

# CONFESSIONS OF A NEIGHBOR

A NOVEL

HEATHER NADINE LENZ

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# PROLOGUE



**H**EART RACING, ELLA OPENED HER EYES. Black water was licking at her skin. The sheer force of the pain in her ears caused her to inhale sharply, holding her breath, tears streaming down her cheeks. She went to bring her hands up to her ears. She couldn't. Ella was certain there must be needles or knives thrust into her eardrums, so sharp was the pain screaming in her skull. A weight lay heavy on her chest, weighing her down onto the stones grinding themselves into her back. She needed to push herself free. But she couldn't move her fingers. It was dangerous to lie half-submerged in water in winter, and the cold was seeping its way steadily into her body. *You must claw your way up, out from under this weight, out of the water.*

Ella went to scream for help, but then muffled her own cry. Was someone out there in the darkness? Waiting. Watching to be sure she had died? Who had done this to her? What had happened?

Her body began to shake, fighting a battle against the cold water's leaching of the little warmth left in her frozen body. The indifferent sky stared down upon her, the stars glittering like so many jewels spread out across the blue oblivion of space. She willed her body to stop its shaking, fearing the slight splashing sound it made might give her away. He would come.

Ella prayed to every angel in the world to swoop down to still the trembling of her body and help her escape the icy claws of this monstrous lake. Her body went still. The gentle whispering of the waves against the lakeshore was soothing her, hypnotizing her into submission. The stabbing pain in her ears lessened, and the urge to move weakened. Her thoughts drifted and danced, spinning like so many spheres of memory and delusion.

In the remote distance, the rumbling of a cargo train echoed out over the lakefront. And then silence swallowed the world, save for the soft rippling of the water. Peace, a warm glow, spread through her, tingling along her skin. Her eyes were closing, the anguish of living and loving seeping out and away from her into the nothingness, the icy void.

Anneli.

Her baby.

A hunger was rushing into the void, an anger howling against indifference, snatching her awareness just in time from the sirens singing her toward permanent sleep. The heat of fury began scorching through the petrified body holding her hostage in the darkness. Move now, Ella, move now or you may never move again.

She managed to roll onto her side, her fingers still incapable of movement. For the first time Ella noticed the sailboat tied up a few feet away at the dock. She began crawling out of the water inch by inch, her clothes impeding her every move forward. Tearing at the wet and clinging shirt and jeans, she fought desperately to undress without the cooperation of her numb fingers.

At last freed from her garments, Ella tried to stand and fell promptly onto the ragged stones, cutting her feet, her hands, her knees. As silent sobs wracked her body, she crawled to the plastic dock, the pain of her bloody hands and knees searing through her with each inch forward.

At last Ella pulled herself up onto the plastic dock, lying bare beneath the dim glow of a sliver of moon. Within seconds of stillness, the cold slammed back into her body, leaving her breathless, gasping for air, hollowed out by the force of its impact. Her muscles contracted. Lying rigid like a pale corpse in the moonlight, Ella noticed her long, blond hair had already frozen in the night air. She was running out of time.

Rolling onto her stomach, she inched forward, one knee at a time, her elbows her best vehicle for forward momentum. At last she reached out an arm for the side of the sailboat and, pulling with all her might, fell headfirst inside.

Face pressed to the floor of the sailboat, she saw the cabin door. *My only hope for warmth.*

She desperately wanted to open the door to the cabin and hide herself away from the leaching cold of the night. She lifted her hand up, and it slid uselessly over the handle. Panicking, she realized she couldn't grasp the handle, her fingers traitors in their numbness. She tried to open the door with an elbow, again and again and again. Her thinking was clouding, her mental ability to process the world around her oozing out with every degree of body temperature she lost. She didn't realize the door was locked until a gleam of silver caught her eye beneath the seat. The key. The key was under the seat.

Collapsing to the floor on her stomach in complete exhaustion, Ella stared at the key. The cold air was stabbing once again like needles into her ears, her body screaming on the floor of the sailboat. Through the cloud enveloping her mind, Ella had an idea. She took the large key in her mouth. Pushing her way back to the door, she pushed the key into the lock. Grasping the key handle with her teeth, she attempted to turn the key.

Bitter, metallic blood rushed to fill her mouth as the key cut her tongue. The key gave a click. The door swung open and Ella fell inside the cabin. The last ounce of energy she had went into kicking the door shut. The force

of the door slamming caused an oar to fall in front of the door, locking the door from within.

There was a bunk above her, but Ella didn't have the energy to crawl up onto its comfort. Instead she pulled the blanket down with her feet, partially covering her bare body before fading away. e

# CHAPTER 1

**E**LATION WELLED UP WITHIN ELLA as she took to the center floor. Every muscle warm, a sheen of sweat on her face, a wellbeing and inner concentration offset the pain radiating in her knee. She looked forward to this class during her entire shift of waitressing at Flavor.

“Gorgeous, Ella. Try it again, dear, but raise your gaze. Yes. Great extension. Now, did everyone see Ella’s extension from her center, the way she made the move appear effortless? Okay, on to the next step,” said the teacher.

Ella’s attention snapped back into focus. Everything that had come before, all the uncertainty stretching out before her, the squishing of emotions inside her heart, the constant murmuring in her head, fell away. When she danced, she was weightless.

Ella gave a huge sigh of relief as she closed the door of her studio flat behind her. As she carefully locked the door and returned her things to their home on the shelf, the weight of the day fell from her shoulders. Rolling her head around, she made her way barefoot to the large windows of her apartment and opened them to the cool night air.

Pausing at the window, Ella looked out over the city, enjoying the breeze on her skin. Ella loved this time of day the best. The sun was sliding behind the horizon, taking her tension away with it, but not her loneliness. The sky was still bathed in pink, warm orange and grey blue, and she stood for a few moments, watching the moon in the distance rise, a few stars glimmering in the encroaching darkness.

She gazed across the street. He was hugging her in their kitchen. They were such a cute couple. Ella wondered if the wife realized how lucky she was, to have found love, to live in such a high design penthouse flat on the top floor, with a view out over the city, the lake, the Alps snow-covered in the distance. But above all, she wondered if her neighbor appreciated how lucky she was to be with him.

You could learn a lot about someone by watching them day in and day out. Most people are creatures of habit, and the neighbor was no exception. She knew, for instance, that he didn’t watch TV and he spent very little time on the internet. The first half an hour or so of his evening he spent talking with his wife, massaging her feet in his lap.

Afterward, he would read a book or work at the kitchen table, papers spread over its surface. In the spring and summer, he would come out onto their extensive terrace at around eight o’clock to garden in the raised designer boxes filled with vegetables, flowers, herbs, berry bushes and fruit trees. He was never lounging with guests in one of the sleek designer lawn chairs next to their cascading fountain. They never had anyone over for dinner or a drink, never.

Ella looked down at her watch. Good, it was a few minutes to nine. She would wait. At nine he stepped out onto the terrace. Ella watched him walk to the seven-by-twelve-foot endless pool, turn it on, and begin to swim into its river current. She knew he would swim for half an hour. Winter, ice, snow, rain or sun, it really didn’t seem to matter. He swam every day without fail, ever since she began noticing him across the street a year ago. She admired his willpower. Was the water heated? How did the water feel against his skin, his muscles straining with each stroke into the current? She could almost smell the chlorine, feel the air fresh on her face as she slid into the water with him beneath a star-clouded sky.

Ella sighed. The neighbor was a welcome escape from the fear crawling beneath her skin. Nausea hit Ella, and she ran to the bathroom. She had three days until her ballet audition. Money was so tight. The salary she earned waitressing was just enough to cover the rent, her other living expenses and her ballet classes. She hardly had enough to pay to travel to the audition.

Tears slipped down her cheeks as she walked out of the bathroom. She leaned against the wall and collapsed down in a heap, her face in her hands. Why did she have to do this all alone? Why did her mother and then her grandmother have to die, leaving her all alone at sixteen? Ella let herself fall into the grief, swim in it, until the sorrow lessened an inch. Taking a deep, shuddering breath, she rose from the floor. Wiping the tears away, she walked across the studio and placed a hand on the bar. It was time to take refuge. She should practice. Instead, she opened the cupboard and took out a bottle of vodka, pouring herself a huge glass. She returned with her drink to the window.

“Excuse me, is this seat taken?” asked a voice from behind her.

Ella jumped. She had been daydreaming, staring out the train window. She looked up to see a strikingly handsome man standing in front of her, broad shouldered and muscular, his blond hair cut short. Behind a pair of black glasses, intense green eyes looked at her, eyebrows raised. A slight smile teased at his lips. Ella realized her mouth had dropped open, her eyes wide. He looked even better up close than she had fantasized.

“Listen, I won’t bother you. I’m just interested in a cup of coffee on my way to work. Say, you look familiar. Have we met before?”

“Actually, I’m... um... No, we’ve never met.” Every cell within her was vibrating. Her face flushed red. Oh god, she almost told him she was his neighbor. Her hands began to tremble. Of all the trains in Switzerland, why did he have to be on this one, asking to sit at her table?

Pull yourself together, Ella. There is no way for him to know how many hours you have spent at your window, watching him.

"So why are you going to work on a Saturday?"

As soon as the words slipped out of her mouth, she regretted them. Of course plenty of people went to work on a Saturday, and anyway, what business of it was hers? Pulling off her hat and raking her hands through her hair, she realized he was still standing there, designer messenger laptop bag in hand, waiting for her answer.

She motioned at the chair, speechless, and took her favorite book out from her bag, pretending to be absorbed. How could her neighbor be on the same train, in the same compartment with her? Didn't he work in Zürich? Shouldn't he be off somewhere enjoying the day with his wife?

"You sound like my wife," he answered with a sigh, sinking into the chair beside her and taking out his laptop. "But I have to admit, I love my job. And when you are in phytotherapy research and development, the work feels limitless."

Ella looked up from her book. Her pulse was starting to revolve faster, like an engine revving.

"I've never heard of phytotherapy," Ella answered, tilting her head to the side and smiling.

A sparkle came to her neighbor's eye as he broadened across the chest and leaned toward her, hands on the table. "Phytotherapy is the evidence-proven production of plant-based medicines."

"You mean herbal remedies?"

"What? No." He slammed the table for emphasis, and Ella startled at his intensity. "My plant-based medicines are tested in clinical trials for the efficacy and safety in comparison to placebos as well as other standard treatments. After passing clinical trials and regulatory approval from the health authorities, they are manufactured under the most stringent quality conditions." Owen gestured dramatically with his hands, emphasizing each point.

Ella decided there was something very sexy about a man passionate for his career, and yet his earnestness amused her at the same time. The man was gorgeous, with his blond hair and startling green eyes, not to mention the smooth, muscular physique. And he was taller than her. Most men weren't. But watching him from afar, she had imagined him, well, different. She had painted him as the strong, silent, smug type. A smile played at the corners of her mouth. He was kind of a nerd. She liked that.

"You sound very passionate about your work. I'll let you get back to it," she said, motioning to his open laptop.

Ella returned her eyes to her book, acutely aware of the presence of the man across the table from her.

"Would you like anything?"

"What?"

"Would you like anything else?"

Only then did Ella register the waiter at her side. "Oh, yes, a weizen beer please."

"We only have those in half a liter..."

"That's fine."

Ella knew she shouldn't drink, but her nerves were jangling like a huge loop of keys, and she wanted to quiet them before they attracted attention.

"Tell you what, bring me one as well," said the man across from Ella. "That's my favorite beer."

A moment later the waiter returned with the beer bottles in his hands and two glasses. While pouring the second glass, the train tilted and the waiter lost his balance, spilling beer all over Ella's hardback book. In a flurry of apology and napkins, Ella stood stock still, staring at the last book her grandmother had gifted her before she died. Two tears slipped down her cheek.

"I'll bring you a new beer, on the house, I'm so sorry," called the waiter as he returned to the kitchenette.

"It was a gift, wasn't it?"

Ella looked up and nodded at the neighbor. "How did you know?"

"Because no one cries over an old book unless it has a special value to them, not unless it was a first edition or something."

"It was."

"It was what?"

"It was a first edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring*. And the last birthday present I received from my Grandma before she died."

"Good grief, how much does something like that cost?" he asked, already reaching for his phone and beginning a Google search. "That book didn't really cost thousands of Swiss francs, did it?"

Ella just shrugged her shoulders in response. Of course she knew the book was valuable. She had all three hardback volumes of *The Lord of the Rings* in perfect condition. Well, perfect condition until today. Ella gazed down at her beer-soaked book. She didn't care about the worth of the book. Its value was priceless. She was holding one of her Grandmother's most beloved possessions, a gift she herself had received from her father. Every time Ella picked up the book, she could almost hear her Grandmother's voice reading aloud. How many hours did Ella lie nestled at her Grandma's side as a girl, listening to her Grandma read this novel aloud?

The waiter brought back a freshly poured beer and set it down on the table, and Mr. Gorgeous mumbled something. Ella didn't look up from her book. She was far away in a place where her Grandma's voice echoed and she was cocooned in safety and love. A moment later, the damp book was being taken out of her hands.

"Here, let me help you."

Ella sat with tear-stained cheeks as her neighbor carefully tore off ten paper towels from a roll, folded them in half with precision and placed them with care between the wet leaves of her book. As he was placing the last paper towel between the pages, he reached a hand across the table and said, "I'm Owen, by the way. Owen Meier."

Slipping her hand into his, she gave a strong shake and let go, wondering at the calluses on his palm and finger as she let go. Where did he acquire those calluses? She knew he gardened and swam, but that wouldn't produce those toughened hands. Her foot began tapping, her very being jolting with unspent nervous energy.

"How did you know how to salvage my wet book?"

"I googled it," he smiled, while tapping his iPhone on the table. "You won't be able to get thousands for that

book trilogy now. However, you will be able to read it just fine. That is, if you don't mind the smell of beer."

"Thank you." Ella glanced up at him from beneath her long eyelashes, and then smiled down at the table, her fingers playing with her hair.

He winked at her while interlacing his fingers and placing them behind his head. But as he leaned back in his chair, relaxed power and superiority playing out of his movements, he knocked into the woman sitting at the table behind him, causing her to spill her coffee all over her lap and the white tablecloth.

Ella laughed at loud, the merriment bubbling up inside her, a sudden release for all her tension, worry, and fear. Owen turned around to the old woman. She noticed his ears had turned bright red, as well as the back of his neck, which he was rubbing while apologizing to the grey-haired woman behind him. Ella sat bemused as her neighbor handed the small woman a bunch of paper towels and insisted on buying her a new cup of coffee. He turned back to her with flinty eyes and a clenched jaw, but seeing the smile fade from her face, his features softened.

"Scalding a sweet old woman with coffee is funny?"

"What, no. No, I'm sorry. It was just the sudden change in your expression and the fact that it was the second beverage spilling in a matter of minutes."

"Yes, well. If they didn't put these tables so close together, it would have never happened. I've never read The Lord of the Rings books before by the way. Is it any good? I don't read very much. I don't have the time." He tapped his laptop.

"One of the best stories ever written," she said, her heart beating faster. She didn't know what in the world he was talking about. He spent hours reading a book every week, usually with a glass of red wine in one hand. She had seen him. Her cheeks burned at the thought of watching him from afar.

What would he think if he knew how much I know about him? How can he be sitting across from me now?

"So where are you headed today?" Leaning in and placing his arms on the table, he caught her gaze and held it. "Looks like you are going on a holiday."

"Greenland." Ella gave a small start. Why did she lie? She was going to an audition at the Stuttgart Ballet Germany.

"Excuse me, did you say Greenland?" Owen furrowed his brow, tapping his lips with his finger. "Interesting. Why Greenland?"

"I'm visiting my mother." Ella plastered a carefree smile on her face. She hoped it said, 'I am so excited and happy' instead of, 'my heart is beating so fast and hard it feels like an airplane engine just before takeoff.'

"Wow, that will be an experience. Where are you from by the way? You look familiar somehow."

The air whooshed out of her lungs. "Um," Ella looked out the window. "Zürich."

"Yeah? Me too."

She looked up from the table into his green eyes, and he smiled, a dimple showing on his cheek. Ella relished the nuances of seeing the neighbor up close. She couldn't see from far away what a seductive grin he had. How many times did she fantasize about meeting him in person, to see the color of his eyes, hear the baritone of his laugh, perhaps even feel the warmth radiating from his skin?

"So what do you do for fun?"

"I dance ballet."

He looked her over, and she blushed under his appraisal.

"Alright, sure, I can see it," he said, the lines around his eyes creasing when he smiled. "Long legs, long arms, long neck. You have prima ballerina written all over you."

Ella couldn't help but smile back, pushing her hair back from her face.

"And you?" she asked after a long pause. He raised his eyebrows at her, the smile still on his face. "What is your deal exactly?"

"I'm not sure what you mean," he answered, frowning. He leaned in, placing his elbows on the table.

She fought her instinct to lean back in her chair. He was so close she could smell his aftershave. "I mean, what do you do for fun?"

"Drink beer with pretty women, such as yourself."

Ella looked down at the table. Was he flirting with her? Yes, she decided. She had experienced enough flirtatious banter while waitressing to recognize it.

"Okay, I swim. And row on a year-round rowing team."

Ella nodded. Well, that explained the calluses. "Isn't it too cold half the year to go rowing?"

Owen ran his hand through his blond hair and winked at her, giving a satisfied smile. "Not for me. The cold doesn't stop me. Just call me a polar bear."

"Oh yeah, a real tough guy huh?" She began laughing out loud. She wondered if he really did have a love for the outdoors, or if he was working to offset his nerdy side with athleticism and an attempt at being macho.

Ella thought she glimpsed flinty anger, a coldness behind Owen's eyes surface. It was gone so quickly she couldn't be sure.

"Well, Kreuzlingen, this is me. Time to do some rowing."

"I thought you were going to work?"

"Yeah, I'll head back to Zürich to the office straight from rowing. It was nice to meet you, Ella," he answered, holding out his hand. "Maybe we will run into each other in Zürich someday."

"How do you know my name?" she asked.

"Oh," he answered while running a hand through his hair. "It's written in your book."

She stood to move her small suitcase out of his way just as the train came to an abrupt final stop, causing Owen to lose his balance and pitch forward into her arms, knocking the wind out of her.

"I'm so sorry. Wow, uh," he muttered, running his hand yet again through his hair. "You okay?"

"Sure. I'm tough like a polar bear."

Owen looked at her quizzically and then laughed. "I enjoyed talking to you, Ella." He gave a dazzling smile. "Have a nice trip," he called over his shoulder, as he made his way down the stairs and off the train.

Ella watched Owen stride from the train. All of a sudden, he stopped midstride, turned, and looked back at

the train with a hand shielding his eyes from the sun. She waved at him through the window.

Ella let out a huge sigh to expel some of her nervousness as she slid into the splits. She had been to numerable auditions in the past year all over Europe. Each time she had failed to secure a place in a ballet company.

A wry smile came to her face. As a child, auditions were a source of gaiety. The pressure was minimal. There was a new leotard always waiting on her bed when she awoke on audition day. There was the post-audition ice-cream sundae celebration to look forward to with her mother and grandmother.

This was her fourth audition. She knew her technique was impressively clean and precise. And yet, she had already faced three rejections. She didn't know how she could take one more. Ella looked around the room at her competition as everyone lined up at the barre. Why did everyone look so calm?

Ella moved to position herself so that she could clearly see the director at the front, but she was crowded back by other dancers. Lifting up on her toes to see, she was suddenly pushed from behind and fell forward with a crash on her hands and knees. Everyone turned to stare at her, before the director continued showing the steps for the dancers to execute. No one offered to help her up to her feet.

When it was Ella's turn to join a line of dancers and present the choreography, there was sweat beading on her forehead. Her palms were sweaty. What was she going to do? When she was sent sprawling on the floor, she hadn't seen a few of the steps of the dance. Looking at the dancers out of the corner of her eye, she improvised the few steps she didn't know. Her face was set in a grimace of concentration as she stepped forward on pointe while doing a grand port de bras into a powerful backbend.

After the audition, Ella drank in huge draughts of cold air as she hurried to the train. She didn't need to wait in anticipation for the letter to come. She knew her performance had held no artistry, and her limbs, usually all grace and elongated body lines, had been tight and rigid with fear of failure. Ella hurried to the train station, the streets a blur through her tears. A bone-aching fatigue pulled on her body as she slumped onto a seat in the train. Why were her shoulders clenched and her arm movements forced instead of ease and lightness? Fear had made her freeze up and dance like a novice, instead of a professional.

That was the last ballet audition she could afford, and she had failed. It would take her months to save up for the expense of traveling to another one. She closed her eyes. Maybe she should just give up.

Ella took a drink and refilled her glass with vodka. Her Grandma would be so disappointed. She hadn't danced all week since her failed audition. She had quit high school. Sure, her flat was sparkling clean, and she was perfectly put together. She showed up every day at work on time and ready to work hard. But the rest? That was too much. Her espresso in the morning was tasteless. Such a weight was weighing down on her heart.

Ella let her cheek fall against the glass of the window. One floor below her, across the street, Ella spied a faint outline in the pool of light emitted from a laptop in their home office. She was working again. No surprise there. He was sitting on the sofa, reading something with a glass of red wine in one hand. She could see he was laughing out loud. A warmth filled her, and she smiled. She liked a man who could laugh out loud at something in a book.

In fact, she found everything about this neighbor attractive, from his blond, wavy hair to his glasses. All at once, loneliness was running toward her, a pack of wolves in the moonlight gliding toward their prey. If they had each other within reach, why did they spend so much time apart?