

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-68622-8 - Next Door to Love
Margaret Johnson
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The man at number three*

My friend Janet looked out of my living room window. 'Who is *that*?' she asked.

I went to look. 'He lives here,' I said.

'He lives here . . . in Bridge Street?' Janet asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'At number three, next door to me. He's my new neighbour.'

Janet smiled. 'He's very tall,' she said. 'And I like his black hair.'



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‘Janet,’ I said. ‘Come away from the window.’ I didn’t want my new neighbour to see us.

She turned to me.

‘It’s OK,’ she said, ‘I’m just looking. I don’t want a new man. I’ve got David.’

David is Janet’s boyfriend.

‘I’m only thinking of you,’ she said. ‘You need a new boyfriend. What’s your neighbour’s job?’ she asked me.

‘I don’t know,’ I said.

‘Well, how old is he?’

I looked at her. ‘I don’t know, Janet,’ I said.

‘Has he got a girlfriend?’

‘Janet,’ I said, ‘I don’t know anything about him. I saw him yesterday and we said “hello”. That’s all.’

Janet always wanted me to go out and meet new men.

‘You need to go out, Stella,’ she often told me. ‘You need to meet new people. New men.’

But I didn’t want to meet new men, and I didn’t want a boyfriend. I knew boyfriends didn’t always make you happy. My last boyfriend, James, didn’t make me happy.

Janet looked at me. ‘You’re thinking about James,’ she said. Janet often knows what I’m thinking. ‘Don’t think about him,’ she said. ‘He wasn’t any good for you. But you mustn’t think all men are bad. Your neighbour looks nice.’

‘Stop talking about him!’ I told her. And we laughed.

Janet left my house at about six o’clock, and I went up to change for my tennis class. My neighbour was out in his garden. It was August and there were lots of flowers in all the gardens. The flowers in the garden at number three were yellow, red, orange and pink. Happy colours. But my neighbour didn’t look happy.

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‘You’re sad,’ I thought as I looked down at him. ‘Why? Why are you sad?’ Then he looked up, and I came away from the window quickly.

I saw my neighbour again the next morning, in the street. He looked tired.

‘Hello,’ I said. ‘It’s a beautiful day.’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It’s hot again. Too hot for work.’ Then he smiled at me. ‘My name’s Tony,’ he said. ‘Tony Bryant.’

I took his hand. ‘Hello, Tony,’ I said. ‘I’m Stella. Stella Greenwood.’

‘Good to meet you, Stella,’ he said.

I didn’t see Tony the next day, or the day after that. Then, on the Friday morning I heard him on the phone next door. The houses in Bridge Street are small and you can sometimes hear people speaking. And I heard everything that Tony Bryant said that morning. He was very angry.

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'You can't do this, Kathy!' he said. 'You can't do this to me again! I want to see her. Please, Kathy. Don't do this!'

I sat at my breakfast table and listened.

'Kathy? Kathy? Oh!' I heard Tony say, and then he put the phone down.

I ate an apple and thought about Tony Bryant. Who was Kathy? And what was Tony afraid of? Because I *knew* he was afraid of something.

There's something Janet always says to me, something that's very important to her. She says, 'When you want to do something, just do it. Don't stop and think about it! Don't wait. Just do it!'

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And that's what I did after I heard Tony Bryant on the phone.

I didn't stop and think. I put my apple down on the table and went to the house next door.

I had to wait a long time. Then Tony answered the door.

'Yes?' he said. He didn't look very happy. And then, of course, I didn't know what to say.

'Yes?' he said again. 'What do you want, Stella?'

I started to blush then and my face felt hot. 'I . . . I wanted . . .' I started to say. 'I just wanted to know . . .' And I stopped.



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‘You wanted to know . . . what?’ Tony said.

‘Well, are you all right?’ I asked, and he looked at me. His face was cold, but I thought he was just sad or angry about something.

‘Yes, thank you,’ he said. ‘I’m all right.’

I blushed some more. ‘Oh,’ I said. ‘OK, good. That’s good. Good. Well, bye then!’ And I left quickly.

But then Tony called after me. ‘Stella! Wait!’

I stopped and looked back at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘It was nice of you to ask. Have you got time to come in for a coffee?’

I looked at my watch. It was nine o’clock. ‘Not now,’ I said. ‘Sorry, Tony. I’m late for work.’

‘OK,’ he said. ‘I’m going away today. But come for coffee next weekend.’

I smiled at him. ‘Thank you,’ I said.