

THE GOLDFISH BOY



Lisa Thompson

SCHOLASTIC INC.

For Mum and Lynne

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ARRIVAL

Mr. Charles had sunburn right on the top of his head.

I saw it while he was inspecting his roses. He studied each flower, giving the larger ones a little shake to see if any petals fell off as he edged along the pathway. The big, bald patch on his head was now a bright red, shiny circle surrounded by white, fluffy hair. He should have been wearing a hat in this heat, but I guess it's hard to notice if the top of your head is burning when you're busy doing things.

I noticed though.

I noticed a lot of things from the window.

It's not like I was doing anything wrong. I was just watching my neighbors to pass the time, that's all; it's not like I was being nosy. And I didn't think the neighbors minded. Occasionally Jake Bishop from number five would shout things up at me—things like *weirdo*, *freak*, or *nutter*. It had been a long time since he'd actually called me *Matthew*—but then, he was an idiot, so I didn't really care what he said.

I lived on a quiet, dead-end street in a town full of people who said how great it was that they didn't live in that big, smelly city of London—and who then spent most of their mornings desperately trying to get there.

There were seven houses in our little cul-de-sac. Six of them looked the same, with square bay windows, front doors with frosted glass panels, and whitewashed walls. But the seventh house, stuck between number three and number five, was very different. Built from blood-red bricks, the Rectory looked like a guest at a Halloween party where no one else had bothered to dress up. Its front door was black, with two triangular windows at the top that were covered from the inside with some old cardboard. Whether it had been put there to stop the drafts or to stop anyone from peering in, who knew?

Dad told me a developer had tried to flatten the Rectory twenty years before when our houses were being built, but it dug its hundred-year-old foundations in and somehow managed to stay, like a rotten, old tooth. The vicar's widow, Old Nina, still lived there, but I rarely saw her. There was a lamp in the front room window that she left on day and night: a glowing orange ball behind the gray curtains. Mum said she kept a low profile because she was frightened that someone from the church was going to make her move out, since with her husband dead, it wasn't really her house anymore. On her front step she had three pots of flowers that she watered every morning at ten o'clock.

I watched her and the other neighbors from the spare room at the front of the house. It wasn't quite as perfect as my bedroom, but I liked it in there. The lemon walls were still shiny-clean and it had that freshly decorated feel, even though it had been five years since it had happened. Mum and Dad called this room the office

since we kept the computer in there, but we all really knew it as the nursery. Hanging in a corner there was a baby's crib mobile made of six padded, stripy elephants, which dangled pointlessly over a tower of unopened boxes and shopping bags. Mum had put the mobile up as soon as she'd gotten home from her shopping marathon, even though Dad had said it was unlucky.

"Don't be silly, Brian. We need to make sure it works, don't we?"

She had wound the little key at the top and we'd all watched as the elephants twirled around and around to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." When the music had stopped I'd clapped—I was only seven then, and you do silly stuff like that when you're that age. Mum said she'd unpack the rest of the shopping another time, but she never did. The bags are still where she left them: diapers, bottles, a sterilizer, a monitor, tiny vests. Everything my baby brother would have needed if I hadn't . . . Well, if he were alive.

The office had a window that looked out onto the street, and I saw my neighbors begin their day:

9:30 a.m.—Mr. Charles is deadheading his roses again. He's using some new clippers with red handles. The top of his head looks sore with sunburn.

Mr. Charles could have been anything from sixty-five to ninety-five years old. He never seemed to get older. I figured he'd found an age he quite liked and just stopped right there.

9:36 a.m.—Gordon and Penny Sullivan appear from number one.

Gordon gets into their car as Penny waves to Mr. Charles from across the street.

Mr. Charles waved back and twirled his garden clippers on his finger like a cowboy, then snipped at the air three times, the silver blades glinting in the sunlight. Penny laughed. Her eyes squinted and she put her hand up to shade them, but then her face dropped. She'd spotted something: me. Mr. Charles followed her gaze and they both stared up at me, watching them from my window. I quickly stepped away and vanished from view, my heart thumping. I waited until I heard Gordon's car reverse out of the driveway and then looked out on the street again.

9:42 a.m.—Penny and Gordon leave to do their weekly supermarket shopping.

9:44 a.m.—Melody Bird appears from number three dragging their dachshund, Frankie, behind her.

It was the weekend, which meant it was Melody's turn to walk their dog. Her mum, Claudia, took him out during the week, but I didn't know why they bothered—he never seemed happy about it, and he spent the length of our road trying to turn back. Melody picked at the wool on the sleeve of her black cardigan as she walked along, stopping every three steps for the little dog to

catch up with her. She practically lived in that black cardigan, even though it was about a hundred degrees out there. They stopped at a lamppost while Frankie had a sniff before digging his paws in and trying to get home, but Melody dragged him onward, and they disappeared down the alleyway that led to the graveyard at the back of the Rectory.

9:50 a.m.-The door to number seven opens and the "newlyweds" appear.

Mr. Jenkins and his wife, Hannah, lived next door on the side we're not attached to. People called them the "newlyweds" even though they'd been married for nearly four years now. Hannah was always smiling, even when she didn't realize someone was watching her.

"I'm not sure it's good for you to run in this heat, Rory," she said, grinning away.

Mr. Jenkins ignored her as he reached his arm up high and stretched over to one side. He taught PE at my school, and in his opinion, anyone who didn't exercise regularly really had no reason to even exist. I tried my best to keep off his radar.

He lunged along their driveway in a tight white top and blue shorts, his hands on his hips.

"Don't be too long," Hannah said. "We've still got to decide on a car seat, remember?"

Mr. Jenkins grunted at her.

I looked down at the step and flinched when I saw her large, pregnant stomach. She rested her hand on top, patting herself rhythmically, and then she turned and disappeared into the house. I let go of a breath I'd been holding.

Mr. Jenkins set off toward High Street, waving at Mr. Charles, who was too busy with his flowers to notice. He studied each rose as they bobbed in the breeze like tight bundles of pink cotton candy on a fairground stall. Any that weren't up to scratch he snipped off and dropped into a plastic pot. When he was finished he walked back around the side of the house carrying the pot of dead roses.

10:00 a.m.-No sign of Old Nina watering her pots.

It was no surprise I hadn't seen her yet, considering how busy the close had been so far this morning.

The door of number five opened and a boy my age appeared. He walked down his driveway and looked in one direction only. Straight at me. This time I didn't duck away but stood my ground and stared back. Stopping in front of our house, he tipped his head back and made a grotesque, gagging noise before launching a great lump of phlegm onto our path. I gave him a slow handclap through the window, ignoring how sick I felt. He frowned when he saw my hands, and I quickly put them behind me. Giving our wall a good kicking, he turned and headed off down the street.

10:03 a.m.-Jake Bishop-still an idiot.

Once Jake had gone there wasn't much to see. Mr. Jenkins returned from his run, his white T-shirt dark with sweat. Penny and Gordon Sullivan unloaded eleven shopping bags from their trunk. Melody returned from her walk holding Frankie under one arm; the dog looked rather pleased with himself.

And then the cul-de-sac was still.

Until the Rectory door slowly opened.

10:40 a.m.-Old Nina is on her step looking very nervous. She has her little silver watering can in one hand.

The elderly lady was dressed in a black skirt, cream blouse, and peach cardigan. She trickled water into each pot for a count of five before moving on to the next one. As she did this her eyes flickered around the neighborhood. She'd just begun to water the final pot when a car turned onto the street. Leaving the watering can on the step she slipped back inside, slamming her heavy front door behind her.

The car driving slowly down the road was one of those that Dad would say costs "a small mortgage." It certainly didn't belong to any of the neighbors. It was so shiny our houses were reflected in its black doors as it circled the cul-de-sac, coming to a stop outside number eleven. I grabbed my notebook as I watched, waiting for the doors to open.

10:45 a.m.-There is a really posh black car on the close. I've never seen it before and it's parked right next door! Does Mr. Charles have a visitor?

I knew my neighbors' schedules inside and out; they didn't surprise me much. But this was something new. I tried to see inside the car, but it had heavily tinted windows so I couldn't make anything out. It hummed quietly for a while and then the engine was turned off. The driver's door opened.

A woman, wearing sunglasses that were so big they covered most of her face, got out and looked around the cul-de-sac. She brushed her hair from her face and then slammed the door shut. Mr. Charles appeared and walked quickly down his path, wiping his hands on the front of his shirt.

"Darling!" he said, stretching his tanned arms toward her.

"Hello, Dad."

She held him at a distance and turned her cheek for him to kiss, then she went to the car and opened the back door. A small girl of around six or seven climbed out carrying a porcelain doll. I stood closer to the window but could only catch a few words.

". . . must be Casey! And who's this? Is she coming to stay?"

Mr. Charles went to stroke the doll's hair, but the girl twisted around so it was out of reach. It looked like something from an antique shop, not a kid's toy. The woman in the big sunglasses emerged from the backseat of the car with a blond-haired boy who

she plonked down on the pavement. Mr. Charles held his hand out to the toddler.

“Pleased to meet you, Teddy. I’m your granddad.”

The boy cuddled a pale blue blanket, rubbing a corner against his cheek as he stared at the crinkly hand reaching toward him. The hand dangled there awkwardly between them, and then Mr. Charles gave up and went to help his daughter with the luggage. They talked for a while, but their backs were to me so I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

The woman put two black suitcases by the gate and then held each child’s face in her hands, saying something before giving them each a quick kiss on the forehead. Squeezing Mr. Charles on the arm, she got back into the car. The engine purred to life and the dark, shiny car drove slowly to the end of the road. The three of them stood there watching until it was out of sight.

“Right! Let’s get you two inside, shall we?”

Mr. Charles flapped his arms at the kids and herded them like sheep toward the house, his face a mad grin. The little boy stopped, still rubbing the blanket to his cheek as he reached for one of the roses next to the pathway.

“Ah, ah, ah, no touching!” said his grandfather and he waved his arms again, steering them in through the front door.

A minute later he was back, dragging the two black suitcases behind him. He glanced up at me and I quickly stepped away, but not before noticing his wide smile had vanished.