

DINEY COSTELOE

*The New
Neighbours*



Chapter One

Mary Jarvis sighed as she looked out of her sitting-room window. She could see her neighbour, Sheila Colby, bearing down on her door like a galleon in full sail. Her face was glowing with indignation and she was obviously bursting with news. Knowing that the quiet hour she'd promised herself before going to St Joseph's was now doomed, Mary set aside the *Telegraph* crossword and went to open the door.

"Mary, you'll never believe it, it's dreadful," Sheila exploded even as she crossed the threshold. Her curled grey hair bounced round her ears and her powdered jowls quivered with consternation. "It's dreadful," she repeated.

"Come in, Sheila," Mary said mildly as Sheila hurried past her into the hall. "Come upstairs and have a coffee, I'm just having one."

She led her friend upstairs to the sitting room and waved her into a chair. "I'll just get your coffee," she said, going into the kitchen. She poured a coffee from the percolator and carried it through into the living room. Handing it to Sheila, she resumed her own seat by the window.

"Now then, tell me, what on earth has happened?"

"Ned Short's sold his house at last," Sheila announced dramatically.

"Well, I'm pleased for him," remarked Mary, sipping her own coffee. "Since Jane left him it's been a millstone round his neck – far too big for him. And I'd have thought," she continued, "that

you'd be delighted. You've never liked either of them. I'd have thought you'd be thrilled he was going."

"But Mary," Sheila was extracting every ounce from the dread news she'd come to impart, "it's been sold...", she put her cup and saucer down with a clatter, "...to students. What are we going to *do*?"

"Do?" Mary looked surprised. "What can we do? There's nothing we can do. Ned's entitled to sell his house to whomever he chooses and whoever wants to can buy it. Not that he's had much choice, he must have leapt at this chance, I should think."

"Gerald says there'll be rowdy parties and noise all the time," wailed Sheila. "It's all right for you – you don't live next door. The noise won't be coming through your walls!"

The houses in Dartmouth Circle were in three terraces of four, set at right angles to each other round a communal garden; 'sixties' town houses on three floors with an integral garage beside the front door. Mary Jarvis occupied number five, the end house in the centre block. The Colbys were her immediate neighbours, sandwiched between her and the Shorts. On the other side of the Shorts lived Shirley and David Redwood, another retired couple.

Mary could see Sheila had a point, and she said, "No, I suppose not, but having students in number seven will probably affect the whole Circle."

The residents of Dartmouth Circle always referred to their cul-de-sac as "The Circle". Somehow, having a private name for their road made for a feeling of community, of belonging.

"Gerald says..." Sheila very often prefaced her remarks with "Gerald says" and it irritated Mary, particularly as she was fairly certain that Gerald, who was mild-mannered and inoffensive, seldom made any of the remarks attributed to him, and his name was used to cloak Sheila's own less charitable thoughts and ideas. "Gerald says that the value of our properties will go down when they move in. The whole Circle will suffer."

"I don't see why it should," replied Mary, even as she wondered if, in this case Gerald, or more probably Sheila, might

be right. "There's a student house on the corner of Dartmouth Avenue, and Mrs Old's house, two doors away from that, sold very well last month, I'm told. It didn't seem to affect the price she got." Mary didn't actually know what Mrs Old's house had sold for, but she felt the need to disagree with Sheila who was always so dogmatic about things.

However, as she was on rather shaky ground, she went on almost without a pause, "How did you hear?"

"Ned told me himself," answered Sheila. She drank some more of her coffee and replaced her cup carefully on the table before going on. "I met him at Molly's when I went for the paper this morning. He was full of it. 'Contracts actually exchanged this time, Mrs C,' he said. 'Oh Mr Short, I am pleased for you,' I said. 'I do hope it's a nice family moving in, or perhaps a young couple, the quiet professional sort, you know.' And he laughed at me, Mary, laughed that dreadful, common laugh of his and said, 'Doubt if it'll be quiet, Mrs C, it's been bought as a student house. I heard them say they're hoping to put nine or ten into it.' Nine or ten, Mary! In a terraced house like ours! Can you imagine? Next door?"

Mary had to admit a certain sympathy at the thought. "Do the Redwoods know yet?" she asked.

Sheila shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I think they're still away. I came straight home to tell Gerald of course," she went on, "and then I did give their doorbell a ring, but there was no reply, so I assume they aren't back yet. I know Melanie had the baby last week, I told you it was a girl, didn't I? Anyway I think they were going to stay for a while to help with little Todd."

Well, thought Mary wryly, if anyone knows their plans it'll be you.

"Anyway, Shirley didn't know how long they'd stay."

"Not all that long if I know David," laughed Mary. "He hates to leave his garden at this time of year."

"Well, they'll be devastated when they do hear," asserted Sheila. "They like their peace and quiet and they'll have the same

problems as we will – all the noise and the comings and goings with ten of them!”

“I really doubt if there’ll be ten living in a house that size,” soothed Mary. “They wouldn’t fit in.”

“Of course they would, they don’t care how they live, people like that. Gerald says they’ll probably smoke pot or worse. What *are* we going to do?”

“I agree it’s not what any of us would have chosen to happen,” Mary said briskly, “but as there isn’t anything we *can* do about it, we’ll just have to wait and see and make the best of it. Now, I’m sorry to have to turn you out, Sheila, but I’m due to help with the lunches at St Joe’s today and I’ve got to go.”

Sheila drained her coffee cup. She considered her neighbour was taking the whole thing far too calmly, and wanted to jerk her into awareness of the dreadful reality that was about to overtake them. “Gerald says we should call a meeting of the Residents’ Association,” she began, “and form a committee.”

“A committee?” repeated Mary incredulously. “*Gerald* said that?”

“Yes,” replied Sheila firmly, “well, a sub-committee...within the Residents’ Association, so that things aren’t allowed to get out of hand.”

It seems to me that it’s *you* who’s getting out of hand, thought Mary. “And just what will this sub-committee do?” she enquired dryly.

“Keep a strict eye on number seven,” Sheila said. “Warn them about being a nuisance and call the police when they are.”

“Call the police?” Mary was exasperated with such an attitude. “Sheila, you don’t know anything about these young people yet. You’ve no idea if they’re going to cause a nuisance, make a noise, give rowdy parties, take drugs – they may be perfectly normal youngsters.”

“Yes,” agreed Sheila ominously. “That’s what I’m afraid of! Anyway, I shall go and see Anthony Hammond this evening. As chairman of the Residents’ Association he must be told.”

When Sheila had departed to her long-suffering Gerald once more, Mary stood at her third-floor bedroom window and looked down into the gardens spread out below her – her own, paved, with tubs of shrubs about to bloom; the Colbys' next door with neat lawn and daffodils and hyacinth glowing in the weeded beds. Beyond the Colbys' was Ned Short's garden, an overgrown wasteland complete with rusted bicycle, discarded fridge and a roll of rotting carpet. Beyond this again was the Redwoods' garden, loved and tended, already a profusion of colour.

How would David and Shirley Redwood like living next door to a student house she wondered? It really couldn't be much worse than living next door to Ned Short, could it? The rows from his house had been heard all over the Circle. Mary smiled to herself. Ned must have known Sheila was thinking that any neighbours would be an improvement on him, that's why he'd taken such delight in telling her it was going to be a crowd of students. Surely he must have been exaggerating when he said nine or ten? Just winding Sheila up to watch her spin. A piece of quiet revenge for all the implied insults and unpleasant barbs that he'd had to endure over the past months, little things which Sheila was so good at slipping into an apparently innocuous conversation. Mary couldn't help smiling as she recalled the horror on Sheila's face, but even so, the idea of a house full of students next door but one to her own did bring on a mood of foreboding.

Still there was really nothing to be done about it, she told herself, so I'm not going to let it worry me yet. And giving herself a mental shake she set off to do her stint at St Joseph's, the local church's day centre for the elderly.

As she was getting into her car, she saw Ned Short coming into the Circle. She smiled and waved. "I hear you've sold at last, Mr Short," she called. "You must be very pleased."

"Told you already, has she?" said Ned with a jerk of his head towards number six. "Knew telling her would be the best way of spreading the news."

"Yes, I did hear it from Sheila," said Mary with a smile.

“Tell you it was students, did she?” enquired Ned innocently.

“Yes,” said Mary, matching his innocent expression, “it’ll be lovely to have some young people around. The Circle has become positively geriatric, don’t you think?” She got into her car and spoke through the open window. “When will you be on the move then? Some time soon? We shall miss you.”

“Soon as the sale goes through,” answered Ned. “This place only has bad memories for me. Don’t worry, I’ll soon be gone – then you’ll have the students.”

He watched her drive away and then turned towards his own front door. He was, indeed, relieved to have sold at last. The house had been on the market ever since Jane had finally walked out; the divorce was through and Jane was pestering him for her share of the money. He hadn’t got the asking price of course, there was no way anyone in their right mind would have paid that with the house in the state it was. He grimaced at the front door as he opened it, its pitted paintwork blistered and peeling. The four small panes of its window were cracked and dirty and the entry phone, standard equipment in all the Dartmouth Circle townhouses, hung out from the door-frame, broken. Many prospective buyers had turned back at that door, hadn’t even bothered to view, turning away from the unprepossessing frontage without knocking. Others, attracted by the Dartmouth Circle address, had ventured inside, but had been unable to visualise what the dirty, battle-scarred house might become, or had balked at the cost of the transformation. When Nicholas Richmond had made an offer at the bottom end of the price range that Ned had privately considered acceptable, Ned had leapt at it, delighted to be shot of the place at last.

He went inside and looked round at the gloomy place that was his home. The light bulb in the hall was broken and there was a pervasive smell of garbage, cats and stale air. Then he gave a bitter laugh. Whatever Mr Nicholas Richmond did with the house, Ned would lay money on it that the students who inhabited it would reduce it to its former pig-sty status in no time flat.

Well, serve the old cow next door right, he thought viciously. Stuck-up bitch with her net curtains and trailing geraniums. He laughed aloud at the recollection of Sheila Colby's face when he'd broken the news about the students. She was the worst in the Circle by far. Probably old Mary Jarvis would be equally glad to see the back of him, but at least she had not made it so obvious. Not that he was sorry to be leaving Dartmouth Circle. He and Jane had never really fitted in to the little community of retired couples and rising stars. They had been one of the few families with teenage children living at home. Robin and Karen were the only children in the Circle who went to Crosshills Comprehensive. The few other children in the close had attended Beechlands Preparatory School, Belcaster High or were away at boarding school. When Robin and Karen had left home, Jane had gone too, moving in with Joe Briggs, the landlord of the pub where she had worked part-time as a barmaid.

Ned had been left to fend for himself and had made a poor fist of it. The house was far too big and he camped out in the living room with only his cats for company. When he was made redundant, he lowered the asking price for the house; it was time to sell and move on.

Well, at least I've got somewhere lined up to go to, he thought, picturing with some pleasure the one-bedroomed flat he'd agreed to rent in Brighton. I've always liked the sea.

He put the kettle on the stove and dropping a teabag into a chipped mug, began to make a list of what he would take from the house. There was too much for the flat, he'd leave the rest for Jane and the kids to fight over.

As Ned Short drank his tea and made his list, Sheila Colby, never one to let the grass grow, was discussing with Gerald how to mobilise the Dartmouth Circle troops in the face of the student invasion; or rather she was outlining her plans to a largely acquiescent Gerald, who with a long-developed skill appeared to be all attention while actually finishing his crossword.

After forty-three years of marriage to Sheila, it was an art he had perfected.

“I shall go and visit everyone in the Circle,” she was saying, “a united front is what we need, a strong representation so that things don’t get out of hand. With the Redwoods still away it’s up to us to take the lead, don’t you think? I’ll go and see Anthony Hammond, that will alert the Residents’ Association.”

Aware of a pause in the barrage of words, Gerald said, “I don’t think there’s any rush you know, if they’ve only just exchanged contracts.”

“But we have to be ready. If everyone’s aware of the problem, we can consider some strategy. They may move in straightaway. We *must* be prepared.”

“I doubt very much if they’ll move in before the beginning of the college year in September,” observed Gerald, finally setting aside his paper. “There must be work to be done on the house, you’ve only got to look at it. The Shorts have done nothing to it in the ten years they’ve been there. It’ll need some money spending on it.”

“Don’t be silly, Gerald,” scoffed Sheila. “Students won’t have money to spend on doing it up. It’ll simply go from bad to worse.”

“I doubt if it’s students actually buying the place, Sheila.” Gerald sounded mildly exasperated. “Someone will have bought it with the idea of letting it out to students, and whoever it is will have to make it habitable.”

“You mean it probably isn’t decided that students will live in it yet.” Sheila grasped at the straw. “Of course, you’re right. If we act at once maybe we can convince the new owner *not* to let it to students at all, but to some nice professional people. The Circle isn’t the sort of place for students to live.”

“I’d have thought it was perfect for them,” Gerald pointed out wickedly. “Five minutes’ walk from the college, ten minutes to the leisure centre and three to the nearest pub.”

“I shouldn’t think the Ship and Compass’ll want them. It’s such a nice quiet pub.”

“In the present economic climate I should think they’ll welcome them with open arms,” Gerald said gravely. “They’ll be glad of the custom.”

“And then they’ll come home from the pub at all hours, drunk and rowdy,” said Sheila, hotly. “I know I’m right, Gerald, we must do something. We should go round and see everyone this afternoon and warn them of the situation.”

“You must do as you think fit,” sighed Gerald, picking up his paper again. “I don’t think you should meddle. And this afternoon, I shall be playing golf with Andrew Peters.”

“Well, at least you can tell him,” said Sheila, blithely ignoring his comment about meddling. “His mother lives alone in number one. She’s ninety if she’s a day; she’ll be terrified of having a house full of students just across the road.”

Gerald did not agree with this last statement. Madge Peters had insisted on living alone in her own home, despite anything Andrew could do to try to move her to somewhere smaller or more convenient, and he couldn’t imagine her being terrified of anyone, let alone a bunch of students. But he had long ago learned the wisdom of keeping ninety per cent of his thoughts to himself and he did so now, merely remarking that he would mention the news to Andrew when he saw him this afternoon so that he could warn Madge if he wanted to. Another thought that occurred to him, but which he also prudently kept to himself, was that the students were an invention of Ned’s, simply to worry Sheila. He wouldn’t put such a piece of spite past Ned Short, but Gerald decided to say nothing, as Sheila would not find it a reassuring thought, it would just fuel her rage.

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