

The
Good Neighbor

— A NOVEL —

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*You can never go home again, but the truth is you can
never leave home, so it's all right.*

—MAYA ANGELOU

— Chapter 1 —

The Banana Song

THE DOORBELL RANG AND I knew it was my ex, just like when my lip tingled and I knew it was a cold sore. Most Wednesday nights I was ready for my midweek parenting respite. Not tonight. Tonight I longed for a snafu in Bruce's plans—a flat tire, a meeting, a hangnail. So tonight he was twenty minutes early. Of course.

Even so, I sang, "Daddy's here," and scooped Noah's toys from the kitchen table, shoving them inside his Spider-Man backpack along with two dinosaur books. I tucked in Spidey briefs and a clean sweatshirt, smoothing it hard as if to mark my territory.

My stomach rumbled and I slid my hand to my belly. Hollow gurgles akin to pregnancy flutters skittered across my palm. I smiled, remembering the moment I'd felt those first movements from Noah. I loved every one of them, even as they became an elbow in my ribs or a foot on my bladder.

I gathered the last of the boystuff, combed my fingers through my hair, and opened the front door. I left the storm

door closed and wrangled Noah into his coat, hat, and mittens, which he plucked off. He reached up and touched my cheeks with his still-soft hands. I crouched down so we were nose to nose. I smelled apple juice, soap, and a hint of boy.

“See ya later, alligator!” he said, accenting the last syllable.

“In a while, crocodile!”

Noah linked his arms behind my neck and I stood. His legs dangled and his chest bounced with giggles. What would it be like when he was taller than me, taller than everyone, like Bruce? I was grateful, with a mother’s longing, that he still had a round, soft face and fine, almost-black hair.

I nodded at my ex. Noah pushed out the door and hugged his dad with a force that landed Bruce against the metal railing. He kissed the top of Noah’s head and held him at arm’s length, as though memorizing the details. Bruce loved Noah like I did. That was something I still counted on, something I was grateful for. Something I needed to remember.

“Where’s Amber?” Noah asked. His *r*’s sounded like *l*’s.

“Amber’s in the car, buddy. She can’t wait to see you.”

My world had seized the moment I realized I was sharing Noah with someone other than Bruce. One day I watched my small child look up at Amber and reach for her hand. He smiled at her, and her meek grin widened. Amber took his hand in hers and patted it. I was awestruck. Or maybe dumbstruck. I was not surprised Amber warmed to Noah. That part I understood. But I was surprised how easily he reached for her. He held out his hand. He trusted her. He was a little boy who needed to be safe and happy and included. Yet instead of feeling a rush of gratitude and a momentary freedom from responsibilities, I

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burned, singed by an unlikely betrayal. Did he call her Mommy by mistake—or worse, not by mistake? Get a grip, I'd told myself. Bruce will have many more Ambers. Then I realized, for Noah's sake, that I didn't want that either.

Noah shot imaginary webs from his palms and Bruce fell back with a flourish. He ughed and arghed and begged Spider-Man to release him, but his performance was flat. Bruce sounded constrained, without enthusiasm. This was not his best trapped-dad voice.

"If Spider-Man lets me out of this web, I'll drop him off at school in the morning."

"Okeydoke," I said, instead of *No shit*. Bruce had been doing Thursday-morning drop-offs since school started in September.

"Smells delicious in there, Iz. If you're making your lasagna, he must be *some guy*."

I closed the door and leaned my back against it. Why did Bruce mention familiar details—my hair, an old sweater, the smell of lasagna? Didn't leaving mean he could no longer lay claim to these things? It was harder to forget, harder to forgive, when he kept poking into the past and pushing it forward. I shook my head to scatter the thoughts, then scurried to the kitchen knowing "some guy" was really "the girls," and they would be on time. My veggie lasagna would not be. It was bubbling on the sides, but soft and runny in the middle.

My lasagna brought me comfort. Moving "back home" had brought me comfort, too. And a little bit of shame. You grow up, move out, go to college, work, get married. You do not move back home with your small child in tow. Unless you need to. And I had—so I did.

Though I arrived months ago, I was still making the transition from living in the house-where-I-grew-up to living in that house as the only grown-up. But I was getting there. A moment of optimism blew through me, like a sigh of relief from the universe.

Still, lasagna from scratch was ambitious on a school night. Maybe I should have nuked a pizza on one of those silver crisping trays, opened a bag of Caesar salad, and squeezed dressing from a tube. Or ordered in. Who was I kidding? I, Izzy Lane, did not order in when the girls were coming for dinner. Even on a Wednesday.

Jade and Rachel arrived at the same time. Rachel leapt to hug me before she even closed the front door. Rachel moved the way she did throughout our childhood, as if she were Tinker Bell—just now with hips that swayed from the weight of four children under seven.

Jade looked up from her phone and surveyed the scene, her arms crossed, her foot tapping.

Rachel and Jade connected only through me. Opposite in demeanor and appearance, they were my perfect fit. Rachel's bounce balanced Jade's stillness. Jade's urban vibe muted Rachel's suburban air. I was a little like each of them, except they reveled in the lives they'd built from scratch. I loved them—despite their contentment.

I went to the kitchen and returned with a bottle of wine.

"We haven't done a Wednesday dinner in ages," Jade said. "What's up?"

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“Can’t I just make dinner for my two best friends when Noah’s with Bruce?”

“No,” they said in unison.

Rachel sat on the arm of the chair I still referred to as “Dad’s.” She tapped her fingers in sequence, from pinkie to pointer. One two three four, one two three four, one two three four. Over and over, as if she were waiting for something—and that something wasn’t wine.

“I can’t stand it anymore,” she said.

“Stand what?”

“When are you going to tell us?”

“Tell you what?”

Rachel exploded with the fervor of a pageant toddler on Pixy Stix. “About Mac!”

“Mac?” Jade asked.

“How do you know about Mac?” I asked, dumbfounded. And maybe even a little dumb.

“Oh, come on, Izzy. You know I’ve been reading your blog! And so have all the girls at mahj.”

“Her blog?” This was Jade. This was Jade getting annoyed. “Why am I the last to know these things?”

“I told you about it. . . .” I put my hands on my hips, a vague gesture of self-defense. “I didn’t make a big deal about it, but I did tell you.”

“She’s right, Jade. She did. She started it the day Bruce moved out. But she calls herself Bizzy, remember?”

“That’s what you did when Bruce left? Turned to your computer and made up an alias?”

“No, not exactly,” I said, although—yes. Exactly. “It was just,

well, I needed an outlet. Some sort of journal.” And to be someone else. Someone whose world wasn’t upside down and inside out. I was also someone else who didn’t realize her first cousin had been taking notes.

Rachel’s hands moved as if she were conducting a symphony. “When you wrote about the date where the guy squirted ketchup all over his eggs and how you had to clean off the lid of the ketchup bottle when he went to the men’s room? It hit me. No one enjoys cleaning dirty ketchup lids like a Lane.”

Rachel should know.

“Jade, you should see the comments! There are tons of them.”

Jade perked up. *Tons of comments* had gotten her attention.

“She’s totally an advice goddess. Izzy told one woman to stop trying to be someone she wasn’t, because then the right guy wouldn’t be able to find her. That’s genius, right?”

It was good advice. Why was I surprised? Though I’d never thought of my master’s in school counseling as a boon to my blogging escapades before, it was.

“It’s true, the advice I give seems to be helpful to people. But some of the stories I’ve told aren’t exactly . . .”

“They’re awesome! Tell Jade about your dates.”

“Dates? You’ve gone on more dates? I thought you said it ‘wasn’t the right time.’” Jade used air quotes. Jade hated air quotes.

“When it’s the right person, it’s always the right time,” Rachel said. “Tell Jade about Mac!”

“Who’s Mac?” Now Jade crossed her arms.

“Her boyfriend!”

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No. I was not telling anyone about Mac.

“You have a boyfriend?” Jade stood and went to the closet. She took out her coat and draped it over her arm. “I worry about you every weekend when you say you’re doing nothing, when you won’t meet me in town, and now I find out you’re really out tooling around the city with a man you’re keeping a secret? Oh my God. Is he married?”

That’s what she thinks of me? “I am not tooling around with anyone!”

“Okay, so you don’t want to call him your boyfriend.” Rachel grinned. “But you’re seeing someone. Mac is amazing. From everything Izzy told me—well, she didn’t tell me, really—he’s smart and funny and handsome. She met him on JDate—”

“Stop!” I yelled. “He’s not what you think. It’s not what it seems.”

Rachel put her hands over her ears. “Please! I don’t want to hear it. Let your old married cousin live vicariously through you a little longer.” She grabbed me again. “Nobody’s perfect, you know.”

Rachel was wrong. Mac *was* perfect. Mac was perfect because I’d invented him—all six two of him, with his full head of dark hair, his humble upbringing, his self-made career. What was his career again? Did he have one? I wasn’t sure. Oops. But more important than any career was that Mac was devoted to me. Of course he was. He was my cyber version of *Weird Science*.

Mac had appeared just in the nick of time, on a Saturday morning in October. Amber and Bruce had shown up at Noah’s

soccer game in matching Temple Owls sweatshirts. Stupid matching sweatshirts. The blatant coupledom punched me in the gut. I had always wanted to be a matchy-matchy couple, but not Bruce. I had bought us matching Phillies T-shirts and caps one Hanukkah, but he refused to wear his when I wore mine. The Hanna Andersson striped pajamas I ordered for us *and* Noah, the ones in which I imagined we'd look like a catalog family, stayed folded and bagged. Then Noah grew, Bruce moved out, and I got a full refund.

Bruce and Amber's sweatshirts, in Temple's official cherry and white, were crisp and new, yet worn. Nonrefundable.

They sat in front of me, our usual effort to appear united. We exchanged our tactical greeting: Bruce took Noah's duffel bag; I reminded him about the cosmic bowling party that afternoon, and decorating the sukkah at the synagogue the next day.

"I know. We'll be there," Bruce said. Amber nodded. They refocused on the field and leaned into each other's shoulder.

We'll be there? Since when were *they* a *we*?

"I'll be there, too," I said. "But now I've got to go. I have plans with . . ." Who on earth did I have plans with? "My boyfriend."

I could have said I had a report to finish or that I was having lunch with Rachel. I could have offered nothing more than good-bye. But I didn't because it wasn't enough. I wasn't enough. I wasn't a *we*. I was a *me*. A *me*, *myself*, and *I*. And I was alone, laden with inadequacy. Embarrassment filled me. The matching sweatshirts had been my tipping point and I'd invented a boyfriend. So what?

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Back then, the mere façade of moving forward had left me aglow.

Tonight my cheeks burned with embarrassment.

“Well, I have to tell you, I’m relieved,” Jade said.

“Excuse me?”

“I thought you were going to say you were getting back together with Bruce.”

I leapt toward Jade and hugged her. “Really?”

Did she know something I didn’t?

“I had no idea why you invited us here. Just coming for dinner on a Wednesday seemed a little unusual, Pea, I’ve got to be honest.” Jade threw her phone into her oversize pocketbook. She used the nickname she’d given me at Penn the day our freshman English professor anointed us *two peas in a pod*. “You hole up here, in this house, and never leave except for work. Yes, you take care of Noah. Yes, you go to work every day. But that’s all you do. And then you invite us over on a Wednesday night when I know it’s the only night you have to yourself.”

All I had wanted was company for dinner, a glass of wine, a few belly laughs. “I am so sorry you’re worried about me.” I swallowed air. Rachel would have to live her romantic dream through someone else. “There’s more.”

Rachel clasped her hands. “You’re in love!”

“No!”

She whispered, “Pregnant?”

“No!”

“Then what?”

Keep it light. No big deal. It’s all a phase. Like Pilates.

“Mac isn’t exactly how he seems.”

“Is anyone?” Jade asked.

In real life I hoped the answer was yes.

“Just enjoy yourself,” Jade continued. “But I want to hear more about this little blog of yours, missy!” She dug out her phone, tapped, and scrolled. “There, got it! The *Bizzy Blog*. Very cute.” She held it up, showcasing a miniature version of my make-believe life.

“It gets . . . well, it got, a few thousand hits. Per day.” This was true. I worked to keep my smile in check. “Apparently, I’m good at it.” They were not the most important words, but hearing them aloud reminded me that the blog had served a purpose. I had created something that connected me to others. And it was mine. It belonged only to me. My thoughts and words were not like dishes or towels or dining-room chairs, or even a five-year-old boy.

No one could leave and then claim half.

Rachel and Jade stared at each other, then at me, then back at each other. I often felt them vying for top branch in my confidante tree, but now I sensed a kinship between them.

“The thing is, though—I mean, the issue is—Mac’s not real.” There. I said it. I stood, ready to purge my reasons for embellishing my life and manufacturing men, and more important, for not telling them any of it.

“It’s fine,” Jade said. “I get it.”

“You do?”

“Mac’s not his real name. And he probably doesn’t know you’re writing about him. Bloggers do that all the time. Change

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names to protect the innocent, so to speak. So you made up a name and he doesn't know you write about him. No big deal."

"What's his real name? I want to Google him! Is he really a dentist?"

How had I forgotten that Mac was a dentist?

"Look, it's okay if you don't want to tell us his name for a while," Jade said. "I don't tell you everything either, especially about the men I date. It's just—*easier*. I think it's normal."

If this was normal, I was in big trouble. "Wait, you don't tell me everything?"

Jade just lifted her eyebrows and smirked. "No. So I guess we're even."

"All I care about is that you're happy," Rachel said.

I wanted her to make me accountable—or to encourage me to be accountable to myself. I wanted her to challenge me, fight me, but Rachel wasn't a fighter.

"Taking care of Noah by yourself, working, dating, and then you have this blog and you meet this *Mac* . . . it's easy to get caught up. I'm planning my reunion and I can spend hours online looking up classmates and sending e-mails. It sucks me right in. I lose all track of time. But I don't understand wanting to share your life with strangers more than with us."

It was easy to banter with strangers, sometimes more so than talking to my friends, or my brothers, or my parents. I had grown weary of my mother's rolled eyes and weak redirects when I talked about Bruce. I cringed at how some of my married friends thought it would be great to be single again. My brothers were compassionate, but wouldn't be caught dead *back*

home. How many times could they listen to me say the same old thing? But sometimes the same old thing was all I had. Writing about it enabled me to make sense of the nonsensical. Plus, strangers had no expectations. They were patient. Even prodding. If they were bored, they were silent. If they rolled their eyes, I couldn't see. To me, the words adhered to the virtual page as new, and without consequence.

I knew nothing of search engines or keywords or that "A Bad Date with a Defense Attorney" would result in hundreds of hits and rampant advice about finding a new lawyer.

But apparently some folks actually *read* the post and commented about real-life Paul the Deviant DA, the perfect-on-paper Jewish lawyer who brought me an erotic novel on our second date because I'd said I liked to read. The people who chimed in on that post were keepers—unlike Mr. Shifty Shades.

My readers didn't feel like strangers. They were people who helped me forget about Bruce and divorce and moving back home. They were the ones who cheered me on when I wrote about blurting out "Mac" at the soccer field. Of course, I'd left out the part about making him up. I'd intended to be honest, but the truth slipped out of my fingers like Noah's green slime. And it was just as messy.

Rachel stepped closer to me. It wasn't my intention to hurt her feelings. My intention was to safeguard my own.

She twirled her fingers in her short brown curls. Rachel twirled her body when she was happy, her hair when she was not.

"Well, no matter what his real name is, we don't have

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to worry so much now that you have someone to talk to at night, someone to spend time with when Noah's with Bruce. Someone who knows how great you are. Besides us, I mean. Right?" Rachel looked at Jade.

"Absolutely."

I could've tried again, tried harder, but at that moment, I just didn't want to. Perhaps they didn't really want to know that I'd conjured up Mac because seeing Bruce with Amber had brought me to my emotional knees. I was sure they didn't want to know I sometimes slept in Noah's bed when he was with Bruce, or on the sofa when Noah was home, because a queen-size bed, with its space for two, was overwhelming.

Jade and Rachel loved me, but they hadn't let me explain. Worse, they had rearranged my words to meet their needs. I got it. The lie was much prettier than the truth.

But enough was enough.

Maybe it was time to exert damage control by pressing the little button on the dashboard that said `DELETE FOREVER`. Then my words would evaporate, Times Roman letters scattering chaotically. "The blog was really just an experiment. For fun. I'm deleting it. I don't need a bunch of strangers knowing my business. You're right."

"Don't you dare! Don't abandon your readers when they've started to trust you. It took me months for Pop Philly to get that many hits per day." It had tens of thousands now.

Jade's phone buzzed. She tapped the screen with her forefinger and scrolled. "Damn. I've got to go. I'm a little crazed lately."

And I'm a liar dating a make-believe man named after my laptop.

"You didn't eat!"

Jade grabbed a handful of Goldfish crackers out of a bowl. "Seafood."

Rachel headed for the Goldfish, too.

"Rache, stay!"

"No, you'll have the whole night to yourself. Seth doesn't like putting the kids to bed anyway."

I had the whole night to myself every Wednesday. Every other weekend I was on my own. I didn't need, or want, any more alone time. That was another reason I dove online every night after Noah went to sleep—companionship on a whim and a click. Another reason for Mac.

"What is so important that you have to leave right now?" I shifted my effort to Jade, but she guffawed.

"You're not the only one with secrets."

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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