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JACKIE KABLER

THEIR LIFE  
SEEMS  
PERFECT...  
BUT IS IT?



*The*

HAPPY  
FAMILY

# The Happy Family

JACKIE KABLER



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## Chapter 1

When I think about my mother, I mostly think about the crying. She cried a lot, my mum. Then again, so did I, because I lost her when I was ten years old. I don't mean she died; at least, I *assume* she's still alive. And when I say I *lost* her, I don't mean I lost her like you'd lose your mobile phone, or your purse. I mean, I can definitely be a bit forgetful at times, but even *I'd* struggle to mislay a whole actual person. When I say I lost her, I mean she just ... disappeared. Walked out. Abandoned me. Abandoned *us*.

I'm not sure why I'm thinking about her now, why she's come into my head unbidden on this busy Thursday morning as I lock my Audi and hurry across the car park. I try not to think about her at all and, generally, I succeed. But when Dad and I were chatting the other day he, who never mentions her either, suddenly remembered that next month would be her sixtieth birthday, and ever since ...

I stop to check for traffic on the road that separates our car park from the surgery building and shake my head to banish the pointless musing. What does it matter that she has a big birthday coming up? That is, if she really *is* still alive, because after all, who knows?

She hasn't been in touch for thirty years. *It's not as if I'm suddenly going to get a party invite in the post, is it?* I think, and sigh.

It's just started to rain, the weather chilly for March, the sky slate grey, and as I push the front door open, head through the still-empty reception area, and turn left towards the staffroom, I sigh again, remembering the long to-do list waiting on my desk. Then I smile as the sound of raucous laughter drifts down the corridor.

Ruth's in early.

I open the staffroom door and step inside. Our head receptionist is perched on one end of the long table in the centre of the room, still laughing, wearing a bright-green blouse with a string of coloured beads around her neck.

‘Beth! Oh Beth, you’ve got to hear this!’

Ruth waves her coffee mug at me, then gestures at Lorraine, one of the practice nurses, who’s sitting on a chair next to her.

‘RUTH! Are you going to tell *everyone*?’ Lorraine says, then groans and gives a resigned shrug. ‘Oh, go on, then. Not going to be able to stop you, am I?’

‘You’re not. You know what she’s like. And it *is* hilarious. Morning, Beth.’

Deborah, head of our nursing team, who’s over at the kettle making herself a drink, grins at me. I dump my bag on the table.

‘Morning. What’s going on? You all right, Lorraine?’

Lorraine opens her mouth but Ruth doesn’t give her time to answer.

‘*She*’s all right, but her dishwasher isn’t. Menopause brain strikes again. Last night, our lovely Lorraine managed to put a whole Camembert cheese in the dishwasher instead of the fridge, Beth. And switched the thing on and went to bed. Now her entire house stinks of cheese, and as for the dishwasher ...’

She snorts and starts to cackle again. Lorraine rolls her eyes and turns to me. I’m grinning widely too now. Ruth’s laugh is infectious.

‘The whole bloody thing and everything in it is covered, Beth,’ she says. ‘And it’s been through the drying cycle so it’s all ... *hard* now. Like everything’s been coated in cheesy plastic. Plates, cutlery ... I honestly might have to throw the whole dishwasher and everything in it away. How on earth am I going to get it all off? Honestly, don’t have a menopause. It’s sending me bonkers.’

‘Oh, Lorraine!’ I’m giggling too now. ‘Too funny! Poor you!’

As I make myself a tea, Ruth regales us with one of her own many menopause-brain stories – something about putting her jewellery box in the fridge and a cooked chicken in her wardrobe. The laughter follows me down the corridor as I – feeling thankful that I’m still only forty and, therefore, hopefully have a few years yet before it’s *me* sharing these stories – head to my office, pausing to wipe a smear off the smart brass sign on the door.

*Beth Holland, Practice Manager*

I’ve been here nearly three years now, and although it’s madly busy – five GPs, three nurses, half a dozen receptionists and admin staff, and

nearly eight thousand patients – I love it. The job, and these women – because they are mainly women – keep me going. On the tough days they make me smile, tell me I’m doing fine, remind me that life is too short to stress about payroll blips or IT issues. Today, although it’s busy as always, turns out to be one of the better ones, and I’m humming tunelessly as I rush down the corridor again just after five.

‘Fancy a quick drink, Beth? Ruth and I are heading up to Montpellier in a bit. Join us?’

Deborah, hearing me approaching, has popped her head out of her room, grey-blond bob swinging around her face.

‘Oh Debs, I’d love to, but I promised Dad I’d pop in this evening, and then the kids, you know ...’

I shrug, and she nods understandingly.

‘We’ll give you more notice next time. See you tomorrow, love.’

‘See you. Enjoy. Have one for me. No, two. Have *two* for me.’

‘Not a problem. Wouldn’t do it for anyone else, mind.’

She winks and disappears back into her room, and I head for the car park. It won’t be dark for nearly another hour but the sky is leaden and, while the morning was just wet, this evening is wet and windy, a sudden gust rolling a discarded Coke can across the slick concrete ahead of me and whipping a strand of hair across my face. I fumble for my car keys in the bag slung over my shoulder, and suddenly I see him out of the corner of my eye.

Again? Seriously? Oh, come on ...

I stop dead and push back my already-damp hair, trying to tuck it behind my ear. I feel a little wave of irritation. When it all began, I’d been wary, nervous, scared even. But then it seemed to stop again, and I’d almost forgotten about him. Almost. So if he’s *back* ... I’m more than irritated now, I’m angry. What does he want, this weirdo who keeps turning up, hanging around? Has he nothing better to do than creep about, spying on me, following me? I turn, take a step towards the spot where he’s standing, then blink. He’s gone. It’s raining harder now, heavy drops settling on my eyelashes, blurring my vision, and I stand still, my gaze sweeping across the almost-empty space. Where did he go? I can’t see him; I can’t see anybody. Only half a dozen cars remain, mine included. But no shadowy figures. Nobody watching me, lurking, waiting. Just my overactive imagination, playing tricks on me.

*OK. Phew. Good.*

I take a deep breath, look around one last time, and shiver. It's cold, and now I'm soaking wet. I need to get on. I climb into the car and start the engine.

## Chapter 2

I'm still thinking about him though as I pull into the driveway at home an hour later, after popping in to see Dad. It was several months ago when I first began to get the feeling that someone was following me, that unseen eyes were watching me.

It was little things at first: a glimpse of a man on the other side of the road as I left the surgery, always in the same dark hooded jacket, but never approaching, never close enough for me to see him clearly, just standing there, statue-like, waiting until I got into my car and then scuttling away; the same silver Fiat appearing again and again, driving slowly past my house, following me into Sainsbury's car park – but again, never near enough for me to get a proper view of the driver. Now and again, I even thought he might be taking photos of me, because there was a phone or camera raised briefly in front of his face. Unsettled, I mentioned it to a few people – the girls at work, a couple of neighbours – wondering if maybe they'd noticed anyone hanging around too, but none of them had, and I could tell they thought I was imagining things.

'I mean, Cheltenham isn't a big place, not really, not when you think about it, is it?' Ruth said, when I confided in her in the staffroom one morning not long after it had started. 'You do tend to see the same people around. I see the same bloke passing my house with his black Labrador all the time. You worry too much, Beth. I haven't seen anyone hanging around. Nobody I'd be concerned about anyway.'

I nodded, somewhat reassured, but I still worried. As the weeks passed, though, I did try hard to convince myself that everyone was right and I was imagining it, because why would anyone want to follow *me*? The idea that I might have a stalker, some sort of crackpot secret admirer, is faintly ludicrous. I'm hardly a catch – a forty-year-old divorced mum of two, so frantically trying to divide her time between work, kids, and an elderly dad that she barely has time to drag a comb through her hair or dab on a bit of