

CHAPTER 1



The thing about a new house is everything's new.

That sounds really obvious, I know, but if you think about it, one of the things about where you live is that you build up all this stuff there. And not just stuff, *memories* linked to stuff. All the little ways things work, like the handle you had to push down twice to get into the bathroom, or the groove on the front step that if you went over it too fast you'd trip and land splat on your front. Or how far to open the window to let in enough fresh air so you can fall asleep but nobody could ever get in. Or the *smell*.

Good smells: baking, my mum's orange-oil perfume, the tomatoes in the greenhouse next to our old house.

Bad smells: ash trays, empty beer bottles, the paint they've used to decorate all the walls in the new house.

You get used to old things.

New things take getting used to.

"Memories don't go anywhere just because you do, Luna," Dad said. And I did get what he was saying. Moving doesn't mean any of the past ten years haven't happened, and it doesn't mean there won't be more good times, and it doesn't

mean we can't make the new house even better than where we were before.

But.

Our new house is nothing like the old one. The old one was a mobile home in a field, with a massive vegetable garden, and things living underneath it. Penny Robinson at my old school said real houses don't have things living underneath them – *they are stuck to the ground, that's what real houses are, and they certainly don't move around from place to place, that's called a holiday*. But she was horrible and used to make stuff up about people, and I never liked her anyway.

I liked having a gap between the ground and our house. And I liked that it could move around, although we never really moved it much because Mum and Dad didn't want to leave the vegetable patch, and we never got asked to move on from there, so it felt safe. The sort of place that you'd look out of your bedroom window and sigh because you'd see a chaffinch or a squirrel or even an owl. Last summer me and Lolly used to crawl underneath it and see if we could hear Mum and Dad walking about above us. That was after Dad had got rid of the Great Plague (which is what

Mum called it). It was scary at the time, hearing these big rats under the house, scratching about and doing whatever it is rats do. Then Dad put traps under there, and poison, I think, and one sunny day came out from underneath holding all these dead furry things by their tails.

That bit wasn't very nice, actually.

It wasn't long after that he started talking about buying our new house. And Mum, well. Mum started being very quiet. I think she liked it there as much as I did but she never really talked to us about it.

I'm sitting on the kerb by the corner as you come into Ridgeway Close. Ours is the only truly finished street on the whole estate, and they've spared no expense in making it look like it's a really exclusive-but-homely place where you'll definitely want to live. It obviously worked on Mum and Dad, which means we are now the proud owners of number 16.

Number 14 is on the other side and is set out exactly the same as ours but the other way round, like our house is looking closely in a mirror. Nobody lives in number 14 yet, so I hope whoever moves in is nice. I think the walls are thin,

though, so they'd better not have loads of rows or screaming, or crying, or breaking things in a huff and stomping up the stairs, because we'd hear all of it. Although noise *shouldn't* be a problem here, because everything is *up to the highest possible standards of building regulations*. It says so in the brochure.

"We're going to have trouble with all this open plan," said Mum when we first got the keys, standing in the dining room, which isn't a dining room because it's attached to the kitchen and the living room by two big plaster arches.

"It'll be nice," said Dad. "Communal."

"If I wanted communal, I'd live in a commune," said Mum.

"Ha ha!" said Dad, but Mum went out of the patio door to have a cigarette in the back garden, where she stood looking like someone in a painting, and Dad opened another can of beer.

Today Lolly had a half-day at her new school. We both start properly tomorrow. Dad is inside setting up the TV. I'm not sure when he's back at work at the warehouse, but he's saved up a month's holiday to arrange the move, and to help feel a bit better after not quite being himself for

a while. But it's nice having him about every day, and I could get used to it. I don't tell him that because it might put too much pressure on him, and these days Dad doesn't cope very well with pressure.

I'm quite nosy, so I've already started making notes about the people I see on the close, what they're doing, what cars they drive, that sort of thing.

When I grow up I want to be a food writer, writing my own cookbooks with shiny covers. Or a detective. Or a Great Baker Detective. So, I have to get my practice in. I can't wait to bake in the new kitchen. It's bigger than our old one, and we have an actual fan oven. I'll have to change all the timings on my favourite recipes, though, which will take time and experimentation. The cooker at the old house was sort of on the wonk. Everything was hotter on one side. I had to customise the baking trays with little metal ramps. They're packed away now, somewhere, because I won't be needing them any more. Or if the new oven is on the wonk, what are the chances it will be on the wonk in exactly the same way?

The most interesting thing about Ridgeway

Close so far is that we have the Grande Homes Show Home on the corner opposite our house. It's a house that's done out with all the best furniture, all the best everything, to show people the sort of life they could have if they lived there. In the front garden are two huge flagpoles that rise way up into the sky, both with the bright red Grande Homes logo across, where the words are set out to make the shape of a cat. Apparently cats symbolise *new but stylish homes, the cosy and the sleek*. I heard Greg Martin say those exact words. Greg Martin is the person in charge of all the salespeople who work from the show home. It's their job to get people to sign up to buy other houses on the estate, and his job to be in charge of them doing that. He seems to be very good at it because the show home is really busy and when people step out of it they have often signed up to buy a house, looking about them with dazed-but-excited expressions on their faces. Little do they know.

"How much would it cost if I bought all the same stuff that you've got in here?" a man in a suit and raincoat asks him, as I listen in while pretending not to.

"Well, we actually have catalogue links to all the products, and there's an option to buy fully decorated and furnished," says Greg Martin. "It works out over ten thousand pounds cheaper than if you bought all the items separately."

The man looks impressed and they both go inside. I notice he didn't actually answer the man's question about how much it would cost and I imagine Greg Martin gets people to buy houses on the South Downs Estate by doing that swirly-eyed hypnotising thing they always have in cartoons.

"You will buy a house on the South Downs Estate. You will move all your family away from the people they like, and the woodland they run in, and all the bits and pieces that have made their life what it is so far, and join the many robot humans in our roll-out plastic house city."

That's what our new street reminds me of. Those roll-out play mats toddlers have. *Here is a road. Here is a house. Here is a zebra crossing.* Who knows what's underneath all the concrete? Whole worlds made flat and forgotten. Maybe they could roll me out a bunch of new friends while they're at it. I know that's not how it works,

but it would be great if it was.

We're one of the last families to move into Ridgeway Close. Some of the gardens look so perfect I can't imagine anyone actually playing in them. Dad said there was some sort of contract that meant you could get a reduced price on your deposit to buy, if you kept your garden in a certain manner for the length of time the show home was on the street. And there's a fine if you let it overgrow. It's our job to give a good impression to potential buyers. It's like living inside an advert on TV.

"What happens if you want to make your garden be full of toilets with stuff growing in them or something?"

"Why would anyone want to do that?" said Dad, looking confused.

"It was just an example."

In the margin of my notebook I make a list of all the house numbers in our little bit of the close. 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, then the four flats, 11, 13, 15 and 17. And us at number 16. So far I've worked out that two couples live in the top flats, 15 and 17, who are friends, because I saw them out on their little balcony in the evening

drinking wine and smoking cigarettes and getting louder in how they laugh. Dad said the women were “proper beauties”, which I thought was embarrassing and made me cringe.

Mum and Dad don’t often say that sort of thing to each other. In the mobile home I used to catch Mum sometimes, flipping through old photograph books of when they were younger, before me and Lolly were born, and sighing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Everything,” she said, and I worried then because everything is a lot of things, so I went into the kitchen and made her a cheese, cucumber and salad cream sandwich and put it next to two homemade (by me) ginger biscuits on a plate, poured her a cup of milk, and put some daisy heads floating in a glass of water for decoration. It looked pretty and I took the whole lot in to her on a tray.

Mum looked at me, and I thought she was going to cry. “That’s so thoughtful, Luna,” she said.

“Do you feel better?”

“Yes. Much. I know I get very sad sometimes. But I hope you know it’s not because of you.”

I like making food for people because it usually

makes them feel better. It's easy with Lolly. She likes anything that's cut into star shapes, which is easier with some foods than others.

It's then I realise my brain is wandering, and I'm not really being a very good detective because I didn't even notice the boy, with the backpack and the long hair with the headband on, come and sit next to me on the kerb.

"Hello," says the boy with the backpack and the long hair and the headband on, sitting next to me on the kerb.

"Hello," I say.

"You're in number sixteen, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I'm in number twenty-two. Right opposite. I'm Rudo."

"I'm Luna," I say. "Do you like baking?" I have no idea why I ask this because I know it's good to start conversations with something less specific.

"Not really," said Rudo easily. "I like eating, though."

This, I think, is what my dad would call a *match made in heaven*.

"Can I show you something really brilliant?" he says.

I don't know what makes me say yes. I was quite happy sitting on the shiny new kerb making my list of any interesting or suspicious activity, totally and utterly by myself. But Rudo smiles at me, stands up and starts walking away, turning to see if I'm going with him, and, for whatever reason, I get up and follow him.