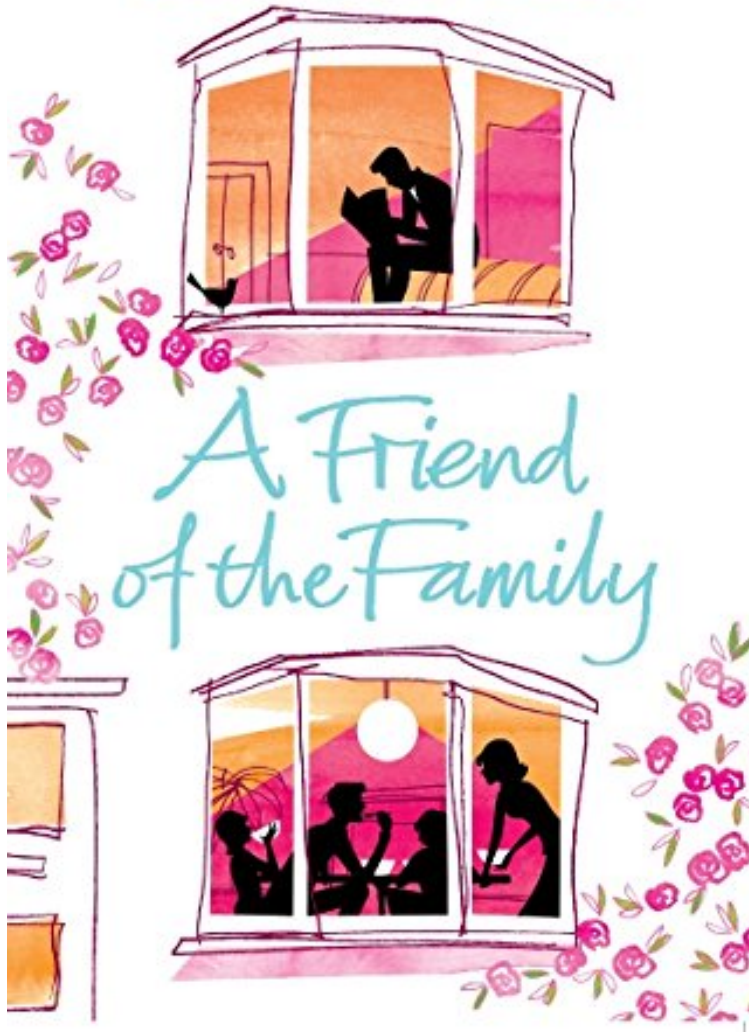


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A Friend of the Family

'Terrific stuff, touching, funny, sentient' *SUNDAY TIMES*

LISA JEWELL



Par Lisa Jewell

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurMeet the Londons, a family in need of a friend ...Gerry and Bernie London are proud parents of Tony, Sean and Ned, three wayward lads whose lives have suddenly reached crisis points:Newly divorced Tony is fantasizing about someone he really shouldn't; prize-winning novelist Sean's got a hot new girlfriend and a dose of writer's block; and Ned's just back from Australia, without the girl he took with him - or a clue what he's going to do with his life.If that wasn't enough for one household, the Londons also have a new lodger - a mysterious rockabilly called Gervase. Will he turn out to be a friend - or foe - to the family?ExtraitBernie slid the microphone on to its stand and took a bow, smiling as the small crowd in the Beulah Tavern whistled and cheered.Roger leapt on to the stage and leant into the mike.'Ladies and

gentlemen, a warm and wondrous thank you to our star turn tonight - the very beautiful lady with the very big lungs! The talented, the supreme, the incomparable Miss Bernie London. She'll be here again next Wednesday to sing the old songs and to give us a bit more winter cheer. So don't miss it!'Bernie grinned again and headed straight for the bar, where Roger already had a gin and lemon waiting for her. She pulled her Silk Cut Ultras from her handbag and leant back against the bar, releasing a little of the tightness from the strappy sandals around her swollen feet. Bernie had been singing at the Tavern for nearly three years now, ever since Roger had taken over the licence, ripped out the twirly carpets, the tatty tapestry upholstery and reproduction Turners and turned the Tavern into 'Crystal Palace's Most Exciting Music Venue'. It was, Bernie was perfectly able to admit to herself, nothing of the sort - it was just a nice local pub that happened to feature live music a few times a week, mainly Irish bands with names like The Ceilidhs or old rock-and-roll singers in threadbare drapes with wilting white quiffs. Bernie sang what she liked to call Lounge Songs: 'Cry Me A River', 'The Way You Look Tonight', 'I Say A Little Prayer', 'Whatever Lola Wants'. Roger, now back behind the bar, lit her cigarette, gave her a wink through large round spectacles and then moved away to serve someone else. Bernie settled herself on a bar stool. She loved this part of the evening -the fifteen minutes after her set when she sat alone with her gin and lemon and a fag and was just Bernie, a middle-aged woman in a black spangly dress and cubic-zirconium earrings who could sing well enough to get paid for it. A big-boned, bosomy woman with great legs, a little bit heavy around the waist now but with the thick, corn-coloured hair and sharp cheekbones of an older Geraldine James. She loved these fleeting moments of solitude when she wasn't her husband's wife or her sons' mother. Bernie always had the feeling that if her life was ever going to change it would change now, during one of these brief windows of possibility in her otherwise structured existence. When she'd finished her drink and smoked another cigarette she'd call Gerry and he'd walk round to meet her, then they'd wander home hand in hand and her real life would begin again. Bernie loved her real life, but she'd miss these moments if they were ever denied her. She bent down to rub at her tender, stockinged feet. She really wasn't used to wearing heels any more, even though she'd practically lived in them when she was younger. Now they were just for Wednesday nights and special occasions. As she straightened up, a figure at the far side of the pub caught her eye. A young man, all in black. A nice-looking man? Bernie couldn't tell from this distance. He was very pale and Bernie caught the glimmer of silver in his lobes. She was sure she'd seen him here last week, too, sitting at the same table. He smiled at her, then, the self-conscious smile of someone unaccustomed to smiling. For some reason, Bernie found herself smiling back. Bernie didn't usually have much time for the sort of men who hit on her in pubs. But there was something about this guy, the set of his shoulders, the shape of his head, the way he moved. Something reassuring. He picked up his drink and wended his way around the tables to join her at the bar. Bernie's fingertips went immediately to her earlobe, twisting the little chunk of zirconium. 'Great voice,' he said, sliding his drink next to hers on to the bar. Close up, the man revealed himself to be anywhere between twenty-five and forty. His mouth was thin, his eyes heavy-lidded, and his hair was a jet-black flat-top, the likes of which Bernie hadn't seen since the fifties. He was wearing a scuffed black leather jacket, tight black jeans and a thin grey T-shirt with some kind of wash-faded graphics on it. He had a faded cobweb tattoo across his neck, a skull-and-crossbones ring on his middle finger, a flashy buckle on his belt and a missing tooth that Bernie didn't notice until he smiled at her and said, 'How long've you been singing, then?' 'Longer than you've been alive,' she said with a laugh, exhaling and stubbing out her cigarette. Bernie sensed that she should have felt uncomfortable, but she really didn't. There was something about this young lad something familiar, compelling almost - that made him seem like the sort of person her fifteen-minute breathers were meant for. 'You all right, Bernie?' said Roger, suddenly appearing, owl-like, at her side. 'Yeah,' she said lightly, 'fine.' 'Let me buy you another drink,' said the man. Bernie looked at her watch. Gerry would be expecting her phone call around now. But then again, knowing Gerry, he was probably so wrapped up in the candelabra he was polishing that he wouldn't have noticed the time. 'Yeah,' she said, 'why not. I'll have a gin and lemon, please.' She eyed up the man's profile as he waited for Roger to serve him. His cheeks were slightly pock-marked and Bernie suddenly saw him as the spotty, awkward adolescent he'd once been. The black leather and the tattoo and the dyed hair were just a costume. He was no hard man, she thought, just a little boy, like her boys, like all boys. Bernie felt the familiar maternal throb in her chest. 'Saw you here last week,' she said, accepting her drink, 'all on your own then, too, you were. What's the matter with you got no mates?' The man laughed and offered Bernie a cigarette. 'Nah,' he said, 'not round here, anyway.' 'Just moved to the area?' 'Yup.' 'Where from?' 'Round and about,' he stopped to light her cigarette and then looked her straight in the eye. 'What about you? You a local?' She nodded, wanting to tell him that she lived just around

the corner on Beulah Hill, but stopping herself. 'Alone?' She laughed. 'Not quite. With Gerry, my husband.' 'Kids?' 'Yeah. Three boys.' She paused. 'It's funny. I never really wanted a girl. Always felt more comfortable around men.' He nodded. 'What sort of age are they, then, your boys?' 'Well,' she began, 'Tony's, the eldest. He's thirty-four. Sean's the middle. He's just turned thirty. And then there's Ned - the baby, he's . . . what is he? Twenty-six, Twenty-seven? What year is it?' '2001.' She counted off on her fingers. 'Twenty seven next month.' She smiled with relief. It didn't feel right, not knowing how old your son was. But then it had been a long time since they'd celebrated his birthday together. 'Proud of them all?' Bernie thought of her boys - her beautiful boys. Of course she was proud of them. It was all she could do to stop herself exploding all over the place with pride. Tony was a successful business man, ran his own greeting-card company that he'd set up from scratch in a room in his flat when he was twenty-one. He employed twenty people now and had a lovely house in Anerley. Well, it was more of a flat, really - he hadn't been able to afford a house after the divorce - but it was very nice, overlooking a park with off-street parking and video cameras all over the place. She was a bit worried about him right now. He didn't seem to have got back on track after the divorce. Bernie couldn't put her finger on what was wrong; he just didn't seem quite himself. And then there was little Ned - not so little any more, over six foot tall and as thin as a reed. He was the brains of the family, went to university, got a first in history of art, even worked at Sotheby's for a while. But then he and Carly split up - Bernie gulped at the thought; it still felt like a death - and he'd run off to Australia with some girl he'd met in a sports bar in Leicester Square and they hadn't seen him in nearly three years. Three years. He was working at an Internet cafe in Sydney, apparently, wasting his degree. But he'd be back one day, she was sure of that, back home where he belonged. And he'd make something of himself then. He had so much potential, that boy, it was just oozing out of him. And then there was Sean. The jewel in her filial crown. Not that she'd ever admit it to anyone other than herself, of course; mothers aren't allowed to have favourites. He had been a bit of a worry there for a while, her Sean, a bit wild, a bit troublesome. Middle children always are, she supposed. He hadn't really stuck at anything, had a different girlfriend every five minutes, each one better-looking than the last (he was her best-looking child, it had to be said). But then he'd written this book, a couple of years ago. He hadn't told anyone he was writing it - well, not his family, anyway - and all of a sudden some publisher had written him out a cheque for 50,000 and the next thing she knew he was in all the papers and everyone was talking about him, and it was her boy. Her little Seany! She still couldn't quite believe it. His book - *Half a Man*, it was called - was about a boy whose twin brother dies in car crash and how he goes mad, after, and starts killing people. She didn't know where Sean got his idea from, she really didn't. It wasn't from her, that was for sure - she had no imagination whatsoever - and as for Gerry... It was a good book, though. He'd biked her over an advance copy one Tuesday morning and she'd taken the day off work and read it in one sitting. A bit too much drug-taking for her liking, and an over-liberal use of the 'c' word, but a good book. The hardback had sold, what was it, something like 8,000 copies and the paperback had come out in the summer and was still in the top twenty now, thirty weeks later. Sean was something of a celebrity these days and oh God, was Bernie proud. She couldn't quite believe what she'd done. She'd produced a bestselling novelist! From within her own body. And she was prouder than any woman had a right to be. Bernie never had any grand ambitions for her boys, never expected them to go to university, to make anything more out of life than she and Gerry had managed. A nice house, a happy family, a few quid in the bank. All she'd ever wanted for her boys was that they be good boys. And, if she could blow her own trumpet for a moment, she'd done a bloody good job on them. They were fine, fine boys, her boys, each and every one of them. Of course every mother thinks her sons are perfect, but hers really were. She honestly couldn't fault them. Bernie turned to the black-haired man and smiled. 'Proud as punch,' she said with a laugh and a wink, 'but what mother isn't?' 'So. Are you a happy family, then?' 'What sort of question is that?' 'A very interesting one.' Bernie smiled. 'Yeah,' she said, 'we're a very happy family. We've been lucky. They're good boys, my boys very good boys.' They fell silent for a moment. 'And what about you?' she said. 'Have you got any kids?' 'Yeah,' he said. 'Well, sort of. I've got a boy. He'd be about sixteen by now, I guess.' 'Lost contact?' He scratched the back of his neck. 'Yeah. Long time ago. The mother didn't want to have anything to do with me.' Bernie gulped and laid a hand on the man's arm. 'You poor thing.' 'Yeah,' he said. 'Well, you end up paying for your mistakes in life one way or another, don't you?' 'Whats his name?' 'Charlie.' 'Nice name.' 'Dyou think? I hate it. Sometimes wonder if I'd recognize him now. You know? If I saw him on the street or something. My own son.' They fell silent again. 'Look,' he said, picking up his drink and draining it, 'I don't want to get in your face or anything. I just really wanted to tell you how great your voice is. You're very talented.' 'Bless you,' said Bernie, 'that's very kind and I appreciate it. Will I see you next week?' 'The

man's face suddenly softened. 'Yeah,' he said, 'deffo. I'll be here. My name's Gervase by the way.' Bernie grinned at him. 'You don't look like a Gervase,' she said. 'No,' he said, 'I don't, do I? I sometimes think that I was never supposed to have been a Gervase. You know, in a parallel reality and all that. D'you know what I mean?' Bernie smiled and nodded. 'Thanks for the chat, Bernie. See you next week yeah?' 'Yeah,' smiled Bernie, 'see you next week.' He nodded at her, and smiled his awkward smile, before forcing his hands into the tight pockets of his jeans and sauntering out of the pub and into the chill of the January night. *Revue de presse* "Sparkling." *Seattle Weekly* "A subtle dissection of the modern world, this is the perfect summer read." *Marie Claire, UK* "Funny and emotionally satisfying." *The Times, London*