

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Nine Perfect Strangers*

Liane Moriarty

Apples Never Fall



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A Novel



Liane
Moriarty



HENRY HOLT AND COMPANY

NEW YORK

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*For my mother,
with love*

Prologue

The bike lay on the side of the road beneath a gray oak, the handlebars at an odd, jugged angle, as if it had been thrown with angry force.

It was early on a Saturday morning, the fifth day of a heat wave. More than forty bushfires continued to blaze doggedly across the state. Six regional towns had “evacuate now” warnings in place, but here in suburban Sydney the only danger was to asthma sufferers, who were advised to stay indoors. The smoke haze that draped the city was a malicious yellow-gray, as thick as a London fog.

The empty streets were silent apart from the subterranean roar of cicadas. People slept after restless, hot nights of jangled dreams, while early risers yawned and thumb-scrolled their phone screens.

The discarded bike was shiny-new, advertised as a “vintage lady’s bike”: mint green, seven-speed, with a tan leather saddle and a white wicker basket. The sort of bike you were meant to imagine riding in the cool, crisp air of a European mountain village, wearing a soft beret rather than a safety helmet, a baguette tucked under one arm.

Four green apples lay scattered on the dry grass beneath the tree as if they had spilled and rolled from the bike’s basket.

A family of black blowflies sat poised at different points on the bike’s silver spokes, so still they looked dead.

The car, a Holden Commodore V8, vibrated with the beat of eighties rock as it approached from the intersection, inappropriately fast in this family neighborhood.

The brake lights flashed, and the car reversed with a squeal of tires until it was parked next to the bike. The music stopped. The driver emerged, smoking a cigarette. He was skinny, barefoot, and bare-chested, wearing nothing but blue football shorts. He left the driver’s door open and tiptoed with balletic, practiced grace across the already hot asphalt and

onto the grass, where he hunkered down to study the bike. He caressed the bike's punctured front tire as if it were the limb of a wounded animal. The flies buzzed, suddenly alive and worried.

The man looked up and down the empty street, took a narrow-eyed drag of his cigarette, shrugged, and then grabbed the bike with one hand and stood. He walked to his car and laid it in his trunk like a purchase, deftly popping off the front wheel with the quick-release lever to make it fit.

He got back in the car, slammed the door shut, and drove off, rapping the beat to AC/DC's "Highway to Hell" on his steering wheel, pleased with himself. Yesterday had been Valentine's Day, apparently, and he didn't believe in that capitalist shit, but he was going to give the bike to his wife and say, Happy late Valentine's Day, babe, with an ironic wink, and that would make up for the other day, and odds were he'd get lucky tonight.

He didn't get lucky. He got very unlucky. Twenty minutes later he was dead, killed instantly in a head-on collision. A semitrailer driver from the interstate didn't see a stop sign concealed by an overgrown liquidambar. Local residents had been complaining for months about that sign. It was an accident waiting to happen, they said, and now it had happened.

The apples rotted fast in the heat.

Chapter 1

Two men and two women sat in the far corner of a café underneath the framed photo of sunflowers at dawn in Tuscany. They were basketball-player tall, and as they leaned forward over the mosaic-topped round table, their foreheads almost touched. They spoke in low, intense voices, as if their conversation involved international espionage, which was incongruous in this small suburban café on a pleasant summery Saturday morning, with freshly baked banana and pear bread scenting the air and soft rock drifting languidly from the stereo to the accompaniment of the espresso machine's industrious hiss and grind.

"I think they're brothers and sisters," said the waitress to her boss. The waitress was an only child and intrigued by siblings. "They look really similar."

"They're taking too long to order," said her boss, who was one of eight and found siblings not at all intriguing. After last week's violent hailstorm, there had been blessed rain for nearly a week. Now the fires were under control, the smoke had cleared along with people's faces, and customers were finally out and about again, cash in hand, so they needed to be turning over tables fast.

"They said they haven't had a chance to look at the menus."

"Ask them again."

The waitress approached the table once more, noting how they each sat in the same distinctive way, with their ankles hooked around the front legs of their chairs, as if to prevent them from sliding away.

"Excuse me?"

They didn't hear her. They were all talking at once, their voices overlapping. They were definitely related. They even sounded similar: low, deep, husky-edged voices. People with sore throats and secrets.

"She's not technically missing. She sent us that text."

“I just can’t believe she’s not answering her phone. She always answers.”

“Dad mentioned her new bike is gone.”

“What? That’s bizarre.”

“So ... she just cycled off down the street and into the sunset?”

“But she didn’t take her helmet. Which I find very weird.”

“I think it’s time we reported her missing.”

“It’s over a week now. That’s too long.”

“Like I said, she’s not technically—”

“She is the very definition of missing, because *we don’t know where she is.*”

The waitress raised her voice to a point that was perilously close to rude. “Are you ready to order yet?”

They didn’t hear her.

“Has anyone been over to the house yet?”

“Dad told me please don’t come over. He said he’s ‘very busy.’”

“Very *busy*? What’s he so busy doing?”

The waitress shuffled alongside them, in between the chairs and the wall, so that one of them might see her.

“You know what could happen if we reported her missing?” The better-looking of the two men spoke. He wore a long-sleeved linen shirt rolled up to the elbows, shorts, and shoes without socks. He was in his early thirties, the waitress guessed, with a goatee and the low-level charismatic charm of a reality star or a real estate agent. “They’d suspect Dad.”

“Suspect Dad of what?” asked the other man, a shabbier, chunkier, cheaper version of the first. Instead of a goatee, he just needed a shave.

“That he ... you know.” The expensive-version brother drew his finger across his neck.

The waitress went very still. This was the best conversation she’d overheard since she’d started waitressing.

“Jesus, Troy.” The cheaper-version brother exhaled. “That’s not funny.”

The other man shrugged. “The police will ask if they argued. Dad said they *did* argue.”

“But surely—”

“Maybe Dad did have something to do with it,” said the youngest of

the four, a woman wearing flip-flops and a short orange dress dotted with white daisies over a swimsuit tied at the neck. Her hair was dyed blue (the waitress coveted that exact shade), and it was tied back in a sticky, wet, tangled knot at her neck. There was a fine sheen of sandy sunscreen on her arms as if she'd just that moment walked off the beach, even though they were at least a forty-minute drive from the coast. "Maybe he snapped. Maybe he finally snapped."

"Stop it, both of you," said the other woman, who the waitress realized now was a regular: extra-large, extra-hot soy flat white. Her name was Brooke. Brooke with an *e*. They wrote customers' names on their coffee lids, and this woman had once pointed out, in a diffident but firm way, as if she couldn't help herself, that there should be an *e* at the end of her name.

She was polite but not chatty and generally just a little stressed, like she already knew the day wasn't going to go her way. She paid with a five-dollar note and always left the fifty-cent piece in the tip jar. She wore the same thing every day: a navy polo shirt, shorts, and sneakers with socks.

Today she was dressed for the weekend, in a skirt and top, but she still had the look of an off-duty member of the armed forces, or a PE teacher who wouldn't fall for any of your excuses about cramps.

"Dad would *never* hurt Mum," she said to her sister. "Never."

"Oh my God, of course he wouldn't. I'm not serious!" The blue-haired girl held up her hands, and the waitress saw the rumpled skin around her eyes and mouth and realized she wasn't young at all, she was just dressed young. She was a middle-aged person in disguise. From a distance you'd guess twenty; from close up, you'd think maybe forty. It felt like a trick.

"Mum and Dad have a really strong marriage," said Brooke with an *e*, and something about the resentfully deferential pitch of her voice made the waitress think that in spite of her sensible clothes, she might be the youngest of the four.

The better-looking brother gave her a quizzical look. "Did we grow up in the same house?"

"I don't know. Did we? Because I never saw any signs of violence ... I mean, *God!*"

"Anyway, I'm not the one suggesting it. I'm saying *other* people might suggest it."

The blue-haired woman looked up and caught sight of the waitress.

“Sorry! We still haven’t looked!” She picked up the laminated menu.

“That’s okay,” said the waitress. She wanted to hear more.

“Also, we’re all a bit distracted. Our mother is missing.”

“Oh no. That’s ... worrying?” The waitress couldn’t quite work out how to react. They didn’t seem *that* worried. These people were, like, all a lot older than her—wouldn’t their mother therefore be properly old? Like a little old lady? How did a little old lady go missing? Dementia?

Brooke with an *e* winced. She said to her sister, “Don’t tell people that.”

“I apologize. Our mother is *possibly* missing,” amended the blue-haired woman. “We have temporarily mislaid our mother.”

“You need to retrace your steps.” The waitress went along with the joke. “Where did you see her last?”

There was an awkward pause. They all looked at her with identical liquid brown eyes and sober expressions. They all had the sort of eyelashes that were so dark they looked like they were wearing eyeliner.

“You know, you’re right. That’s exactly what we need to do.” The blue-haired woman nodded slowly as if she were taking the flippant remark seriously. “Retrace our steps.”

“We’ll all try the apple crumble with cream,” interrupted the expensive-version brother. “And then we’ll let you know what we think.”

“Good one.” The cheaper-version brother tapped the edge of his menu on the side of the table.

“For breakfast?” said Brooke with an *e*, but she smiled wryly as if at some private joke related to apple crumble, and they all handed over their menus in the relieved, “that’s sorted, then” way that people handed back menus, glad to be rid of them.

The waitress wrote *4 x App Crum* on her notepad, and straightened the pile of menus.

“Listen,” said the cheaper-version brother. “Has anyone called *her*?”

“Coffees?” asked the waitress.

“We’ll all have long blacks,” said the expensive-version brother, and the waitress made eye contact with Brooke with an *e* to give her the chance to say, No, actually, that’s not my coffee, I always have an extra-large, extra-hot soy flat white, but she was busy turning on her brother. “Of course we’ve called her. A million times. I’ve texted. I’ve emailed. Haven’t you?”

“So four long blacks?” said the waitress.

No one responded.

“Okay, so four long blacks.”

“Not Mum. *Her*.” The cheaper-version brother put his elbows on the table and pressed his fingertips to his temples. “Savannah. Has anyone tried to get in contact with her?”

The waitress had no more excuses to linger and eavesdrop.

Was Savannah another sibling? Why wasn't she here today? Was she the family outcast? The prodigal daughter? Is that why her name seemed to land between them with such portentousness? And *had* anyone called her?

The waitress walked to the counter, hit the bell with the flat of her hand, and slapped down their order.

Chapter 2

LAST SEPTEMBER

It was close to eleven on a chilly, breezy Tuesday night. Pale pink cherry blossoms skittered and whirled as the taxi drove slowly past renovated period homes, each with a midrange luxury sedan in the driveway and an orderly trio of different-colored trash cans at the curb. A ring-tailed possum scuttled across a sandstone fence, caught in the taxi's headlights. A small dog yelped once and went quiet. The air smelled of wood smoke, cut grass, and slow-cooked lamb. Most of the houses were dark except for the vigilant winking of security cameras.

Joy Delaney, at number nine, packed her dishwasher while she listened to the latest episode of *The Migraine Guy Podcast* on the fancy new wireless headphones her son had given her for her birthday.

Joy was a tiny, trim, energetic woman with shiny shoulder-length white hair. She could never remember if she was sixty-eight or sixty-nine, and sometimes she even allowed the possibility that she was sixty-seven. (She was sixty-nine.) Right now she wore jeans and a black cardigan over a striped T-shirt, with woolly socks. She supposedly looked "great for her age." Young people in shops often told her this. She always wanted to say, "You don't know my age, you darling idiot, so how do you know I look great for it?"

Her husband, Stan Delaney, sat in his recliner in the living room, an ice pack on each knee, watching a documentary about the world's greatest bridges while he worked his way through a packet of sweet chili crackers, dipping each one into a tub of cream cheese.

Their elderly Staffordshire terrier, Steffi (named after Steffi Graf, because as a puppy she'd been quick on her feet), sat on the kitchen floor next to Joy, chewing surreptitiously on a fragment of newspaper. Over the last year Steffi had begun obsessively chewing on any paper she could find

in the house, which was apparently a psychological condition in dogs, possibly brought on by stress, although no one knew what Steffi had to be stressed about.

At least Steffi's paper habit was more acceptable than that of her neighbor Caro's cat, Otis, who had begun pilfering clothing from homes in the cul-de-sac, including, mortifyingly, underwear, which Caro was too embarrassed to return, except to Joy, of course.

Joy knew her giant headphones made her resemble an alien, but she didn't care. After years of begging her children for quiet, she now couldn't endure it. The silence howled through her so-called empty nest. Her nest had been empty for many years, so she should have been used to it, but last year they'd sold their business, and it felt like everything ended, juddered to a stop. In her search for noise, she'd become addicted to podcasts. Often she went to bed with her headphones still on so she could be rocked to sleep by the lullaby of a chatty, authoritative voice.

She didn't suffer from migraines herself, but her youngest daughter did, and Joy listened to *The Migraine Guy Podcast* both for informative tips she might be able to pass on to Brooke, and also as a kind of penance. Over recent years she had come to feel almost sick with regret for the dismissive, impatient way she'd first responded to Brooke's childhood headaches, as they used to call them.

"Regret" can be my memoir's theme, she thought, as she tried to shove the cheese grater into the dishwasher next to the frying pan. *A Regretful Life*, by Joy Delaney.

Last night she'd been to the first session of a "So You Want to Write a Memoir" course at the local evening college. Joy didn't want to write a memoir but Caro did, so she was keeping her company. Caro was widowed and shy and didn't want to go on her own. Joy would help Caro make a friend (she already had her eye on someone suitable) and then she'd drop out. Their teacher had explained that you began the process of writing a memoir by choosing a theme, and then it was simply a case of finding anecdotes to support the theme. "Maybe your theme is 'I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks but look at me now,'" the teacher said, and all the ladies in their tailored pants and pearl earrings nodded solemnly and wrote *wrong side of the tracks* in their brand-new notebooks.

"Well, at least your memoir's theme is obvious," Caro told Joy on the way home.

“Is it?” said Joy.

“It’s *tennis*. Your theme is tennis.”

“That’s not a theme,” said Joy. “A theme is more like ‘revenge’ or ‘success against the odds’ or—”

“You could call it *Game, Set, and Match: The Story of a Tennis Family*.”

“But that’s ... we’re not tennis *stars*,” said Joy. “We just ran a tennis school, and a local tennis club. We’re not the Williams family.” For some reason she found Caro’s comment annoying. Even upsetting.

Caro looked astonished. “What are you talking about? Tennis is your family’s passion. People are always saying, ‘Follow your passion!’ And I think to myself, Oh, if only I had a passion. Like Joy.”

Joy had changed the subject.

Now she looked up from the dishwasher and remembered Troy, as a young boy, standing right here in this very kitchen, racquet gripped like a weapon, face rosy with rage, his beautiful brown eyes full of blame and tears he would not let himself cry, shouting, “I *hate* tennis!”

“Ooh, sacrilege!” Amy had said, because her role as the oldest child was to narrate every family argument and use big words the other kids didn’t understand, while Brooke, still little and adorable, had burst into inevitable tears, and Logan’s face became blank and moronic.

“You don’t hate tennis,” Joy had told him. It was an order. She had meant: You *can’t* hate tennis, Troy. She’d meant: I don’t have the time or the strength to let you hate tennis.

Joy gave her head a little shake to dislodge the memory, and tried to return her attention to the podcast.

“... *zigzag lines that float across your field of vision, shimmering spots or stars, people who have migraine aura symptoms say that...*”

Troy hadn’t really hated tennis. Some of their happiest family memories were on the court. Most of their happiest memories. Some of their worst memories were on the court too, but come on now, Troy still *played*. If he’d really hated tennis he wouldn’t still be playing in his thirties.

Was tennis her life’s *theme*?

Maybe Caro was right. She and Stan might never have met if not for tennis.

More than half a century ago now. A birthday party in a small,

crowded house. Heads bounced in time to “Popcorn” by Hot Butter. Eighteen-year-old Joy gripped the chunky green stem of her wineglass, which was filled to the brim with warm Moselle.

“Where’s Joy? You should meet Joy. She just won some big tournament.”

Those were the words that unfastened the tight semicircle of people surrounding the boy with his back against the wall. He was a giant, freakishly tall and big-shouldered, with a mass of long curly black hair tied back in a ponytail, a cigarette in one hand, a can of beer in the other. Athletic boys could still smoke like chimneys in the seventies. He had a dimple that only made an appearance when he saw Joy.

“We should have a hit sometime,” he said. She’d never heard a voice like it, not from a boy of her own generation. It was a voice so deep and slow, people made fun of it and tried to imitate it. They said Stan sounded like Johnny Cash. He didn’t do it on purpose. It was just the way he spoke. He didn’t speak much, but everything he said sounded important.

They weren’t the only tennis players at that party, just the only champions. It was destiny, as inevitable as a fairy tale. If they hadn’t met that night they would have met eventually. Tennis was a small world.

They played their first match that weekend. She lost 6–4, 6–4, and then went right ahead and lost her virginity to him, even though her mother had warned her about the importance of withholding sex if she ever liked a boy: “Why buy a cow when you can get the milk for free?” (Her daughters *shrieked* when they heard that phrase.)

Joy told Stan she only went to bed with him because of his serve. It was a *magnificent* serve. She still admired it, waiting for that split second when time stopped and Stan became a sculpture of a tennis player: back arched, ball suspended, racquet behind his head, and then ... *wham*.

Stan said he only went to bed with her because of her decisive volley, and then he said, that deep, slow voice in her ear, *No, that’s not true, your volley needs work, you crowd the net, I went to bed with you because as soon as I saw those legs I knew I wanted them wrapped around my back*, and Joy swooned, she thought that was so wicked and poetic, although she did not appreciate the criticism of her volley.

“... *this causes the release of neurotransmitters...*”

She looked at the grater. It was covered in carrot, which the dishwasher wouldn’t wash off. She rinsed it in the sink. “Why am I doing your job for

you?” she said to the dishwasher, and thought of herself in pre-dishwasher days, standing at this sink, rubber gloves in hot dishwater, a skyscraper of dirty plates by her side.

Her past kept bumping up against her present lately. Yesterday she’d woken from a nap in a panic, thinking she’d forgotten to pick up one of the children from school. It took her a good minute to remember that all of her children were adults now: adults with wrinkles and mortgages, degrees and travel plans.

It made her wonder if she had dementia. Her friend Linda, who worked at a nursing home, said a wave of restlessness swept through the place at school pickup time each day as the elderly ladies became agitated, convinced they should be rushing to collect long-since-grown children. Hearing that had made Joy teary, and now the exact same thing had kind of happened to her.

“It’s possible my superior intellect is masking my dementia symptoms,” Joy had told Stan.

“Can’t say I’ve noticed,” said Stan.

“My dementia symptoms? Or my superior intellect?”

“Well, you’ve always been demented,” he’d said, and then wandered off, probably to climb a ladder, because his sons had informed him that seventy was too old to climb ladders, so he liked to find excuses to climb them as often as possible.

Last night she’d listened to a very informative podcast called *This Dementia Life*.

The cheese grater refused to join the frying pan in the dishwasher. She studied the two items. It felt like a puzzle she should be able to solve.

“... *trigger a change in the size of the blood vessels...*” said the Migraine Guy.

What? She was going to have to rewind this podcast and start again.

She’d heard that retirement caused a rapid decline in brain function. Maybe that’s what was going on here. Her frontal lobe was atrophying.

They had thought they were ready to retire. Selling the tennis school had seemed like the obvious next step in their lives. They couldn’t keep coaching forever and none of their children were interested in taking on the business. In fact, they were insultingly disinterested. For years Stan had nursed a wild hope that Logan might buy into Delaneys: that old-fashioned idea of the eldest son becoming his proud successor. “Logan

was a great coach,” he’d mutter. “He got it. He really *got* it.”

Poor Logan had looked completely aghast when Stan had diffidently suggested he might like to buy the business. “He’s not very *driven*, is he?” Stan had remarked to Joy, and Joy had snapped at him because she couldn’t bear to hear criticism of her children, especially when that criticism was valid.

So they sold up. To good people for a good price. She hadn’t anticipated this sense of loss. She hadn’t realized how much they were defined by Delaneys Tennis Academy. Who *were* they now? Just another pair of boomers.

Thank God for their own tennis. Their most recent trophy sat, heavy and proud, on the sideboard, ready to show off when everyone was together on Father’s Day. Stan’s knees were paying for it now, but it had been a good, solid win over two technically excellent players: she and Stan had held the net, attacked the middle, and never lost their cool. They still had it.

In addition to tournaments, they still played in the Monday-night social comp that Joy had established years ago, although that had recently got depressing because people kept dying. Six months ago, Dennis Christos had died on the court while he and his wife, Debbie, played against Joy and Stan, which had been terribly traumatic. Joy believed poor Dennis’s heart couldn’t take the excitement of thinking he was going to break Stan’s serve. She secretly blamed Stan for making Dennis think it was a possibility. He’d *deliberately* let the game get to 40–love for his own pleasure. It was taking a lot of willpower for her not to say, “You killed Dennis Christos, Stan.”

The truth was, she and Stan weren’t suited to retirement. Their six-week dream holiday to Europe had been a disaster. Even Wimbledon. Especially Wimbledon. When the plane landed back in Sydney they’d both been giddy with relief, and they’d admitted that to no one, not to their friends or their children, not even to each other.

Sometimes they tried to do things that their other retired friends did, like “a lovely day at the beach,” for example. Joy cut her foot to shreds standing on an oyster shell and they got a parking ticket. It had reminded her of those occasions when she had got it into her head that she and Stan would take the children on a *lovely picnic*, and she’d tried so hard to pretend they were a lovely picnicking family, but something inevitably

went wrong, there was always someone in a bad mood, or they got lost, or it rained just as they arrived, and the drive home was silent and resentful, except for the regular sniffles of whichever child felt he or she had been unjustifiably admonished.

“We’ve actually become quite *romantic* since retirement,” one annoyingly chipper friend told her, which made Joy want to gag, but the other week she bought two banana milkshakes at the food court, as a kind of fun gesture because she and Stan used to buy them for breakfast at small-town milk bars when they used to travel together for regional tournaments in the early years of their marriage. They’d save on motels by sleeping in the car. They had sex in the back seat.

But it was clear that Stan didn’t even *remember* their banana milkshakes, and then on the way home he dramatically and unnecessarily slammed on the brakes when someone pulled out in front of them, and Joy’s milkshake went flying, so their car now permanently and disgustingly smelled of sour milk: the sour smell of failure. Stan said he couldn’t smell a thing.

They needed different personalities to retire with grace and verve like their friends. They needed to be less grumpy (Stan did) and have a wider variety of interests and hobbies beyond tennis. They needed grandchildren.

Grandchildren.

The word alone filled her with the kind of giant, complicated emotions reserved for the young: desire, fury, and worst of all, spiteful, bitter envy.

She knew one tiny grandchild was all it would take to stop the silence roaring, to make her days splutter back to life again, but you could not ask your children for grandchildren. How demeaning. How ordinary. She believed herself to be more interesting and sophisticated than that. She was a feminist. An athlete. A very successful businesswoman. She refused to be that particular cliché.

It would happen. She just had to be patient. She had four children. Four tickets in the raffle, although two of her four children were single, so perhaps they didn’t count as tickets just yet. But two were in solid, long-term relationships. Logan and his girlfriend, Indira, had been together for five years now. They weren’t married, but that didn’t matter. Indira was wonderful, and the last time Joy saw her, she definitely had a mysterious, secretive look about her, almost as if she wanted to tell Joy something but was holding off: maybe until she got to twelve weeks?

Brooke and Grant were happily married, settled with a mortgage on a proper house and a family car, and Grant was older, so it could be on the cards soon. If only Brooke hadn't opened up her own physiotherapy practice. It was admirable—Stan *glowed* with pride whenever anyone mentioned it—but running your own business was stressful, and migraine sufferers had to manage their stress. Brooke was *too* driven. But surely she'd want a baby soon. Brooke always knew the latest medical guidelines, so she would know you shouldn't leave it too late.

Joy secretly hoped her children might find a creative way to tell her about their pregnancies, like other people's children were always doing on YouTube. They could, for example, wrap up an ultrasound picture, and then film Joy's reaction as she opened it: bewilderment followed by understanding, hand clapped across her mouth, tears and hugs. They could post it on their social media! *Joy finds out she's going to be a grandma!* It might go viral. Joy dressed extra nicely every time her children visited, just in case.

(She would never share that fantasy with anyone. Not even the dog.)

The Migraine Guy spoke seductively into Joy's ears, "*Let's talk about magnesium.*"

"Good idea. Let's do that," said Joy.

There was no way for the frying pan and grater to fit together. There was no solution. The grater would have to miss out. It was clean anyway. She straightened up from the dishwasher to discover her husband standing right in front of her, like he'd teleported himself.

"Jesus—bloody—what the—?" she shrieked.

She pushed her headphones down onto her neck and put her hand to her thumping heart. "Don't creep up on me like that!"

"Why is someone knocking on the door?" Stan's lips were orange from the chili crackers. There were damp circles on the knees of his jeans from the melting ice packs. It was aggravating just to look up at him, especially because he was looking down at her with an accusing expression, as if the knock on the door was her fault.

Steffi sat herself down next to Stan, ears pricked and alert, eyes shining with the glorious possibility of a walk.

Joy's eyes went to the clock on the kitchen wall. It was far too late for a delivery or a market researcher. Too late for a friend or family member to drop by, and no one really did that anymore, not without calling first.