

Chapter 1

'Stevie Nicks is a legend!'

'What?' Daisy, who sat nearest the door and whose job it should have been to say this coded warning, looked up, eyes blank as buttons.

'Stevie Nicks,' Helen hissed again, *'is a legend!'* She already had her coat on, ready to go home, and her arms were filled with a bouquet of M&S Finest Seasonal Blooms, a bottle of Buck's Fizz and a box of Honey Dust Kissable Body Powder. Still she managed to jab her elbow in the direction of the corridor.

The penny dropped. Daisy grabbed her mug, making a show of drinking from it. So did Anne. And Tina. Then, along with Helen, they all turned and beamed at Dr Ross, who was now standing in the doorway having seemingly forgotten why she was there.

'Anything you need?' Helen asked lightly.

'No,' Dr Ross managed. 'Umm...lovely flowers, Helen. Birthday?'

'Yes. Well...tomorrow.'

'She'll be fifty!' Tina offered, mug at her lips.

Dr Ross narrowed her eyes at Tina's mug. 'Really?' she said. 'I...' And abruptly she closed her mouth and turned to go.

'Was there anything else?' Helen called.

'No.' Dr Ross turned. Looking straight at Helen, she smiled and said, 'Nothing at all. Have a lovely birthday.' And this time she did go.

Daisy, having downed a mouthful of tea, spat it back out. ‘Ugh! Stone cold.’

‘Worth it, though.’ Anne grinned. She put her own mug back on her desk. ‘No one messes with Helen. Isn’t that right?’

Helen smiled. Dr Ross had been with the surgery for approximately three weeks, stalking corridors like an extra in *The West Wing*, on the prowl for improvements that she needed to be seen to make. All to pave her way up to senior partner, Helen supposed. She didn’t really care. She’d been here long enough to see more young ambitious doctors than she cared to remember come and go, along with their various improvements. But this latest diktat had been so ridiculous – such an obvious example of change for the sake of change – she’d felt obliged to respond. Reception staff were no longer permitted to bring coffee mugs to their desks. Nine pounds an hour they earned! Primark (Daisy said) paid better! And of course, because Helen was the oldest and the longest-serving, it had been up to her to lead the fightback. Which she had, with relish, inventing this signal phrase to act as a warning system. (It had taken some rehearsing. None of the others seemed to know who Stevie Nicks was. *Is she on Spotify?* Daisy had asked. *Of course not!* Helen had responded, ten seconds before Tina had opened the app and found her. Which had left Helen with an all too familiar feeling nowadays, that sense of arriving at a party, just as everyone else was leaving.) Two days the fightback had been going, and she couldn’t, judging by Dr Ross’s face just now, imagine it needing to be continued come Monday. So why didn’t she feel victorious?

‘Have a lovely birthday!’

‘Don’t do anything I wouldn’t!’

‘Behave now!’

The voices of her colleagues rang out after her as Helen opened the door and stepped into a cold April evening. *Don’t do anything I wouldn’t?* Either her colleagues lived

extraordinarily dull lives or her public persona was a lot more exciting than her private one. Because her first and only stop for the evening was Asda. Then home, *Poirot*, bed. And even Anne, who used Fridays to swap out her foil-wrapped sandwiches for a takeaway Cornish pasty, could probably beat that end-of-week line-up. Sighing, Helen tipped the flowers and the bottle and the Kissable Body Powder onto the passenger seat, fell into the driver's side and turned the rear-view mirror to her face. Fifty. What possible use was Kissable Body Powder ever going to be?

The circuit of Asda didn't take long. She was, after all, pleasing herself. No rainbow of vegetables to pick out for fussy children, no super-lean protein sources for overachieving husbands, and – since she didn't have sex any more – no low-calorie insipidity either. Into her basket went a tub of hummus and a packet of tortilla chips, a giant slab of Cadbury Dairy Milk and a bottle of Chablis. The fizzy stuff could wait for tomorrow. It bloated her out and made her fart, and she needed to be slimmer tomorrow than she was today. Caro would be. Caro would be as slim as a pin.

With dinner sorted, she made a pit stop by the magazines to throw in a copy of *Hello*, then wandered over to the freezer section and found a bag of part-baked pains au chocolat. Perfect. She was almost at the till before she remembered the real reason she'd come in. Milk. There were many things that Jack, her eighteen-year-old son, could not be trusted with, and number one on that very long list was not to have drunk all the milk. And tea without milk, on the morning of her fiftieth birthday, might bring the curtain down on her second act before it had even begun. Suddenly and inexplicably sweating like a racehorse, she yanked her jacket off and hurried back to the chiller section. Lately her body seemed to do this. Transformed itself, with zero warning, into a pizza oven – no temperature control whatsoever. Off it went, a towering inferno against which Marks & Spencer breathable tights

had no defence. Damp in all the wrong places and struggling to shed layers, she didn't, as she bumped along, hear from the depths of her handbag the low and ominous thrum of her phone.

Back home, elbows for hands, she wedged the front door open and bludgeoned the hall light on.

'Jack?'

Jack? Her voice echoed back, and the note of hopefulness was unmistakable. If he wasn't home, she didn't have to cook him anything. And if she didn't cook him anything, she wouldn't eat his leftovers, or pick from the pan... The dress she had for lunch tomorrow with Kay and Caro was tight enough anyway. A couple of glasses of wine and an early night (maybe half the Cadbury) were exactly what the zipper needed.

She sighed, the kind of giant-sized sighs her mother used to make, and went into the kitchen where, camouflaged by the semi-gloom, Jack jumped up and shouted:

'Surprise!'

Helen screamed, and the bottle of Buck's Fizz slipped from her hand, shattering on the terracotta tiles.

'Bloody hell, Jack!' she yelled, watching as the patch of sticky orange spread. It looked for all the world like orange juice – which it was, mostly. Thank God it wasn't the Chablis.

'Sorry.' Jack stuck his hands in his pockets. He was taller than her, as lanky as his dad and irresistibly handsome to every eighteen-year-old girl within a five-mile radius. 'It was meant to be a joke,' he mumbled, watching Helen dump her things and bend to pick up the broken glass. 'What's for dinner?'

Over a hunched shoulder, Helen looked at him. 'Haven't a clue.'

'I'm just asking.'

‘Well, how about you don’t ask?’

‘What? I can’t even ask what’s for dinner nowadays without you getting angry?’

She straightened up. ‘No, Jack. At this particular moment you can’t ask what’s for dinner. Without. Me. Getting. Angry.’

‘You don’t even like Buck’s Fizz,’ Jack shrugged.

‘That,’ she hissed as she slammed her handbag on the table, ‘is not the point!’

‘And you’re always in a mood!’

‘I’m not always—’

But he’d gone.

As simply as that. Off and out of the house as only a teenage boy can. Helen stood, hands on hips, staring at the mess. He was right. She didn’t like shop-bought Buck’s Fizz (who did?) and she was always in a mood.

In the hallway, the home phone began to ring. Thanks to the special jingle tone that Libby, her daughter, had programmed to denote that it would be her ringing, Helen knew who it was before she’d picked it up. Libby. Surprise! *So you won’t be worried, Mum*, Libby had explained at the time. Helen hadn’t had the heart to say that she never had been – and had now resigned herself to the fact that she never would be – worried. Libby had been born sensible (at 4.30 – half an hour before the five o’clock feed and a good early night). She was currently in her final year at university studying Politics and Modern History. Putting the world to rights, thinking local, not global. Starting with as local as it came: her own mother.

Helen sighed – another mother-sized sigh. Did she have the energy for her daughter? Had she ever had the energy for her daughter? Her finger wavered over the phone. There wouldn’t be another chance to speak, though. Libby had an all-day thing on tomorrow. Launching a “plastic attack” outside Tesco, which sounded as much fun as shopping *in* Tesco. The idea of setting an alarm to go and stand outside a supermarket on a Saturday

morning befuddled Helen. (When she was a student, Saturday mornings hadn't actually existed.) And then, of course, tomorrow was also her birthday lunch, which hopefully would turn into an all-day thing as well. She answered the call.

'Hi, Mum. Had a good day?'

Had a good day? 'Well, I didn't die,' she said.