maria bent over the banister rail and whisper-shouted to her husband. "Ricky, keep it down. You know Alice is asleep."

He walked to the bottom step of the stairs. "Damn. I'm sorry. Look, do you want to call the sitter? She's real late."

The dreaded sound of a baby starting to cry filled the landing.

"Now look what you've done!" Maria glared at her husband, kicked off her stilettos, and went back into Alice's room. She knew she would be pacing the nursery floor for the next hour. It was no place for three-inch heels.

Rick was annoyed with himself for shouting up the stairs and even more so that the sitter was late. What kind of first impression was that? Then the doorbell rang.

His son and the dog sprinted to answer it.

"Cody, you wanna get that?"

Rick was joking, because there was really no way to outrun the ten-year-old. Cody was going through the first-to-be-everywhere phase. To add to the chaos, the Labrador started another of her barking frenzies.

“Quiet, Orga!” Rick yelled at the dog, but it didn’t do any good. He could still hear Alice wailing, and her protests were getting louder not softer. The ruckus downstairs would only unsettle her more.

*Damn.* He headed for the kitchen to grab a bottle of something to bring to the party. The sooner they got out the better. They needed a break.

Cody had been sulking around the house all afternoon, telling everybody who would listen that he was too old for a sitter. He claimed some of his friends didn’t even have sitters anymore, but when Rick had talked it over with him, it turned out it was the ones with older sisters. Cody had eventually decided if any of his friends found out, he’d say his mom got the sitter for his little sister. Rick agreed that was a great idea.

Rick decided to bring a bottle of champagne to the party because it was a birthday celebration and it might earn him some brownie points with Maria. Then he headed back to the hall to meet the new sitter.

The first thing Rick saw was Cody smiling and the sitter laughing at something his son had said. She was gorgeous. Long blond hair, big eyes, striking features. Rick had met many sitters over the ten years of his son’s life. They had been a normal mix of pretty, plain, fun, dull, but this one was a real beauty. She could have been modelling instead of watching kids.

He pushed the notion out of his mind. “Hi,” he said, his voice a little too jovial. *Take it down a notch.* “I see you’ve met Cody already.”

The dog was still barking.

“Orga, be quiet.” The hound started sniffing the newcomer instead. He moved the champagne bottle to his left hand so he could shake with his right. “I’m Rick, Cody’s dad.”

“Hullo, I’m Jessica Armstrong.” Her smile was timid, cute. “And I’ve met Cody and Orga.”

Rick felt uncomfortable and his face was hot. Was he blushing? He wondered if that was even physically possible. Wasn’t there an age limit on blushing? The last time he’d glowed this hot, he was in the fourth grade and Judi Schillawaski had—without any warning—kissed him.

This girl was more beautiful than Judi Schillawaski.

“Maria’s upstairs with Alice. She just woke up.” Rick winced when the baby let out another wail. “You might need to play with her for a while. Alice, I mean. You might have to play with Alice, the baby, not Maria, my wife.”

*Just stop talking, you idiot!*

Jessica laughed. “I’m the eldest of five and love babies, so really, I’m happy to play with Alice.” She glanced at Cody who was surreptitiously studying her. “And I love playing with big boys, too,” she said.

Now it was Cody’s turn to blush. He turned away. If it hadn’t been for his own discomfort, Rick might have felt sorry for the boy. He had clearly spotted that the new sitter was a beauty. The kid was growing up.

Orga started barking again.

“Cody, will you put that damn dog out in the backyard? I’m sorry,

Jessica. She gets excited, but she'll calm down in a few minutes. It's just because you're new."

"Not a problem. Honest, I love dogs, too."

With the boy gone, they were alone, and Rick felt his body tense. What in the hell was his problem? He was usually good with meeting new people. This one was different.

"Let me show you around," he said, but the words felt awkward. Until this evening, the sitters had been little more than kids themselves. He'd never felt wrong-footed or goofy like he did now. *Get a grip*, he chastised himself, and then he gave best his corporate smile. "I'm thinking that's an English accent?"

"Yes. I'm English, from a town called Dorking, in Surrey. It's just south of London."

"Yeah? My wife, Maria, is from Puerto Rico." *Why did I say that? Act normal, you ass!* "What are you doing in Newton?"

"I'm over here for a year. Studying at Wiswall College."

"Oh, that's cool. It's just down the road."

"Yes, it is. I'm so sorry I was a little late this evening. I got lost, but I assure you, Mr. Sanchez, it won't happen again. That is, if you want me back."

"Please, call me Rick."

Jessica had enormous dark blue eyes which seemed bigger now that she looked anxious. He got the urge to reach out, but that would have been ridiculous. Inappropriate. Against the law?

He laughed louder than he meant to. "No problem about being late. We're pretty relaxed in this house. If you keep the kids content, Maria and I will be more than happy." They walked into the living room.

"Oh, an Xbox." Jessica grinned at Cody, who was back from putting the dog out. "How good are you on this thing? Because I have to warn you, I'm an ace." She winked at the ten-year-old. Cody's eyes lit up, and he lunged for the controls.

"You've just secured a place in my son's heart, Jessica. Xbox is his life. If you're as good as him, he'll never want another sitter."

She sat down next to Cody and took the other controller. Then she glanced at Rick. "Call me Jessie."

He nodded. There was a time when something like this—seeing an incredibly good-looking woman—would have fired him up. Rick would have had all the witty one-liners, all the charm he required, but time had softened him. Eleven years of marriage, two kids, and the fact he spent more time at the country club than the nightclub all meant he'd lost his edge. How could he have let that happen?

Rick watched the two of them settle onto the sofa. Seeing the gorgeous young sitter with the game controller was a reminder that he was ancient in comparison. She had more in common with Cody than with him.

*Lucky kid.*

Rick and Maria were heading out to yet another fortieth party, but the stunning blonde on his living room sofa made him think it would be a lot more fun to stay in than head out.

*Would you get a grip? You could almost be her dad—almost.*



Maria was at her wit's end. How could he have shouted up the stairs like that? Was he absolutely brain-dead? With an hour's sleep, Alice was sufficiently rested for a big-time tantrum.

She tried to soothe her back to sleep but that didn't work. So Maria scooped up her daughter and paced the floor in the darkened nursery. Alice was a strong-willed baby, however. She wouldn't stop until Maria switched on the bedroom light. For a moment it looked like that worked. Then the doorbell rang and Orga started barking, and the child knew something was going on downstairs. Alice wailed even louder, huge sobs racking her little body.

Then it happened.

Maria wasn't quick enough, and Alice off-loaded her full nighttime bottle of milk—now semi-curdled—over Maria's cleavage and new dress. The warm, wet liquid soaked through the cocktail dress and secret underwear onto her skin. It appeared even NASA technology was no protection against baby puke.

Maria called down the stairs for help, but everyone was out of earshot. Eventually she gave up, stomped back into the nursery, and peeled off both Alice's clothing and her own. She gave herself and the baby a quick wipe down with a damp cloth and then got Alice into a new pink onesie. The baby cried the entire time, and Maria wondered why her husband didn't bother to come up and help. He was always better at soothing their little girl. Maria had a dark suspicion her daughter simply preferred Ricky to her. Even Cody seemed to have a way with his little sister. Sometimes when she cried and Maria couldn't stop it, her ten-year-old boy would take over and soothe Alice with ease.

Maria was tempted to cancel the night. It was Ricky's fault. If he hadn't shouted, Alice would still be asleep. She took the little screamer into her bedroom and let the baby bawl on her bed for a minute while she wiped herself down again. Maria tried to sniff her own skin and didn't smell any baby puke, so she threw on her old black party dress, scooped up the still-screaming Alice, and headed down the stairs.

Naturally enough, as soon as Alice saw they were going down to where all the action was, she stopped crying. It was so damn frustrating. Maria prayed the new sitter would be good with babies. Stopping in the kitchen, she picked up a fresh bottle of formula and then followed the sounds of laughter into the living room. Cody was yelling death threats already, so she

knew he was playing his precious Xbox, and Rick was shouting encouragement at the seventy-two-inch flat screen. The level of excitement in the room was at a fever pitch.

“Hi,” Maria said as she walked in the room. Then she saw her sitter. *Wow*, she thought. In all the years she’d been hiring sitters, she’d never had such a pretty one. Maria stopped and looked at Cody sitting right beside her on the sofa and Rick hovering next to them. Her men sure seemed to like the new girl. She scowled. Was that why her husband hadn’t heard her?

Jessie hit the pause button on her controller as soon as Cody jumped to the next level in his game, and then she jumped to her feet. “Hullo there,” she said, but her focus was on Alice not Maria. The baby looked mildly interested as the sitter slowly approached.

“Maria, this is Jessica—Jessie—our new sitter,” Rick said. “She’s from England and she’s the eldest of five. She likes dogs, too.”

This much information annoyed her. “Didn’t you hear me calling you?”

Rick looked blank. “No. It must have been when I was walking Jessie around the house. You okay? You’ve changed your dress.”

“Alice vomited all over me.”

“Poor you. How awful,” Jessie said. “Do you think the baby is sick?”

Maria appreciated the sympathy but said, “No, I don’t think so. She was settled for the night, but *somebody* shouted up the stairs and woke her.” She glared at her husband. “Alice here was crying so hard she made herself sick. She does that sometimes.”

Jessie stood next to mother and baby and stroked Alice’s tiny fingers. She talked in a gentle, higher pitched voice—cooing and gurgling at the baby. It worked. Alice started to gurgle back.

“May I?” She gestured to Maria, putting her hands out to take the baby. Maria wasn’t so sure.

“She’s in a foul mood this evening.” But even as Maria said it, she could feel Alice’s body shift. The baby leaned toward Jessie, wanting to get into the new girl’s arms.

Maria felt a tiny stab of jealousy but suppressed it and let the sitter take her daughter. It was a seamless handover. Alice looked highly amused by the ridiculous noises the newcomer was making.

“I think I’ll let you ladies talk,” Rick said and left the room.

Jessie sat beside Cody and bounced Alice gently on her lap, which gave Maria a chance to sit and really study the new girl. Her long blond hair was scooped in a loose clasp, but a few spiral tendrils had escaped and fell around her face in soft waves. Her skin was very fair, and she wore almost no makeup, perhaps just a little pink on her cheeks. Or was that natural? There was a glow to her skin—*the glow of youth*, Maria thought, starting to feel frumpy and a million years old.

Jessie spoke to Cody. “Will you help me with your little sister? You’ll be able to tell me where I go to change her nappy and show me where her crib is?”



Cody dropped his remote on the sofa and began gently banging the leg of the table with his foot. Maria knew what he was doing—it was just enough to show that he was fed up but not so much that she would get mad. Her boy was obviously upset that he'd lost his Xbox partner thanks to his sister's intrusion.

"I don't know what a nappy is," he grumbled, clearly not wanting to cooperate.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I think I mean diaper," Jessie said. "Look, as soon as she's down, I'll challenge you to a rematch and we'll play for the whole night. What do you think?"

Cody glanced up at her, grinned, and then ran out of the room. Maria was impressed because she knew how hard it was to keep two children happy. Not bad for a girl who had been in the house twenty minutes—if that.

"Alice started on formula last month, so here's one." She put the bottle on the table next to them. "And there's more in the fridge if you need it, but I don't think you will."

"Would you like me to heat the bottle before I give it to her?" Jessie asked.

"No, she's used to it cold," Maria said. The girl knew a thing or two about babies, she realized. "So you have little brothers and sisters?"

Jessie nodded but continued playing with Alice. "There are four more at home—two boys and two girls, all younger than me. In fact the youngest is only eight, so he's younger than Cody. His name is Tristan."

"And you're British?"

She nodded again. "I'm studying here for a year."

"What's your major?"

"Psychology. I'm doing my master's."

"Wonderful. You can help me figure out what makes my two tick. What aspect of psychology are you doing your master's in?"

Jessie's eyes brightened. "Emotion regulation and interpersonal competence in romantic relationships."

"Oh." Maria felt awkward now. "Anything else?" She was joking, but it seemed Jessie thought she meant it.

"Well," she said, "I also have an interest in the role of the family environment on a person's emotional development."

Cody picked that precise moment to skip back into the room balancing the toaster on his head. "Mom, can Todd and I go toasting later?"

Maria glanced at the sitter. "You came to the right house if you want crazy family environments." She rolled her eyes. "Cody get that toaster off your head!" She wondered if Jessie could see through her and her happy family façade.

"What's toasting?" Jessie asked Cody.

"You don't know what toasting is?" Cody's tone was condescending. "It's ghosting but with burnt toast."

She smiled, all the time stroking Alice's little back. "Okay, you'll have to

tell me what ghosting is.”

“Don’t tell me you don’t know what ghosting is? Everybody has that.” He plonked the toaster on the coffee table.

Jessie shook her head. “I don’t think we have it in the UK.”

“Cody, you’re making a huge mess. Crumbs everywhere. Put that thing back in the kitchen.” Maria stood up and put her hands on her hips in annoyance.

He picked up the toaster, balanced it back on top of his head, and made for the door. “No ghosting? Jeez,” he said.

Maria watched her boy leave the room and then sat back down. “You could as easily have said you didn’t have electricity. He wasn’t impressed. Ghosting is a Halloween thing. It’s kind of a nice idea. The kids put a note on a friend’s doorstep telling them they’ve been ghosted, and they leave a little bag of candy.”

The boy bounced back into the room, without the toaster this time. “It has to be anonymous,” he said.

“Oh, Cody. Good job! That was one of your list words from school this week. Well used.” Maria meant it as a compliment, but then she saw her son flush and realized too late that she had embarrassed him in front of the pretty new sitter.

“So you don’t write your name on the note?” Jessie asked. Maria studied the younger girl. Was she oblivious to Maria’s mistake or smoothing things over? She couldn’t tell, and that unsettled her even more.

Cody moved on. “No way, and you have to do it when it gets dark. You put the note and the candy on their doorstep without anybody seeing you. Then you ring their doorbell and run as fast as you can. If you do it right, you can hide and watch them open the door to get the candy. It’s cool.”

Maria sighed. “Yes, we’ve had a lot of visits this year, but the problem is Orga gets overexcited and now she’s barking at everybody.”

“Okay, I’ll keep an eye out for that.”

Then Cody jumped up. “But I want to do toasting with Todd—not ghosting.”

The sitter smiled at his enthusiasm. “Now what’s that?”

“Well, you see everybody expects candy when they’re ghosted, so it’s sick to give them burnt toast instead and see how mad they get when they open their bags.”

“It’s not very nice.” Maria pretended to look stern, but she wasn’t annoyed at all. In fact, she was relieved to see Alice was still content. The baby seemed very happy with Jessie. It was amazing how fast she’d calmed down. Jessie seemed to have Cody and Ricky’s talent for keeping the baby happy. What was their secret?

“Aw, Mom.” In a heartbeat, Cody was back to looking miserable. “Can I just do Mitch Jackson’s house? He did us last night.”

“Mitch is a boy who lives a few houses down the road at number thirteen. He’s a seventh grader, so he’s a little older than Cody,” she told Jessie.

“He’s a bit mean to Cody sometimes.”

The sitter gave an understanding nod.

Maria looked at her son. “Tell you what—if Todd’s mom says it’s all right, I’m okay with both of you toasting Mitch Jackson. But nobody else. Promise?”

Cody punched the air with his hand. “Score!” he yelled, frightening Alice a little, but Jessie was on it and upped her cooing for a moment.

“Just Mitch, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. I have to call Todd.” He ran out of the room again. “Adios!” he yelled as he disappeared down the hall.

“Is your little brother as energetic as he is?” Maria asked.

“Tristan? He sure is.” Jessie smiled. “And the others are worse.”

“Are they away from home, too?”

The girl shook her head. “No. I’m the first. The next one down is doing her A levels this year, so she’ll head to college next autumn.”

“That’s tough on your parents. Education is expensive.”

“It’s not as bad in the UK as it is here, and I’m on a scholarship. My mum couldn’t afford to pay Wiswall fees. My dad is deceased.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

Jessie shrugged.

Rick reappeared at the door to the living room.

“Ready to go, honey?” He looked at Maria. She nodded and stood.

“Well, you seem more than capable of handling things here. I’ve left both our numbers next to the phone in the kitchen, although I know you have mine already. I’ll have my cell with me all night, and we should be home around midnight. All right?”

The sitter stood up and shifted Alice to her hip with the fluency and ease of a young mom.

“That’s fine. I do have your number, but I’ll save Rick’s in my phone, too, so we’re doubly covered. Have a good night.”

“Don’t come out to the door with us. It’ll upset the baby,” Maria said, although she didn’t think her daughter looked too sad anymore.

Rick reached over and stroked her arm. “Are you aware Cody is on the phone calling Todd? I overheard him asking his partner-in-crime to come over so they can toast Mitch Jackson together.”

Maria rolled her eyes. “You know what, if it amuses him and makes Jessie’s job a little easier, I say go for it.”

Jessie was studying Alice and playing with her tiny hand. “I think we’re okay coming out to the door with you.”

It irked Maria that the girl was overriding her authority, and what’s more, she seemed so damn capable with Alice. She knew that was crazy, because it was great to have a good sitter. Maria and Rick got their coats from the closet while Jessie focused on keeping Alice happy.

“By the way,” Maria said, “I turned on the house alarm but left the front door off the system. That way the boys can come and go, and you’ll be able

to answer it if you get ghosted.”

Jessie nodded. “Have a smashing night,” she said.

Maria smiled. “Your British accent’s really cute.”

Jessie looked a little embarrassed. “I do feel a bit conspicuous. I keep using words I assumed were normal over here, but they’re not.”

“Gimme an example,” Rick said.

“Oh, let me think. *Fortnight* caused some confusion when I started school.”

“I know what a fortnight is,” he said, looking proud. “It’s fourteen nights—two weeks. So Wednesday fortnight would be the Wednesday two weeks from next. Am I right?”

Jessie smiled and nodded. “My roommate didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“American English and English English—they’re not the same language, are they?” Rick asked.

She shook her head. “Definitely not, but we get by.”

Maria kissed Alice on the cheek and shouted a good-bye to her son, who was more interested in his phone call than seeing his parents off. “See you around midnight.”

Rick took Maria by the arm when they were walking to their car. “She seems cool.”

“She’s very pretty.”

“A pretty sitter, sitting pretty with our precious little babies.” Rick had a habit of making up marketing jingles on the spot because it was part of his job, but Maria was in no mood for them just then.

Maria looked at her husband. It was getting dark, but she could still see his face. “She’s very beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Is she? I hadn’t noticed.”

She elbowed her husband. “Rick, you would have to be blind not to notice.”

## Chapter Two

### Blind Ambition

“Michael, you should’ve seen our new sitter.” It was almost the first thing Rick said to his best friend when he got him alone. Maria and Rick had been late arriving at the party because of all the fuss with Alice, and by the time they’d arrived, the party was in full swing. Maria had gone in search of the hostess to give her the champagne, while Rick made a beeline for Michael. He found him at the bar, so they each grabbed a bottle of beer and moved away to talk in private.

Michael studied his friend’s face. “Tell me all about her. Is she nice?”

“Nice doesn’t even start to cover it, man. She’s an eleven out of ten. No, scratch that. She’s twenty out of ten—plus she’s good with the kids.”

Michael laughed. “You were doing well till you mentioned the bit about being good with the kids. If she’s that hot, who cares?”

Rick shrugged and grinned. “What can I say? I’m a broken man. But I have to tell you, I haven’t seen a girl that gorgeous in years.” Then he stood a little taller. “Don’t get me wrong. I know she’s a kid and I’m married, but still, I know beauty when I see it—and she’s British.”

“Ah, a European import? Sweet.” Michael looked like he was studying his beer bottle label. “Tell me—would you?”

“Would I what?”

“You know—would you?” He nodded toward the door of the room as if that explained what he was saying, but Rick already knew.

“Nah, relax.” He tried to sound convincing while remaining blasé. “Too much hassle. Not worth the risk. Besides, I love Maria.”

Michael laughed again. “I can see it in your eyes, friend. Beautiful women make the most moderate men morons.”

“What is that? A quote from Shakespeare?”

“No. Me.” He draped an arm around Rick’s shoulders and whispered, “Can I recommend a cold shower and getting a new sitter?”

“Did I mention she’s great with the kids?”

Michael shook his head and pulled his arm back. “Lose her, bro. Get her the hell away from you. One of two things is gonna happen. One, she’ll drive you crazy with desire, or two, you’ll do something you’re sure to regret—or three, you’ll do one and two. I’m telling you, get her out of *su casa*.”

Rick said nothing and took a large swig of beer. Michael seemed to understand the situation pretty well. “This sort of thing ever happen to you?”

“What? Having a hot sitter? Cathi wouldn’t let me. She has more sense.”

“Well, tonight was just her first night. We got her from a sitter website. Her credentials were great. I just didn’t realize her body—that is, the rest of her was so great, too,” Rick said. “I couldn’t exactly fire her as soon as I saw her.”

Michael raised a hand in defeat. “Okay. Whatever you say.”

Rick began to grind his teeth in annoyance. “All right, I’m going to get another beer. Do you want one?”

“Sure. Thanks. That way we can get drunk and pretend there isn’t a twenty out of ten sitting in your house giving Cody all of her attention instead of you.”

Rick threw him a dirty look as if to say *enough* and went to get the beers. The problem was everything Michael had said was true.



“I love your dress,” Cathi said when Maria eventually caught up with her. “Did you get that in Boston?”

“You know this old dress, but thanks, *chica*. I need you to boost my spirits.”

Cathi wrapped her arm around her old friend. “Maria? Honey, what’s wrong? Your dress might be nice, but you look miserable. What happened? Is it Alice again?”

Maria was relieved to get a supporting shoulder to cry on. “Yes. I swear, Cathi, that child hates me. I did have a new dress for tonight, but she vomited all over me and my new miracle underwear.”

Cathi squeezed her friend a little firmer. “How many times do I have to tell you? You don’t need it! Your figure is fabulous, and you know that this just a phase with Alice. She’ll come through the other side. Is she not sleeping? Could she be teething?”

Maria pulled away and looked at her friend. “Oh, I never thought of that. It’s like I’ve forgotten all about babies. Cody never gave me a moment’s trouble. No, I managed to get Alice to sleep. I really worked hard this evening to get organized. I gave her a bath, read to her. I took it real slow so she’d settle well, and it all worked. She was out cold until my idiot of a

husband yelled up the stairs at me and woke her just minutes before we were walking out the door. When she wakes like that, she's impossible to get back to sleep."

A passing waiter carried a large silver tray of glasses full of pink punch. Cathi grabbed a fresh one for herself and Maria.

"Here, you need this. You poor doll. We forget how much work babies are, but remember, they do grow up pretty fast."

Maria took a large gulp of punch and continued. "You're the best, Cathi, but I haven't told you the worst part yet. The most beautiful girl in the world walked into my home just as I was being puked on and Alice was screaming her head off. You should have seen her. She's so beautiful. Damn near perfect. And she's young and great with kids and she's over here to do a master's in psychology. So she's smart on top of being beautiful. God, I feel sick." She gulped down the rest of the punch in her glass.

"Over here from where?"

"Oh yeah, she has a real sophisticated accent, as well. She's British. She was even teaching Rick words before we left. Rick—my husband—not Cody. That said, I think Cody has his first crush, too."

"It's not Cody I'd worry about. Come on, let's get you a refill, girl. I think you need it. What did you say she was doing with Rick?"

The women headed over to the punchbowl and took another glass of the raspberry-colored liquid for Maria.

"Oh, I was there for that. It wasn't suspicious or underhanded. It was more annoying than anything. They were just talking about the difference between American English and English English, and next thing I knew she was telling him new words like *fortnight*." Maria tried to speak in an upper class English voice, which made Cathi laugh.

"Your Puerto Rican accent is too thick. That's the funniest attempt at an English accent I've ever heard." Then Cathi tried to put on an English voice, too. "Is she rather posh?"

"Nah, I don't think so. She seemed pretty normal, eldest of five. Her dad is dead. It's just—oh, I don't know. To see both my men acting dopey around her . . . that's some power. It's a pain in the ass, if you want to know the truth. I mean do these women, these—what would you call them—swans? Do they know the power they have over normal men?"

"Don't forget she's smart, too."

"Yeah."

"And good with kids."

"Okay, don't rub it in."

But Cathi wouldn't stop. "So you're saying this girl literally has it all, beauty and intelligence. She's thoughtful, caring, and even has a sense of humor. You know we have a better word to describe these women. Just take the first letter from each word to abbreviate it—*B* for beauty, *I* for intelligence, *T* for thoughtfulness, *C* for caring, and *H* for humor. Now let me think . . ."

Maria figured it out and laughed. “Thanks, *chica*.”

Cathi took a sip of her punch. “Look, honey, for a start there aren’t many of them around—thank the Lord—and second, are you sure you aren’t blowing this a little out of proportion? I mean, you’re gorgeous. I’ve always told you that. I still see men checking out your curves. That Puerto Rican va va voom is really impossible to beat. It’s downright sexy.”

Maria shook her head vigorously. “Wait till you see her. She looks like a cross between Taylor Swift and a Victoria’s Secret model.”

“Ew, Taylor Swift? The girl who was voted sexiest woman alive last month?” Cathi put her arm around her friend’s waist again. “Okay, if she freaks you out this much, just don’t use her again after tonight.”

“But you should have seen her with Alice. I thought we were going to have a problem being able to leave tonight. Alice just wouldn’t settle with me—nothing new there—but this kid, Jessie, she just took my little girl in her arms, my baby, and Alice cheered up right away. It’s damn annoying. Go figure.”

Cathi laughed. “If she hadn’t managed that, you would have missed the party.”

“I know. It makes no sense.” Maria swirled her red drink and studied the miniature tornado she’d created.

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong. It all makes perfect sense. First off, she’s pretty and you think Rick noticed, so you feel threatened as a wife and woman. Second, even Cody spotted how cute she was, and now you feel bad because at some subconscious level you know your darling little boy is getting older and will one day leave you for another woman. And third, even Alice was happy with this new woman. I figure that threatened you most of all, because being a mother is what you’re all about. It’s how you define yourself. You were really sideswiped.”

Maria stared at her friend openmouthed. She didn’t know how to respond, but she knew there was no need—her friend was on a roll.

“In theory this woman could replace you. That’s gotta be tough to absorb.”

“Seriously? You got all that just from what I said?”

Cathi nodded and raised her empty glass. “Well, something very similar was on *Dr. Phil* yesterday.”

Maria laughed. The party was getting busier and the music louder. “What happened at the end of the show?”

Cathi, never one for subtlety, sighed. “The couple broke up. That’s quite unusual for *Dr. Phil*.”

“Twenty minutes in the company of a pretty new sitter and you think Rick and I are heading for divorce?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean you guys. I was talking about the people on the show. No way. You guys are cool. All you have to do is seduce Rick tonight. Remind him how good you are. You’re a red-blooded woman with a terrific body. Let him at it.”



Maria slapped her forehead. “Cathi, I just stopped nursing Alice. I still have all my baby weight. I’m not as hot as I was a couple of years ago.”

“Neither is he. Come on, girl. We’re all aging, but remember, youth is no replacement for experience. You may be a little softer around the edges, but you’ve given him two amazing kids and he loves you.”

“Thanks, Cathi. I need a refill.” Maria sighed, noticing she’d drunk her swirling tornado.

“Now that’s a great idea. Afterward, we can come up with lots of X-rated ideas for how you’re gonna spice up your love life when you get Rick home later tonight.”

Maria groaned. “I’m done with X-rated sex. You know Alice is a *Fifty Shades* baby.”

“I think half the babies born last year were *Fifty Shades* babies. You don’t have to make a baby. Just play with Rick. If you blow his mind, he won’t be able to think about your pretty little sitter. Trust me.”

The women headed back to the punch bowl and put Jessie right out of their minds.

“Tell me, have you had any luck with your old neighbor, Noreen Palmer?”

Maria gave a helpless shrug. “I don’t know how to get through to that woman,” she said. “It’s easy enough to bump into her because she’s out walking her dog so much. I just grab Orga and head out. I’ve already had three conversations about this with her in the last two weeks. She knows I’m up to something.”

Cathi looked eager. “What did you say to her?”

Maria saw two seats by the window and headed for them. When they got settled, she continued. “The first time, I asked if she was finding the house a little big now since the kids are all gone. Of course, I didn’t just blurt it out. I kinda worked up to it. Anyway, she didn’t seem to think so. I told her I thought I knew somebody who might want to buy her house for a fair price. She looked a little interested, but then she changed the subject again. Then yesterday I asked her if she’d thought any more about my friend who was interested in her house, and she looked at me like it was the first she’d heard about it.”

Cathi huffed in frustration. “Is she getting confused in her old age? Does she know I want to make her an offer?”

“Oh, I think so. I more or less said that, but she just laughed and waved her hands. I don’t think she’s interested, Cathi. What more can I do?”

“Try harder.” Her friend looked exasperated.

“You know, hers isn’t the only house with a view of the water. You could get a realtor to approach all the homes overlooking Crystal Lake. Maybe somebody else would think of selling.”

“I like her house best, and you’d be surprised how few do sell in a year. There are lots of houses in the neighborhood but not right on the lake. They seem to change hands privately, which is where you come in. You’re right

there. You live on Newton's most desirable street. I know you can find me a way in," Cathi said, pleading.

"You know we found our house by pure chance. We were just out walking and saw the for sale sign. I'm sure that could happen to you."

Cathi shook her head, looking impatient. "That was a decade ago. Things have changed, Maria. You and I have to think outside the box. The trick is for me to hear about a house first and make an offer, which I get accepted before it goes on the open market."

Maria wasn't convinced. Of course she would love it if Cathi lived closer. They were best friends, after all. Their husbands had been working at the same marketing company for about nine years, and the four of them had become very close. But did it have to be right next door?

Plus, Maria *liked* Mrs. Palmer. She was a widow who lived alone. The woman was a little absentminded now in her old age, but the kids adored her—even Alice. She was a soft little woman in the Angela Lansbury mold. One time, Cody had even asked his mom if Mrs. Palmer was the woman from *Murder, She Wrote*. Maria had really laughed at that.

A decade earlier, when she and Rick had bought number seven, Crystal Lake, the house had been in bad condition. Back in those days, they had been just starting out, so what they'd lacked in finances they'd made up for in energy. Ricky had done a lot of the renovations himself. Maria hadn't been able to do too much—she'd been pregnant with Cody—but as soon as he was born, it had been a different story.

Most of Newton's new moms cocooned themselves in a love-bubble of soft pink or blue. They breastfed their newborns, took gentle walks around the lake, and did multiple mommy-toddler mornings. Maria was cut from a different cloth.

Cody had dozed happily while she'd painted the nursery sky blue. She'd nursed him in the Lowes plumbing department and changed his diapers at Home Depot. She had been up ladders, down at the DIY stores, and around that house like a woman possessed.

Maria had laughed when Mrs. Palmer urged her to slow down. She'd said she would stop when the house was finished. Noreen was a treasure in those early years. The older woman had helped with the newborn Cody, and she'd given Maria lots of old furniture, including all her old baby stuff that had been stored for years in the loft of number nine.

Mrs. Palmer had been a bit like a mother figure to Maria over the last decade, but Maria could see her next-door neighbor was aging. She was beginning to slow down. Maria thought maybe their roles were reversing now. Perhaps it was her turn to start helping the older lady.

Instead, her best friend Cathi had notions of getting her hands on number nine, Crystal Lake. She wanted to renovate the house and then live in it herself. When Maria had told her friend the next-door neighbor had been living in the house for fifty years, Cathi had become even more determined. She'd made a powerful argument that Mrs. Palmer was sure to make a

financial killing and end up being a very rich woman. She could head to Florida and kick her heels up in the sun. Newton was too cold in the winter for the elderly.

That's what Cathi said, but Maria knew Mrs. Palmer never headed south in the colder months. She stayed in her home at Crystal Lake. Noreen was a hardy woman and walked her dog once the roads were cleared of snow. She wrapped up warm and got out in the winter weather. She wasn't one of the snowbirds who left at the first sign of frost.

Noreen was a Newton woman through and through. Cathi didn't seem to appreciate that. Half a century in one house was an amazing achievement, and her roots were deep. Having had the conversations with her neighbor, Maria seriously doubted Cathi would manage to get her hands on the property.

"What about the other side of the lake?" she said, but Cathi shook her head.

"Believe me, I've done the research. The houses on your road look over the lake to the west, so you guys get sunsets over the water. It has to be on your road and your side of the street. And you know I can only afford one that needs renovation. Numbers five and three have been renovated in the last few years, so they'd be crazy money if they ever went up for sale, and the other three on the waterfront seem settled. I can't get any info on them." Cathi looked very serious as she spoke. "The even numbered houses don't interest me because they don't back onto the lake. They're on the wrong side of the road. No, I think it has to be Noreen Palmer's house. We just have to find a way to convince her to sell."

Maria had already knocked back two glasses of punch, and she was a beginning to feel a little calmer, maybe even good. Looking at Cathi's intensity, she began to giggle. "You know, you're taking all of this very seriously. Does it really matter? It's just a house."

Cathi didn't look amused. "It's not just a house, Maria. It's a home. It's a statement of where you're at in life. It says how rich and successful you are. It tells the world what your values are—big house, big family, big success. You know all that."

Maria frowned. "*Chica*, if you ask me, big houses mean big bills and lots of cleaning. Our house isn't so big. I think you're crazy. You don't even have a big family—unless you have something to tell me?"

Cathi blew out a jet of air—something she often did when she was impatient. "Are you insane? There's no way I'm going back there! My baby days are behind me."

"Okay, you have Katie and Stacy. You'd get by in a two bedroom if you wanted. Mrs. Palmer's house has six bedrooms. It's huge—too big. She had a bunch of kids, and you know her son, Greg, lives just across the road. She's not going to want to move away from her grandson, Todd. He's Cody's friend. Why would you want that much space?"

Cathi's eyes lit up. It was obvious she'd given the question a lot of

thought. “I want one room for each of my girls. I want a study for myself, and I’d like to convert another of the bedrooms into a huge bathroom off the master suite. Didn’t you say she doesn’t have en suite bathrooms?”

“No. The house was built long before such things were deemed necessary.”

Cathi smiled. “It’s begging to be renovated, and I’m just the woman to do it.” She raised her glass.

Maria clinked and smiled—on the outside, anyway. She didn’t like to see her elderly neighbor forced into something she might not want to do. That said, she knew Cathi very well. Once her friend set her mind on something, she was rarely beaten. If Cathi wanted number nine, she’d find a way to get her hands on it. Mrs. Palmer wouldn’t stand a chance.

“Can you imagine the parties we could have? We could do joint celebrations and open up the two backyards. What fun would that be?”

Maria smiled. “It’d be fantastic in the summertime. We can have boats on the lake. Crystal Lake Lane is amazing in July.”

“Oh, I was thinking nighttime parties. If I could get a swimming pool in the backyard, it would be the best ever.”

“Why do you need a pool with the lake right beside us?” Maria wondered if her friend was going a bit too far. “What does Michael think about all this?”

Cathi glanced at her friend. “We don’t need to tell him until we’re a little further along in our plans.”

“Okay, now I’m curious. How much further?”

Cathi laughed. “I guess we’d have to tell him before the furniture removal guys arrive.”

Maria sighed. “He is a very tolerant man, *chica*. Ricky would kill me if I bought a house without telling him. I don’t even know if I could do it legally. You have such blind ambition.”

Cathi looked affronted. “It’s not blind. I have a very clear vision of where I’m going and how I’m getting there. I am simply determined to own a house on Crystal Lake.” Their husbands were approaching them. Cathi gave a dazzling loyal-wife smile and whispered to Maria, “Don’t say anything in front of the boys yet—not until I have everything under control.”

## **Chapter Three**

### **No Need for Alarm**

Back at Crystal Lake, Jessie was happy she had everything under control. When she first met Maria, the woman had implied Alice would be a handful. It sure hadn't turned out that way. Jessie thought the little girl was a cutie and an easy baby to care for. With just a few cuddles and one peekaboo game, Alice had been ready for a diaper change and a full bottle of milk before settling back into her crib. She'd fallen asleep before the Incy Wincy Spider was anywhere near the top of the garden spout.

Now the house was quiet. Orga was back inside and seemed to be calmer, and Cody was still out with this friend, so it looked like Jessie was going to have an easy night. With the house so peaceful, she realized there was a good chance she could get some homework done. She headed to the kitchen to find the teapot. Maria had told her to make herself at home, and she always liked a cup of tea next to her while she studied. While she waited for the water to boil, she found the note with their cell phone numbers and added Rick to her contacts. Just then she heard the front door slam followed by the thundering feet of Cody and Todd as they came bounding into the room.

"Did Mitch Jackson toast us again, Jessie?" He stood legs apart, fists clenched, ready for war.

She wanted to laugh at his anxious little face but knew better. For him, this was serious business. "Not only have we not been toasted, we haven't even been ghosted. I was rather looking forward to that," she said. "Now tell me—where would I find a mug?"

Cody went to the cupboard above the dishwasher. "We just toasted him, but I have a feeling he saw us. We're waiting for a counterattack." He took out a coffee mug and put it on the counter beside her just as the doorbell rang.

The boys tore off, and she followed them in time to witness Todd racing for the road to see if he could catch who had rung and run.

Meanwhile, Cody was checking out the contents of the little brown bag on their doorstep. He slapped his forehead in anguish. “Aw, man, I told you he saw us,” he said, showing her the burnt toast in the bag.

Jessie felt his pain. Clearly this was war. Todd returned looking deflated.

“Come in,” she said, getting into the spirit of things. “He could be watching us at this very minute, and you guys don’t want to be seen like this. We have to talk strategies.”

She could see that was music to the boys’ ears.

“You could be an ally for our side,” Todd said.

Soon the three of them were standing around the island in the kitchen. Jessie reckoned the smooth marble countertop was the perfect place to lay out a large sheet of paper and draw a map of the neighboring houses. The boys got her paper, sharpies, and a ruler while she got herself the mug of tea. Then they watched transfixed as she began to sketch a rough map of the street. Jessie knew there was a lake behind them, but since she hadn’t seen it yet, the boys took her into the dining room to look out over the back of the house.

That was the first time Jessie saw Crystal Lake. It was dark out, but that didn’t matter. The view was hypnotic. She’d walked through the dining room with Rick earlier on her tour of the first floor of the house, but somehow she’d missed the incredible view outside.

The backyard of the Sanchez house stretched back about seventy feet, and beyond that was a low cut hedge. Without a doubt, the shrubs were cut back to see the lake because it was so pretty. The night was still and so the water was, too. It looked like a sheet of black glass spreading out across . . . she didn’t know how far, but she could see the homes on the other side, the buttermilk-yellow light of their little windows mirrored on the water. Jessie wondered if, across the lake, the Sanchez house looked as appealing to them as those buildings did to her. The night sky was clear, and the moon reflected on the lake like a picture in a children’s story book.

*Funny it’s called Crystal Lake*, she mused. *It looks so dark—like jade or ebony—but not something bright and illuminating like crystal.* She thought of her mother’s precious crystal vase collection at home. Wedding presents from years ago. She should phone her mother soon.

“We’re not allowed to go down to the lake at night.” Cody cut into her thoughts.

Jessie swung around. “I should think not. It could be very dangerous. Are you okay in the back garden if you stay away from the water?”

He nodded.

“Righty ho, men. Let’s plan your attack strategy,” she said in her best British army voice and marched back into the kitchen.

“Check,” Todd said.

“I know what can help us.” Cody rushed out of the room.

Todd and Jessie only had to wait a moment before he reappeared with the iPad. “Google Maps,” he said with satisfaction.

“Gotta hand it to you, kid—you’re a good cadet.” She laughed, and with the aid of the tablet, she had a pretty good map of Crystal Lake Lane done in minutes.

The young men settled down to talk tactics. It didn’t take them long to decide to go behind Mrs. Palmer’s, the house next to them. She wouldn’t mind. Then they’d cut across the front of number eleven, and finally they could swing around behind Mitch’s house—number thirteen.

“Approaching from the rear gives you the element of surprise,” Jessie said. “But nowhere near the lake. Deal?”

The boys high-fived each other and cheered. Cody was in charge of making a fresh batch of toast.

“It has to be really black this time. The burnter the better.” Todd was insistent.

Jessie left them to it, and taking her mug of half-drunk tea, she went back to the dining room window. The view of the lake was calling her. She could see the attraction of the neighborhood. There was no question a house like this would be expensive, but it was worth it, in her estimation. The peaceful feeling it evoked in her was enchanting, hypnotic, magical.

There were no lakes around Dorking, where she lived in the UK, so if she wanted a sea view, she had to head to the English coast. It had never occurred to her when she’d arrived in Newton, Massachusetts, that she’d get a lake view. If she lived in this house, Jessie knew she’d spend hours just gazing at the water. *Would that be a terrible waste of time or a life well-spent?*

The smooth surface of the water had a calming effect on her. Surely that was a good thing. Jessie put her mug down on the table and folded her arms. Just to stand there and watch the water was cathartic. Why was that? Was it primal or psychological? What was the appeal? It was worth discussing with one of her professors.

In a heartbeat, all hell broke loose, and the peace was shattered by a deafening screech. The volume was absurd. Jessie ran to the boys and found them in a cloud of burnt-toast smoke. Cody looked guilty and panicked in equal measure.

“What the heck?” she yelled, but shouting was useless over the noise. “Must be the fire alarm, with all the smoke in here!”

It was much louder than it needed to be, and she was pretty sure the damage being done to their eardrums was worse than any smoke damage to the beautiful cream-colored kitchen. The black toast had popped out of the toaster, and there was no real danger to the children or the house.

“You guys, get out into the front garden and take Orga with you. Don’t move from there. I’ll get Alice.” She yelled as much as she could, but she used hand signals, too. The boys nodded and ran out the front door with the dog.

Jessie took the stairs two at a time, but even at that speed, by the time she got to the baby, Alice was crying. She couldn’t hear the baby over the noise

of the fire alarm, but she could see Alice's tiny fists closed tight and her little chest heaving with sobs. Jessie scooped her up and grabbed a blanket from the crib.

Bounding down the stairs, between one shrill from the alarm and the next, she heard the house phone ringing. Perhaps it was Maria. She knew some alarm systems were connected to the house owner's cell phone. Maria would tell her what to do. As Jessie fled the house, she snatched the portable telephone and then swept out the door with Alice in one arm.

The boys were standing in the front garden with Orga cowering beside them, and they'd been joined by Mitch Jackson. Jessie knew from the boys' perspective this was way cooler than toasting. She felt a little better now that they were all safe and out of the house, but the noise was still very upsetting.

She answered the ringing phone in her hand. "Hullo."

"Good evening, ma'am. This is the fire department. Your alarm has been activated. Can you apprise me of the situation?"

Jessie was a little intimidated by the efficiency of the woman on the other end. Her voice sounded officious—almost aggressive.

"Um, yes. It was the family toaster," she said. "No harm done. I just don't know how to switch the alarm off."

"A toaster? Is that what you said?"

"Yes, just a toaster. It's fine, really. In fact there's no fire. It's all just smoke."

She heard the woman talking to somebody else. There was a crackle on the line, and it was difficult to focus with Alice crying in her arms and the blaring noise just twenty feet away. Jessie tried to listen to the phone conversation.

"Confirming, Unit One. It's a domestic toaster at Crystal Lake." Then she sounded like she was talking to Jessie again.

"Ma'am, is everybody out of the building?"

"Yes, yes. Everything's okay, honest. I don't know how to switch off the alarm. That's the main problem here."

"You need the fire alarm code for that, ma'am. Without the code, the alarm will keep ringing. There's a unit on its way to assist."

"A unit of what?" Jessie asked. Back in England, they measured alcohol in units. Maybe she was sending around a gin and tonic. That would be nice. The only other thing she knew measured in units was blood, which she didn't think was really necessary.

"Look, I'm just the sitter. I have a ten-year-old and the baby with me. If I just go in and get the ruddy toaster, I can bring it out here. That might shut the stupid alarm off."

The lady on the phone interrupted. "Did you say you have an infant with you, ma'am?"

"Yes, but she's out here in the garden with me."

The lady was talking to somebody else again. "Unit Two, there are two,



repeat two, children at the scene. A ten-year-old and an infant. The sitter is outside in the front yard.”

“A second unit? Are we talking double G and Ts?” She gave a nervous laugh. The truth was beginning to dawn, however. Her mystery phone woman was probably talking to fire engines.

Jessie became anxious. “Look, we don’t need any help. I just need the alarm to be switched off. It might switch itself off if I get the toaster out.” She felt more panicky now. The appalling noise of the house alarm was very jarring, and Alice was still crying.

“Do not reenter the building, ma’am. I repeat, do not reenter the building.” Then the voice down the phone spoke to the others. “Unit One, step on it. We have a potentially escalating situation at Crystal Lake.”

Jessie cut in. “I can hear you, and I’m not an escalating situation!” she shouted. “Just switch off the damn alarm, and I’ll calm down.”

“You need to have the code for that, ma’am.” There was no emotion in the dispatcher’s voice, no panic, and this unnerved Jessie even more.

“Look, you keep repeating the fact I need a dumb code, which I clearly don’t have, because if I did, the ruddy alarm wouldn’t still be screeching. Can you understand me?” Jessie knew she shouldn’t yell, and she wanted to sound in control, but it was too late. “I don’t have the code. I’m the minder.”

Then she thought about her cell phone. She should phone Maria and get the code herself. She would switch the mad noise off and everybody could get back to normal.

That was when the enormous red fire engine truck arrived. A police car escorted it—lights flashing on both vehicles and sirens shrilling in perfect disharmony. The already earsplitting noise level in the neighborhood doubled. Jessie took Cody by the hand, and with Alice still screaming in her arms, they all backed away as a herd of hardy firefighters took over.

Jessie watched in disbelief as two men started unrolling the enormous water hose from their truck. Two others ran into the house and opened all the windows, and two more sectioned off a part of the front yard with hi-vis tape. It reminded her of *CSI*, because the taped area was usually the place where the dead body was buried. *Hopefully not today*, she thought—although she did love *CSI*.

Expecting one of her heroes from the television show to appear any second, she watched two more men, clad in canary-yellow moon suits, walk through the yard and enter the house. They had the full-inferno fire-protection kit on—the oversized yellow hood with fireproof glass to cover the face, enormous heat-resistant coats, matching trousers, and finally those big boots they could walk across the sun in. After a few moments, they came out carrying the tiny toaster between them. The little machine had long since given up smoking and completely cooled down, but it looked like they were taking no chances.

Despite the seriousness of the situation and the obvious cost of the

exercise, Jessie was amused. From behind, the men in yellow looked a little like *Sesame Street* Big Birds. She wanted to laugh but didn't.

It would have been so much better if there was a decent house fire for them to fight. Then at least the big yellow birds would have had something good to chirp about. Maybe the baby had similar thoughts, because it was around that time that she gave up crying and decided to watch the theatrics.

Another fire engine arrived, adding to the cacophonous cocktail. But after a few hand gestures between them, the fire officers from Unit Two didn't disembark. A gaggle of neighbors had begun to converge next to the enormous red engine and the police car. As the danger levels subsided, Jessie felt her face burn with embarrassment. Was all of this excitement her fault? Had she miscommunicated the size of the emergency? And would somebody ever switch off that darn house alarm?

Cody pulled Jessie's sleeve. "The lady on the phone is still talking to you," he said. Jessie had let her hand drop, but she still held the receiver and, it appeared, the emergency dispatcher.

"Hullo," she said, feeling a little dazed.

"Unit One has informed me they have the situation contained, ma'am. Are you in a position to switch off the fire alarm yet?"

Jessie shook her head. "I still don't know the code. I could phone the family, but my mobile—I mean my cell phone—is in the house."

"One moment please." She stopped talking to Jessie again. "Unit One, she's just the sitter. Can you get her into the house to get her cell so she can call the parents to get the code?"

Jessie heard a man reply through the crackle. "That's affirmative. I'll do that now."

Then she saw one of the firefighters walking over to her. Everything had happened so fast she didn't know what he had done to assist the containing of the situation, but at least he wasn't one of the big yellow birds. This guy was in a navy T-shirt and pants. He was maybe a little older than her and was smiling. He didn't look worried.

"Hi, I'm Dan Walker, and you are?" He reached his hand out to shake hers.

"Jessica, or Jessie, the minder." She went to shake his hand, but the phone was in it and Alice was keeping her left arm busy.

"Hi, Jessica or Jessie."

"I'm Jessie."

He winked and took the phone from her. "Cindy, that you? Yeah. We're clear here. Yeah." He listened to her say something and said "yeah" a few more times before hanging up.

"Okay, Jessie, you can call the parents now." He handed her back the phone.

"I don't know their cell numbers off the top of my head."

"I do," Cody said, looking delighted to be able to help a real firefighter.

He said the number of his father's cell first, but it went to voice mail.

Jessie left a message, and then they tried Maria's. The same thing happened. Dan shook his head in disbelief.

"There's no accounting for some folks," he said with a shrug.

"My, my, what's all this about?" An elderly lady approached the little group.

"Hi, Mrs. Palmer," Cody said. "Our toaster went all smoky and it set off the house alarm, and now we have two fire engines and one patrol car. Cool, huh?"

"Very," she said. Then she looked from Jessie to the firefighter. "I'm Noreen Palmer from next door. Can I help?"

Jessie nodded at the older woman but was more interested in the firefighter's help. "Can we go back into the house? I'd love to check my cell phone just to see if I have the same contact numbers as the ones Cody here gave us and also to see if they've maybe called me."

"I can take you back in, but it's real noisy in there." Then he looked at Noreen. "You live next door?"

"Yes. What can I do?"

"Well, could you maybe hold the baby for a moment while I take this young lady in to get her phone?"

"I'd be delighted. Or better yet, I can take Cody and Alice to my house." She pointed to the building just next door. "It's so noisy out here and much quieter inside. Cody knows my kitchen well, as do Todd and Mitch. Alice has been in there with her mom plenty of times, too. We can have cookies and milk, and you can join us in a few minutes if that works for you."

"Shouldn't we get Todd and Mitch back to their parents?" Jessie asked.

"I'm Todd's grandma. I'll phone his mother now, and I see Mitch's dad standing over there. They live two doors down from me."

Jessie looked behind her. Where a few curious people had stood a short while ago, now the entire neighborhood had poured out to have a look. "Oh," she said and gave a weak wave. She even got a few waves back.

"Let me take Alice, and then you go into the house and get your phone with this nice fireman. Cody, you take Orga with us."

Jessie wondered if this lady was perhaps a little too elderly to take charge of Alice, but what choice did she have? The baby seemed happy to go with her, and it would only be for a few minutes.

"Thank you so much. What did you say your name was?"

"Noreen."

"Thanks, Noreen. I really do need the help."

Then Jessie headed into the blaring house with Dan the fireman to find her phone. He checked the alarm system while she moved back outside with her cell, but there were no new messages. Then she tried both parents with the numbers in her phone but had the same luck as before. She left them each a second voice mail, and then she was all out of ideas.

She went to look for Dan inside but the shrill of the alarm was too loud and they both headed back outside. That's when Cody reappeared, waving a

piece of paper over his head. “Mrs. Palmer thought you might want this. It’s the fire alarm code. Mom gave it to her once.”

Dan grabbed the note and was back in the house playing with the key panel on the wall in seconds. Jessie and Cody were only steps behind. She watched him press the buttons and couldn’t help noticing the tattoo on his muscular forearm. It was a falcon with outstretched wings swooping down, like it was about to attack. Jessie gave an involuntary shiver. His entire body looked strong. All in all, Dan seemed to be in good shape. As he tapped the last digit of the code into the keypad, the shrilling fire alarm subsided. Almost immediately, it started back up again.

“What now?” he yelled in exasperation and read the small LED panel above the keys.

Jessie read it, too. “I don’t believe this. Intruder alert?” She remembered the firefighters opening every window in the house. The phone began to ring again. Jessie ran back outside with Cody just as she’d done a little earlier and answered it.

“Hello, ma’am. This is Newton Emergency Services. We have notification of an intruder alert in your home. Can you appraise me of the situation?”

“It’s okay,” she shouted into the phone. “It was a fire—well, not a fire, just smoke, but all the windows were opened. The house alarm was on at the time, so we’ve tripped that. Can you switch it off?”

“No, ma’am, you have to do that. Do you have the intruder alarm cancellation code?”

“No, I don’t!” she wailed. “I’m just the minder.”

“Very well, ma’am. Sit tight. I’m going to send a unit over.”

Jessie looked at Dan. “Here we go again,” she said, looking miserable.

But he smiled at her with a twinkle in his eye. “Yep,” he said. “Here we go again.”

## *Also by Suzy Duffy*



*Wellesley Wives* - Popsy Power is pretty, popular, and insanely rich. Her husband adores her, and her two daughters are busy producing babies and romping up the corporate ladder—like good little Wellesley Wives. However, what Popsy doesn't know is that her husband and worldly wealth will soon be gone, and as for her daughters... Well, Lily's romping is not restricted to the boardroom, and Rosie finds her pilot-husband flying more than his jet.

Sandra is Popsy's best friend. She has the perfect body, bank balance, and palatial penthouse. As a second wife herself, she should know how husbands wander, but even she is shocked when she discovers where Jack has found his fun . . . When Lily's nasty, little secrets suddenly go public and Rosie finds her husband flying a little too high, it's time to escape.

Popsy and Sandra flee to beautiful, peaceful Ireland. Rosie heads to Mexico, and Lily seeks refuge in the arms of her man. The adventure continues for Popsy and Sandra. Within days, they're almost arrested and killed before finding themselves in a boathouse in Banagher—with jobs! Meanwhile Rosie is diving off the back of a catamaran into the azure-blue of the Caribbean, but she's not sure what's worse—the sharks in the sea or the ones on the beach. Back in Boston, Lily discovers that getting what she wanted was not what she wanted, but unlike her scuba diving sister, surely she's in too deep...

From Banagher to Boston and down to the Caribbean Sea, these four ladies are on a rollercoaster ride through life. Rich, poor, happy, sad, in or out of love—only one thing is certain. Things are never dull when you're with the Wellesley Wives.