



NEIGHBOR *Dearest*

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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CHAPTER *one*

SUPERSONIC HEARING

My little sister is such a drama queen. *Literally*. Jade is an actress on Broadway.

She clapped her hands together, applauding the students who'd just bravely put themselves out there to try out for *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. "You all did such a great job today! Tomorrow we cast the roles and start our first rehearsal. This is gonna be epic!"

Jade had come out to the Bay Area to visit our family for the week and offered to volunteer at the youth center where I worked. Since there wasn't enough time to produce an entire play, Jade decided to direct the kids in one key scene from the musical that would be performed later in the week.

I loved my job as director of the arts at the Mission Youth Center. It was just about the only thing going right in my life. The only downside was the fact that these walls were haunted by memories of my ex, Elec, who used to be a youth counselor here. That was how we met. He'd loved his job, too, until he quit so that he could move to New York after we broke up. He moved to be with *her*. I shook my head to shoo away thoughts of him and Greta.

Jade grabbed her purse. "I need to go back to your place to use the bathroom and have a quick bite."

I'd just moved into a new apartment that was only a few blocks away from my job. The lease had finally run out on the place I'd been renting with Elec across town. Even though my ex sent me his half of the rent for the remainder of our lease after he'd moved out, I couldn't wait to vacate that place; every corner of it reminded me of him and of the miserable months that followed our break up.

My place was right in the south central section of the Mission District. I loved the culture in my new neighborhood. Produce bins and a variety of cafes lined the streets. It was also a mecca for Latin culture, which was great, except for the fact that it reminded me of Elec, who was half Ecuadorian. Little reminders of the guy who broke my heart were everywhere.

Jade and I strolled down the sidewalk, stopping at a fruit stand so that she could buy some papayas for an afternoon smoothie she planned to make back at my apartment. We also ended up getting two coffees to go.

I bent back the opening on my coffee lid as we walked. "So, little sis, I never thought we would be in the same predicament at the same time."

Jade had recently been dumped by her musician boyfriend.

"Yes. But the difference is, I feel like I have way more distractions in my life than you do. It's not that I don't think about Justin. It's not that I don't get sad, but my performances keep me so busy that it's almost like I don't have time to wallow in it, you know?"

"I told you I've been doing these phone therapy sessions, right?"

Jade took a sip then shook her head. "No."

"Yeah. I found this psychologist who specializes in trauma from failed relationships, but she's in Canada. Anyway, we do phone sessions one night a week."

“Is it helping?”

“It always helps to talk things out.”

“Yeah. But no offense, you don’t seem any better for it. Anyway, you can talk things out with Claire or me. You don’t need to pay big bucks to talk to a stranger.”

“Nighttime is really my only time to talk to anyone. You’re performing at night, and Claire is too wrapped up in being a blissful newlywed. Besides, she’s never had her heart broken. She listens, but she doesn’t get it.”

Our older sister, Claire, married her high school sweetheart. Even though the three of us were close growing up in nearby Sausalito, I’d always felt more comfortable opening up to Jade.

When we arrived at my building, my sister stopped to sit on one of the benches in the corner of the fenced-in courtyard. “Let’s sit for a bit, finish our coffees.” Her gaze wandered across the grass to my shirtless neighbor. “Okay...who’s the hottie in the beanie defacing the property?”

“What is it with you and beanies?”

“Justin used to wear one. That’s why I love them. Isn’t that sad?”

“That *is* sad.”

“This from the girl who still sleeps in her ex’s shirt.”

“It’s comfortable. It has nothing to do with Elec,” I lied. It was the one thing I allowed myself from him. It made me sad, but I wore it anyway.

“So...who is that guy?”

I didn’t know my neighbor’s name, but I’d see him once in a while doing spray paint art along the wrap-around concrete wall that surrounded the property. It served as a vast canvas. His spray painting was true art, definitely not what would be considered simple graffiti. It was an elaborate

mix of celestial and geographical images. This guy just kept adding different artwork to the wall gradually. It was a work in progress. I could only assume he planned to paint the entire circumference of the property, as much as the wall space would allow.

“He lives in the building, next door to me, actually.”

“What is he doing? They allow him to do that here?”

“I don’t know. The first time I saw him out here, I thought he was vandalizing the property. But no one seems to care or stop him. Every day, he adds to the mural. It’s actually quite beautiful. But it doesn’t match his personality.”

Jade blew on her coffee. “What do you mean?”

“He’s not very nice.”

“You’ve talked to him?”

“No. He’s just not friendly. I’ve tried to make eye contact, but he walks right by me. He has these two big dogs, and they’re pretty mean. They bark all of the time. He walks them every morning.”

“Maybe he’s like a savant. You know, really good with art. Or maybe he’s a genius but with limited social skills. What do they call that...Asperger’s?”

“No. He communicates just fine. I’ve seen him yelling at a few people. I’m pretty sure he doesn’t have that. This guy is just not friendly. He doesn’t have Asperger’s. He’s just an ass.”

Jade chuckled. “I think you should totally stop by his place with some warm muffins wrapped up in a basket. It’s the neighborly thing to do. Maybe he’ll loosen up...or loosen *you* up.”

“Muffins, huh? What’s that code for?”

“Muff...muffins. Same thing. If I lived here, I’d be all over that. But I *don’t* live here. You do. And you totally need a distraction. I say...he’s it.”

I admired the guy’s broad shoulders and tanned muscular back as his arm moved the spray can up and down. “God, doesn’t he remind you of Elec, though? Arm tattoo...dark hair. Artistic. Basically, that’s the *last* type of guy I’m going for at this point.”

“So, if someone looks like or seems similar to Elec, then they’re automatically disqualified? They’re destined to do the same thing Elec did? Is that how you think? That’s just stupid rationale.”

“Maybe that’s fucked-up. But the last thing I want is to be with someone who reminds me of him in the least.”

“Well, that’s a shame, because Elec was freaking hot, and this guy...is even hotter.”

“Can you remind me why we’re discussing this? The dude doesn’t even say hello to me. He’s not signing up to be on this delusional version of *The Bachelorette*. He’s not interested.”

Neighbor Dearest suddenly wiped the sweat from his forehead, took off the mask covering his nose and mouth, and dumped the spray cans into a black drawstring sack. He slung it over his shoulder and just when I thought he was going to walk away and out of the courtyard, he began to walk in our direction. Jade straightened in her seat, and I hated that my pulse raced a bit.

His eyes were focused on me. I wouldn’t call it an angry stare, but he wasn’t smiling. The sunlight beamed directly into his blue eyes, which glowed and really stood out against his tan skin. Jade was right; this guy was truly gorgeous.

“Blueberry are my favorite,” he said.

“What?”

“Muffins.”

“Oh.”

Jade snorted but stayed silent, letting me take the brunt of this humiliation.

“And I’m not anti-social or a savant. I’m just a good old-fashioned prick...with supersonic hearing.”

He smirked and walked away before I could say anything.

When he was safely out of earshot—for real this time—Jade sighed.

“Angry guys are the best in bed.”

“You just can’t stop yourself, can you? Haven’t you done enough damage? I’ve always told you that you’re loud when you think you’re whispering. Now there’s proof...at my expense.”

“You’ll be thanking me later when you’re screaming out in orgasm as the angry artist is Van Goh-ing down on you.”

“You’re crazy.”

“That’s why you love me.”

“It is.”



We hope you enjoyed this extended preview!

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