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LIZ
BYRSKI

*The Woman
Next Door*



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*For my remarkable family and my extended family of special friends.
With love.*

Chapter One

Edinburgh, Scotland, Late February, 2014

Shortly before midnight the hotel fire alarm goes off, a frightful blaring noise that tears into each of the rooms, shattering sleep and creating instant panic. Polly, who had been working late on her laptop and had thrown herself fully dressed onto the bed and fallen asleep, shoots bolt upright: confused, disorientated, her heart pounding. Alarm, she thinks, alarm, shit, I have to get out, and she staggers blurrily around the room stubbing her toe painfully on the leg of the desk. She feels giddy and nauseous – shock, fear or perhaps the combination of an empty stomach and a large gin and tonic from the bar fridge before she fell asleep? Focus, she tells herself, focus: shoes, laptop, coat, handbag, passport, money, and she drags on her boots, shoves the laptop and her handbag into her backpack and heads for the door.

The passage is crowded with anxious, bleary-eyed people in various stages of dress or undress, heading like lemmings for the fire exit which is already jammed. An elderly woman, unable to push through, starts to panic, screaming and waving her arms. Alongside Polly a man wearing an army greatcoat open over cotton undershorts and a t-shirt starts shaking violently, so

violently that his clenched fist catches the side of her face and at the contact he begins to howl – a chilling, unearthly sound. Polly reaches out to grasp his hands and still them. His eyes rake wildly over the people pushing towards the doorway and she can see that he is elsewhere, Iraq perhaps, or Afghanistan. He looks so young, barely more than a boy, but he has known terror and seen the unspeakable. He has stopped the howling and is talking now, talking fast into the distance in a low monotone, half English, half something else, all of it incomprehensible.

‘Come on,’ Polly says, ‘come on, you’re in the hotel, it’s the fire alarm, we have to get out.’ But he is taller and much stronger than her, and frozen to the spot.

The panic in the passage is building, it needs only one more person to panic, to push until someone falls, or to throw a punch, and all hell will break loose. Polly tries to drag the soldier towards the fire door, but he is rigid in his traumatic state.

‘Can someone help me?’ she shouts, but she is shoved aside as people struggle to get to the door.

‘Here,’ a voice says behind her, and a man pushes his way through the crowd. ‘Okay, soldier,’ he says. He’s taller than Polly and able to look the young man straight in the face. ‘We’re going to get you out of here,’ he says, grabbing the soldier by the arm.

The soldier stops shaking; sweat trickles down his temples, his fixed expression seems to crack and he breaks into gut wrenching sobs, doubling over at the waist, staggering, almost knocking Polly over.

‘Good,’ the man says, nodding at her, ‘we can move him now. We can get him down the stairs.’ And awkwardly they steer him, still shaking, through the fire door. The log jam has cleared now but people are still coming down from the upper levels and they are trapped on the landing until two women in hotel bathrobes, clutching each other’s arms, make a space for them to join the descent. Slowly they get the soldier down the five flights of stairs, along the passage and out into the street where the ragged mob of evacuees in pyjamas and dressing gowns waits in eerie silence

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by the flashing lights of two fire engines, two ambulances and three police cars. Polly and the other man lean with the soldier against the wall, while more stragglers emerge from the hotel and are steered by fire officers to join those on the opposite pavement.

It has started to snow and large flakes dance against the black sky. There is no evidence of fire, no smoke, no smell of burning, no sense of panic out here. A fire officer urges them away from the building. The soldier is calmer now, still shaking violently, but he has stifled his sobs, and is standing, Polly realises, bare-foot on the icy pavement. She points down at his feet. 'Can we take him to the ambulance first, leave him there?' she asks, and the officer nods and leads them to the nearest ambulance.

'Sounds like post-traumatic stress,' says the paramedic, pulling thick white socks onto the soldier's feet. 'Good you got him out, we'll look after him now.' And he wraps a thermal blanket around the young man's shoulders.

Polly steps back and the soldier reaches out a hand. 'Thank you,' he says, tears starting again as he turns to the man who had helped them. 'Thank you, too, I'm sorry, so sorry, thank you.'

Polly takes his hand in both of hers and holds it briefly. The older man pats the soldier on his shoulder, and they turn away and cross the street to join the shivering crowd.

'Someone said it might be a false alarm,' says one of the women who had let them pass on the stairs. 'What a drama, I was really quite frightened, but my mother was positively stoic.'

Her mother, who appears to be well into her eighties, is sitting on a low wall wrapped in one of the hotel's bathrobes, sending a text on her mobile phone. 'I went through the Blitz,' she says, glancing up, 'it prepares you for emergencies. How's that poor young man?'

Polly starts to shiver and then can't stop; she stamps her feet and wraps her arms around herself as the man who helped her talks to the two women, then turns to her.

'Were you asleep with your clothes on?' he asks, looking her up and down.

She nods. 'I was. Lucky for me.'

'Indeed. I was dead to the world. Grabbed my coat and shoes and ran.'

'I grabbed my . . .' she hesitates, remembering. 'Oh shit . . . I just remembered I put my backpack down in the passage, my bag and computer are in it. Lord knows what's happened to it.'

'It'll probably just be there waiting for you when we get back in,' he says. 'You sound like an Aussie.'

Polly nods. 'And you're not a Scot.'

'No, originally from South Africa, came to London as a teenager.'

'But you're wearing an Australian coat.'

He grins. 'Well I don't think there's any law that says only Aussies can wear Drizabones. I bought it a couple of years ago in Melbourne, best coat I've ever had and very stylish over navy blue pyjamas, don't you think?' He reaches out to shake hands. 'Leo,' he says, 'Leo Croft.'

She takes his hand. 'Polly Griffin. Thanks for helping, I wouldn't have got him out on my own.'

No one seems to know what's happening, people are stamping their feet, rubbing their hands and complaining and it's another ten minutes or so before the fire chief tells them through the megaphone that this was indeed a false alarm and they can safely return to their rooms, using the stairs as the lifts are not yet reactivated.

'Come on,' Leo says, 'let's get back inside and see if we can find your backpack.'

They find it exactly where she had left it, leaning against the wall where the soldier had been standing. She sighs with relief. 'I would have been totally stuffed without this. I have a conference presentation to give tomorrow.'

He turns in surprise. 'Are you at the university?'

'Just a small conference in the arts faculty.'

'So you're an artist?'

She shakes her head, stops outside her room and pulls her

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keycard out of her coat pocket. 'A writer, it's a conference on life-writing in the School of Literature and Languages. Well this is me.' She slides her card into the slot, it flashes green, and she opens the door.

He laughs. 'What a coincidence. I'm here for a symposium in the School of Social and Political Science,' he points to the door opposite hers, 'and that's my room. Look here, d'you fancy a brandy? There are a couple of miniatures in my room – good for shock and very warming.'

Polly hesitates. 'Um . . . well . . . well no thanks, I need to get some sleep, I've a big day tomorrow.'

'Not even a quick one?'

'Not even that, but thanks anyway.'

He takes a small step back. 'Ah well, I'll have to drink it all myself,' he says. 'Good night then; maybe catch you at breakfast?'

'Maybe,' she says. 'And thanks for helping with the soldier. No one else did.'

He shrugs. 'I'm glad we could do it. Good luck with your presentation.'

Inside the room Polly kicks off her boots and coat and stands in the silence, thinking. Then she goes to the bedside table and picks up the room service breakfast menu; there is still time to hang it on her door before collection time. The buffet breakfast in the dining room is excellent but the last thing she'll need in the morning is a conversation before she has to deliver her keynote. She fills out the menu, opens her door very quietly, slips it onto the handle and closes it again. Good decision. He seemed nice but right now she doesn't need any distractions.

*

Fremantle, Western Australia, Early March

Joyce, unloading the dishwasher and making breakfast at the same time, straightens up and cracks her head on the open door of the cupboard where she keeps the cups.

'Bugger!' she says, rubbing it with one hand and stirring the scrambled eggs with the other. 'It's ready,' she calls down the passage, and she piles the eggs on top of the already buttered toast and reaches for the tongs to extract tomatoes and bacon from the grill. 'Mac, c'mon, it'll get cold.'

'Coming!'

She hears the sound of his bare feet padding along the polished boards, the unmistakable rhythm of his steps, somehow entirely distinguishable from the sound of anyone else walking towards her. Soon I will have Sunday breakfasts alone for months on end, she thinks, lifting the coffee pot onto the bench top, pushing his plate and mug to the other side so that they can sit facing each other.

'Ripper!' Mac says, hitching himself onto his stool, pulling his breakfast towards him. 'I'm going to miss this.'

She nods, saying nothing, feeling suddenly crushed by the enormity of what they have agreed. Picking up her knife and fork she feels strangely revolted by the food, puts the cutlery down again, reaches for the plunger and pours their coffee.

'I've sorted out the pool pump,' Mac says. 'It's running like a dream now.'

'Good,' she nods, sipping scalding coffee and burning her mouth.

'Not eating?' he asks, pointing his fork at her plate.

'In a minute.'

'You okay?'

She nods, looking up, tries to smile but feels her face crumple, tears slide down her cheeks.

Mac swallows his food. 'Delayed reaction?'

'Yep.' She attempts to get a grip on her voice. 'It just seems such a big change, such a big thing to do.'

'It is a big thing to do, but it isn't something that's *undoable*,' he says. 'A year, remember, that's what we said. See how it goes for a year. It was your idea. You said it was what you wanted.'

'But you . . . you do want it too . . . don't you?'

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'I do – I wouldn't have agreed otherwise.'

Joyce nods, patting her eyes on the tea towel. 'It's just that when I heard you walking along the passage I suddenly thought . . . I won't hear that . . . I won't hear his feet walking towards me for ages, months at a time. It just sort of got to me, I suppose.'

He nods, reaches across the bench top to take her hand. 'Me too. I woke up twice in a real sweat about it, nearly woke you. But we've been talking about this for ages. It's time to give it a go.'

Joyce takes a huge breath and sits up straighter. 'I know, you're right, and it's not as though we're splitting up, just that we . . .' she pauses, unable to go on.

'We're at a time in our lives when we want different things. You want to be here, I want to be down in Albany, so we're going to try it. It's just . . . well just a change in the way we live for a while.'

Joyce looks up at him, grips his hand. 'When I told you I wanted us to live apart for a while I expected a fight, I was ready for it. I suppose I didn't think you'd jump at the idea like you did . . . so now I'm wondering . . .'

Mac smiles. 'You're wondering why; but my reasons are the same as yours. Time to be alone with myself, to see how I manage living alone. We bought that place to retire to and that's what I want to do. I'm ready for it, you're not, and you said you really want to do your own thing for a bit so I'll take off and do my bloke-in-his-shed thing, and you can think about what you want to do. I can wait.'

'Suppose . . . well suppose I never want to retire there?'

He shrugs and returns to his food. 'Well let's worry about that if it happens. This is just a trial, that's all, time for both of us to do something we want, and see what happens. Just as you said.'

She looks at him. He's nearly seventy-two, six years older than me, she thinks, but he looks so much younger and fitter. How has that happened, why haven't I noticed that before?

'You're going to do something new,' he says. 'Something entirely your own.'

She smiles. 'Yes . . . well, when I work out what that is. Should we ring the kids and tell them what we've decided?'

'I think we should get Ben and Nessa round for a barbecue. Shame we can't get Lucy and Kara at the same time but I doubt they'd want to trek back from uni for this. Anyway, we'll tell Ben and Nessa and we can talk to Gemma on Skype, either before that or straight after, then they'll all hear it round about the same time.'

'Okay. How d'you think they'll take it? It might be a bit confronting for them, they might not approve.'

'Bugger that,' Mac says, laughing now. 'They've got their own lives and we have ours. But I think they'll be fine. Let's pick a date in March. Okay?'

And they stand together in front of the calendar.

'End of the month . . . I'll leave on the twenty-fifth,' Mac says.

'It's seems awfully soon. Less than three weeks.'

He puts his arm around her shoulders. 'Now that we've made the decision we need to act on it. Before either of us has too many disturbing second thoughts.'

She nods and leans against him. 'It's not about you,' she says. 'You know that, don't you?'

He hugs her to him. 'We've been through all this, it's not about you either. It's about giving each other some space to do what we want.' They stand there hugging each other for a moment. 'Will you tell Stella yet?' Mac asks.

'When she gets back from Albany next week, I think, but not anyone else, not until we've told the family. Stella will miss you.'

'She'll certainly have something to say about it.'

'She'll think we're being very grown-up! Very *modern*. I'll bet you ten bucks that's what she says. Ha, you're being very *modern*.'

Mac laughs. 'That's exactly what she'll say. I'm glad you'll have her there next door.'

'Me too. But you . . .' she stops herself from saying that he won't have anyone nearby, because somehow she knows that he doesn't need that, doesn't need someone to be there next door

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for him. He can do this, he can be on his own. What she doesn't know is whether she can do that too.

'And the others? Polly? Helen and Dennis?' Mac asks.

'Polly's away for a while yet. And I don't want to tell Helen and Dennis until we've told the family. They'll have far too much to say about it. I think we'll tell them last!'

Mac sips his coffee, watching her. The phone rings and he slides off his stool to answer it. 'You do know that I love you as much as ever, don't you?' he says.

'I do,' she says, calmer now.

Mac picks up the phone. 'Helen,' he says a moment later, taking the receiver away from his ear. 'Would we like to have fish and chips down at Cicerello's this evening?'

*

All the restaurants at the fishing boat harbour are packed but typically Helen had called earlier and managed to snag a cancellation. They sit now, at a table by the window, sharing a nicely chilled bottle of Semillon, four old friends very much at ease, and greet the arrival of their food with enthusiasm. They had lived next door to each other for almost three decades until a few years ago when Helen felt she needed a change – a down-size from the rambling old nineteen-thirties house in South Fremantle. She'd wanted somewhere modern, easier to manage. So they had sold up and moved to a large and elegant apartment in North Fremantle, overlooking the river.

'How's Stella?' Helen asks.

'Fine,' Joyce says. 'She's in Albany filming for the new series of *Cross Currents*.'

Helen rolls her eyes. 'I thought her character died in the last series.'

Joyce nods. 'She did but she's back to do a haunting.'

'I wonder why she bothers,' Helen says, 'what is she now – eighty? It's just attention-seeking. I wonder she hasn't got over that yet.'

'Stella's an actor, Helen,' Mac says, pouring the wine. 'It's been her life. Why should she give it up if they still want her?'

Helen shrugs and looks out of the window. 'Crazy if you want my opinion.'

Joyce is about to defend Stella but stops herself; she really doesn't want to get into an argument with Helen in this sort of mood. For some time now Helen has been increasingly snappy and critical, delivering her judgements or comments without a shred of sensitivity. Throughout their long friendship she has always had a foot-in-mouth problem, often apparently unaware of how hurtful she can be. And in recent years she's grown harsher.

'Do you feel that getting old gives you the right to be so blunt?' Joyce had asked her recently. 'Sometimes I wonder if you realise the effect you have on people.'

Helen had laughed. 'I've always been blunt, no bullshit. Tell it like it is. You know me well enough by now, Joyce,' she'd said.

And Joyce, who did indeed know her very well, had decided not to pursue it. This is who Helen is, she'd told herself, she's important to me, I know what to ignore and what to take seriously. But these days it's becoming harder for her to tolerate Helen's blundering judgements and evident thoughtlessness.

'We got a bit of good news,' Dennis says. 'Damian and Ellie and the kids are coming home for a visit at the end of March.'

Joyce has a brief flash of nostalgia for the days when Helen and Dennis lived next door, when Ben and Gemma grew up alongside Damian and Nick, went to the same school and when, for such a long time, life had seemed like an endless series of sleepovers in one house or the other. Those days when she and Helen had been so much closer and Helen had seemed so much easier to get on with.

'Lovely,' she says, 'you must be pleased. We must get yours and ours together, come round to our place and Mac can do one of his famous barbecues . . .' She stops, looks up at him, suddenly realising, 'oh . . . but you'll be gone by then.'

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'Gone?' Helen says. 'Where to?'

Mac raises his eyebrows, and Joyce flushes, then shrugs. 'Um . . . well, we're sort of . . .'

Mac takes a sip of his wine, puts down his glass and clears his throat. 'We were going to wait a while to tell you, until after we'd told the family, but as . . .' he hesitates.

'As I've just blurted it out we might as well tell you now,' Joyce says, her face burning.

'Yes, we'll come clean,' Mac says and starts to explain, laying it out carefully: a year living apart, Joyce here, himself in the cottage in Albany. An experiment, see how it goes for a while . . .

'You're splitting up,' Helen says, her eyes darkening.

'No,' they say in unison.

'Just spending time apart because we want to do different things, be in different places,' Mac adds. 'But I'll pop back from time to time and Joyce will come and visit me in Albany.'

Dennis raises his eyebrows.

'Well that's how it'll end,' Helen says. 'A year and then you'll be splitting up. It's a terrible idea. You must be mad.'

This is 'angry Helen' whom they both know well, but rarely is her anger directed at them. Joyce feels Mac stiffen in response. 'We're not splitting up, Helen,' she says, 'that's not what either of us wants. Just a bit of space for a while.'

'And then what?' Dennis asks.

Mac shrugs. 'We don't know yet. One thing at a time.'

Silence.

'Space!' Helen says, in disgust. 'What do Ben and Vanessa, and Gemma think about this? I bet they're not too happy.'

'As I said, we haven't told them yet,' Joyce says. 'So if you run into Ben or Nessa, please don't say anything. We'll call Gemma the same day we tell them.'

Mac steps in. He talks about renovating the Albany cottage.

'And you?' Helen barks, looking at Joyce. 'What's your great new plan for living alone?'

Joyce is tense now, hurt, annoyed. 'Not sure yet,' she says. 'I want to do something new, different. I've thought about getting a stall in the markets, or maybe even going back to uni.'

'Oh my god, now I've heard it all. You're both having a delayed mid-life crisis. I never heard of anything so silly.'

Joyce had known the conversation, when it came, would be difficult, but she hadn't imagined this level of hostility.

Dennis puts his hand on his wife's arm as if to restrain her. 'Calm down, Helen, calm down.' He looks across at Mac. 'It does sound a bit like seventies hippie bullshit if you ask me.'

'Mate, we *didn't* ask you,' Mac says. 'We *told* you our plan; that's it. End of story. If you and Helen don't like it that's a shame, but this is what's happening.'

There is an awkward silence. Helen draws up her shoulders, glaring at Joyce, then tosses her serviette on top of the food she has barely touched. She gets to her feet and grabs her bag from the back of her chair. 'That's it, I won't be part of this conversation anymore. Come along, Dennis.'

'Well I don't think that's . . .' Dennis says pushing his chair back slightly from the table.

'Then I'll go alone,' Helen says. She leans towards Joyce. 'You'll regret this, don't say I didn't warn you,' and she turns sharply and strides out of the restaurant.

Dennis glances from her across to Mac and Joyce. 'Er . . . well it looks like we're off,' he says. And he shrugs, raises his hand in a half-wave and follows Helen out of the restaurant.

Mac turns to Joyce. 'Well that was weird.'

She sighs. 'My fault. I should have told Helen in small increments.'

'You weren't going to tell her at all just yet.'

'Mmm, opened my mouth without thinking, sorry.'

He shrugs. 'Can't be helped, they had to know sometime. They'll get over it . . . at least Dennis will. But Helen seems to have taken it as a personal insult.'

They finish their food and the wine in comparative silence

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and Joyce, pushing her empty plate aside, contemplates the fact that her own anger has completely subsided and she feels nothing at all.

'You know what?' she says. 'I don't give a shit what they think.' She raises her glass. 'Here's to the year of living dangerously.'

*

Helen wakes at midnight to the sound of Dennis snoring. He has rolled onto his back and is lying there alongside her, occupying more than his share of the bed, mouth wide open, emitting a series of snorts and whistles.

'Shh-shh!' she hisses. 'Shut up, Dennis, roll over.' She nudges him in the ribs and he grunts loudly and rolls onto his side, facing away from her. She lies there waiting for silence, for him to rearrange his limbs and his breathing, knowing that even when he does she won't get back to sleep. Eventually she sits up, sighing, swings her legs out of the bed, puts on her dressing gown, pads out to the kitchen and leans on the worktop, gazing out across the moonlit river. They are high up here, on the fourth floor with gorgeous views up and down the river, and across to the tree-clad East Fremantle escarpment, dotted with elegant houses. Any time, day or night, there is always something happening – even now a couple of small boats are moving swiftly up river, and others bob around on their moorings at the jetty. A few cars creep across the traffic bridge and beyond that a train glides across the rail bridge and slips out of sight. This was what she had wanted, this spacious apartment with these views, a short walk from the centre of town, and a short drive from Emerald Street.

She had wanted an end to living in an old house which, although it had never been a thing of beauty like Joyce and Mac's place, had served them well for years. Built in the nineteen-thirties it lacked any of the attractive art deco features of some others of that period, but it was spacious and practical, and sat on a very large block of land. It had been a sound investment in the long term and they had turned it into a comfortable family

home, but over the years Helen had struggled to make it look the way she wanted. Perhaps an expert with a big budget could have transformed it but Helen couldn't, and by the time the kids had left home, Dennis, who had grown accustomed to going along with what she wanted, dug in his heels.

'I'm not spending thousands on some tosser who'll turn it into a place where I can't feel at home,' he'd said.

But Helen was desperate for some sort of change. She felt trapped by the house. She had had enough of the skirtings that never quite met the floorboards, the window frames that were always slightly wonky, and the cockroaches and mice that found every crack and cranny. She was sick of the dust that the house seemed to generate, the creaks and drafts, the constant maintenance. She was sick of the endless lists of things that needed doing. She had wanted gleaming tiles, smooth white walls, pale carpets, pale fabrics, a perfect modern kitchen and two and a half bathrooms, top of the range air-conditioning and heating, lots of built-in cupboards and robes. And an end to the garden with its wobbly brick paths, overgrown natives, and ancient roses with thorns like daggers, where everything seemed to grow faster than she could cut it back. She had been so over it all she couldn't wait to escape.

It had been fun when they were younger, when Damian and Nick were kids, and when Joyce and Mac bought the house next door. Ben and Gemma were similar in age and all the children moved freely between the two homes; sometimes it seemed as though they were just one big family. But the kids grew up and left; Damian eventually married Ellie, got a high profile job in oil and gas, and they and the two children are now in Dubai. Nick, still single, is in his early forties, and seems more interested in studying bats in a cave in South Australia than thinking about a relationship. There had been a time when Helen had thought that Nick and Gemma might get together. They were always around together as teenagers and Helen loved Gemma. She had always wanted a daughter, and Gemma had filled a little

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of that space for her. Back then Helen and Joyce had cautiously speculated on the possibility of it being more than friendship and Helen had fondly imagined a beautiful white wedding, but it never happened. Gemma and Nick remained close friends, but that was where it stopped. Nick ended up in weird places across the country recording bat movements, and a few years later Gemma took off for a job in Geneva.

Helen sighs. Yes, she had wanted this place so much, and now, five years later, here she is in the middle of the night, gazing longingly across the river, back to the old part of the city, imagining what lies beyond her line of sight: the leafy streets, the elegant old red brick and limestone houses and weather-board cottages of South Fremantle. The cafés and eccentric little shops, the bakeries, the Italian deli, all just minutes from the cappuccino strip, the bookshop, the banks, the markets.

'I wish you weren't going,' Joyce had said at the time. 'I'll really miss you, but if it's what you want . . .'

It had been, but she hadn't expected to feel like this – like an outsider, cut off from her best friend and her neighbours, watching those precious relationships stretch and fade away from her for lack of daily attention. She had thought it would last forever, that she and Dennis could move and that everything would otherwise stay the same, but somehow they haven't. Living next door, or close by in the same street, is so different: popping in for a coffee, borrowing or lending things, slipping through the side-gate that Dennis and Mac had made in the dividing fence, sitting on the verandah with a bottle of wine on summer evenings. She hadn't realised how she would miss all that, how impossible it would be to sustain or recapture its essence once they had left. She hadn't anticipated the boredom, the lassitude that so often settled on her for days on end. She had expected freedom but found herself trapped.

Helen opens the fridge and takes out a half-empty bottle of wine. She'd polished off the first half before she went to bed. She hesitates, glances guiltily over her shoulder, pours some into a

glass, and takes bottle and glass with her to the sofa. That stupid business in the restaurant had given her a headache and she plumps up a cushion and stretches out, half sitting, half lying, wondering if she can take something for her head or whether she's already had too much wine for that. Ah well, the view, she thinks, that's one thing that's always here, the million-dollar view, from this open living area, the kitchen and their bedroom. The view and the clean lines, the minimal housework, the domestic convenience of it all, but you can only look so long at the view, and five years on it hasn't even started to feel like home. She has grown to take those things for granted now and yearns instead for some of the earthy, chaotic aspects of life in Emerald Street. She had changed their lifestyle and changed herself to suit it. Previously content with her mix of casual clothes and a few more formal pieces Helen had taken pride in the way that her height and naturally slim build enabled her to look pretty good in most things. But since casting off the trappings of that life she has been opting for a more upmarket, dressy look, paying too much for everything, especially shoes, shoes, shoes. From a perfectly adequate and well-chosen wardrobe she now has two wardrobes of expensive and fashionable clothes that she rarely wears. It was how she had envisaged the new life that she and Dennis would have here, but in reality their way of living has changed little except to be more isolated and less relaxed.

Helen knows that she'd behaved badly when Joyce and Mac explained what they were going to do. It had touched the raw nerve of her discontent, and she'd felt it as another loss. She had forced a change in her own and Dennis's lives, and it was a bad move, although she won't admit that. Now Joyce is planning a big change without discussing it, mentioning it only by mistake. What Joyce wants will simply widen the gap between them. And Joyce and Mac's decision feels deeply personal, as though it is aimed at her and her alone, as though Joyce is saying: well you're the one who moved, now wait and see what I can do. Helen had wanted to slap her tonight, and she knows she did

The Woman Next Door

that, not physically but with her words and the way she left the table. Maybe she was a bit over the top walking out of the restaurant like that but, really, Joyce should have discussed it with her. It came as such a shock.

Helen hears a step behind her, tucks the glass and bottle on the floor under her legs and turns. Dennis in his pyjama trousers is standing in the doorway, rubbing his balding head and yawning.

'What's up?' he asks. 'Can't sleep? Or are you sick or something?'

Sick, Helen thinks, sick of this life, sick of you.

'Can't sleep,' she says. 'Go to bed, I'll be back soon.'

Dennis yawns and shuffles to the bathroom and she hears him peeing copiously against the porcelain. Then he belches, huffs and puffs, and she waits angrily for the sound of him washing his hands, but of course he doesn't. 'Fuck off, Dennis,' she murmurs, rage rising up within her. 'I want something to change, I don't want to be in this life any longer and I can't bear to think about what the next twenty years will be like.'