



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."

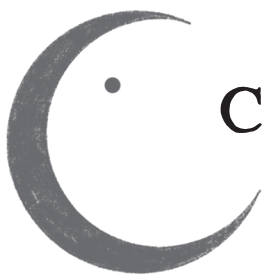
"I'm Luna," I say. "Do you like baking?" I have no idea why I ask this because I know it's good to start conversations with something less specific.

"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.



CHAPTER 2



I follow Rudo all along the back fence of the show home. He seems quite relaxed about it as he pulls over one of the recycling tubs, then stands on it, and starts pulling himself over the fence using the tub to bunk himself over.

“We’re not doing anything *illegal*, are we?” I say. The last thing I need is to get into that sort of trouble on the day before I start my new school, and Mum and Dad really don’t need the stress. But Rudo turns round and gives me a grin, the sort that says, “Maybe, but there’s a loophole, and everything will be fine.” So I continue as though this is the case. I can always point at him if we get in trouble. I can always say, “He told me to do it!” But, I wouldn’t do that. Experience shows I’d be more likely to take the blame, annoyingly.

Soon he is up and over, and I can feel my heart beating fast in my chest, because I’ve got one of my legs over the top of the fence too, while the other foot is on tiptoes on top of the recycling tub. I pull myself over, which is harder than it looks because the fence is actually quite thin and a bit wobbly, and land with a soft thump, right next to him, on some soft but very neat grass. We are in

a back garden. Not just any back garden, *but the back garden of dreams.*

"Should I be regretting this?" I say.

"No!" he says, smiling, pulling me down to the ground, so we're hiding behind a water feature in the shape of a beehive.

"Isn't there CCTV?" I look about for little cameras, or those red laser beams you see in movies when art thieves are trying to steal the *Mona Lisa.*

"There is," he says slowly, "but not on this bit of the garden because they forgot, with all the focus on *there.*" He nods at the house, which even on the outside is the cleanest and neatest house that has ever existed. The Grande Homes Show Home. *The home of homes.* The shadows of the two big flagpoles loom over the garden like two guards, and even though I'm acting like I'm OK about all this, like *it's no big deal to me actually,* I'm worried about getting into trouble. "And we can *sneak,*" he says, laughing to himself as he starts crawling along the grass, stopping to lay flat behind glazed plant pots, in an over-dramatic way. The way he moves makes me laugh too.

"I'm good at sneaking," he says proudly. "It's my specialist skill." He sounds half proud and half sad about that.

The garden is the *perfect garden*: flowers, pond, the water feature, a lovely set of tables and chairs, statues, and even a vegetable garden. I feel a sort of swoop in my chest, the memory of home, but as I reach over to touch the spray of carrot leaves, as we crawl past, it turns out they're *plastic*. Who would go to all the trouble of setting up a beautiful garden that was *full of fake vegetables*? I feel like I'm in a sci-fi movie, one with a scary plot where everybody turns into robots and there's only me and Lolly left who are human or something. But I keep crawling after Rudo anyway. He certainly doesn't move like a robot.

As it turns out, it's not the actual garden he's interested in. Soon he's crawling round the base of the big pear tree, the one they must have kept from when this was moorland, before they cleared it to start again, because it's thick and has branches like it's been reaching upwards for a very long time. He gets to a rope ladder at the back of the tree, turns to me and nods enthusiastically.

I already like that about him, that he's not afraid to be excited. Some people pretend to not be excited about anything. They are not the sort of people who could ever be my friend. Not that I have much experience of friends, but that's something about people I've noticed by being a detective.

"Look at Luna Loveridge *staring* at everyone!" is what Penny Robinson used to say, and people would laugh. But I wasn't staring. I was *watching*. There's a difference.

I look up. There, in the branches, is the absolute biggest and swankiest tree house I've ever seen. Somebody could live in it *and* have some servants (even though I don't believe in having servants) living in it too – it's that big. And it has been made to look like a proper house, like a miniature version in the same style as the real ones on Ridgeway Close.

"Actual wow," I say with my mouth open.

"Come on then," he says, beckoning me over, as he starts to climb the ladder, hidden from the windows of the house. "Sometimes it's worth sneaking."

For some reason, once again I follow.

But, oh! Inside is just wonderful!

The whole place is set out like a one-room version of my own house, and I guess most of the others on Ridgeway Close. There's a kid-size sofa, slate grey, with mustard cushions, and two armchairs, two orange beanbags, and a stripy rug to show where the living-room area is. Then there's a glass dining table – you can tell nobody is going to use it, who'd put a glass dining table in an area just for kids? – and some metal chairs, the sort that look nice but which fall apart after a month of people actually using them, but still. There's a shelf with loads of board games stacked, and a socket board, with loads of different holes for plugs and chargers, and two USB ports. There is an old-fashioned TV, a big square one, and I'm looking at the fake kitchen, wondering if it is actually fake... There's a three-quarter-size electric cooker, with hob, and if it works, *if it works, I'm coming here all the time and never leaving.*

"So," says Rudo, looking proud of himself, "this is the clubhouse."

"The clubhouse," I say slowly. "What club?"

"It hasn't got a name yet," he says with a shrug.

"But that's a minor detail."

"How many members?"

"One." He looks at me. "Potentially two..."

"Are you inviting me to join your club?"

"It's a possibility."

I laugh, feeling brave. Something about Rudo makes me feel brave. "I'm not committing to something before I know what it is. Would we be in big trouble if we got found in here?"

"What do you think?" he says, making himself comfortable on a big orange beanbag. He really looks at home here. "And there aren't any rules in this club. Not really."

"What I'm asking is, wouldn't we be in *huge* amounts of trouble if we got found in here? Couldn't they throw us out of our *actual* houses?"

"Ah, nahhh. Our families own them, even if they are on one hundred per cent mortgages that they'll have to pay back every month, possibly for the rest of their lives," he says, "so I think it's unlikely we'd get more than a bit of a lecture and told not to do it again. Maybe have to write a letter to someone saying sorry. Maybe have *Greg Martin* take us by our ears to our parents, like in a movie or something, and

our parents grounding us...?"

"Yeah, maybe," I say. "And I don't think my parents would ever ground me."

"Neither would my mum," says Rudo quickly. "And I'm not afraid of Greg Martin."

"And neither am I," I say even quicker. Truth is, I *am* a bit afraid of Greg Martin, not because he might tell me off, but because of the way his face changes in the gaps between when he's talking to potential customers. That smile, that huge smile, which drops to nothing when nobody who's going to buy something from him is looking. Except me.

"And the club," says Rudo, "is any kid we like and decide to tell about it, but we have to check with the other first."

"How are we going to decide who we tell about it?"

Rudo shrugs and opens a cupboard in the kitchen, bringing out a packet of chocolate digestives and some sachets of hot chocolate like they have in hotel rooms.

"You're the first I've told," he says, flicking on a real kettle. "We can work out who to tell next. At some point."

"Why did you choose me?"

"You were spying on people," he says.

"I wasn't!" I say quickly.

"Come off it," he says. "I saw you when I was spying on you. It's fine. It's why I knew we'd get on."

"I'm not sure how I feel about having someone spy on me while I spy on other people." This makes us both laugh, and I feel sort of happy. "They have a working kettle in here?" I say, trying not to feel too excited about the fact Rudo has chosen me, first, to come to the clubhouse.

"I brought that," he says proudly. "I brought lots of things. They don't check in the cupboards. Nobody really comes up here. Not often enough to really notice anything anyway. Something I've noticed is that people very often come and look at houses they're going to move into, *without* their kids. It's like a conspiracy."

That makes no sense to me. If I had children, the first thing I'd be looking at was the inside of this tree house. And I'd be bringing them with me to look. But Rudo is right. Mum and Dad came to view number 16 without me and Lolly. And by the time we *did* see it, it was all decided.

"It's amazing," I say again. "Thank you for bringing me."

"Ah, no problem," says Rudo with a shrug, pouring hot water into two mustard-striped mugs. "I didn't even ask if you want one. How rude. Do you?"

"I pretty much always want hot chocolate," I say, truthfully.

We take our drinks over to the sofa, sit, and each wrap our hands lightly round our mugs, blowing on the steam without saying anything. You can see the diggers and cranes working on the other streets through one window and the other side of Ridgeway Close through the other. You could probably really spy on people from here. If you wanted to.

"So what sort of things do you like?" I say, after a mouthful of hot chocolate. It's sort of thin and lumpy, like it's come from a machine, because Rudo didn't stir it, but it still tastes good. "Other than breaking into tree houses, that is?"

Rudo smiles. "Ha! I like space stuff, planets. And I like drawing, drawing people's hands and eyes and their hair. Little portraits. And dancing. I go to tap lessons." He gives me a side look. "I

like old movies, with dancing in." He pauses as if waiting for laughter, which certainly won't be coming from me. I love old movies too. "I like ... um ... murals. You know. Big pictures on the sides of buildings and public places ... like big, bright messages to people as they go past... What about you?"

"Baking," I say immediately. "I can bake most things. Huge cakes, buns, pastries full of sweet custard. I like notebooks. Making notes. I like detective stories and my little sister, Lolly. You'll meet her. She's funny and smells of candyfloss. I have no idea why, but she does. I love the smell of clean laundry. And my mum's perfume; she gets posh stuff from a big shop in London once a year, it's got orange oil in it. And, I like it really early in the morning when nobody else is awake. That's my favourite time of day."

"Maybe sometimes," says Rudo, looking thoughtful, "at that time of day, you could sneak out and come here. I do sometimes."

"Don't your mum or dad mind?" I remember not everyone lives with their mum and dad and want to ask the question better. "Or whoever you live with...?"

But Rudo shrugs, and I don't push it.

"Fancy a game of cards?" he says, pulling a pack from the shelf with the other board games.
"Do you know how to play rummy?"