

## CHAPTER 1

Felicity Fox had just had a most distressing experience. She had seen what she thought was the reflection of an old bag lady in the plate glass window of Peter Jones, but after a couple of seconds she realised that she was looking at her own image: lank hair, old black jumper and a pair of jeans that had been old when she was thin and they had still fitted her. It had been a long time since she had seen her reflection like that, so much had happened and she hadn't been aware of this physical deterioration.

She had left the house early to try and find some material for her bedroom curtains. Her son Oscar was coming back from New York soon and would be furious if she still had an old sheet covering the window. She had been in her new house for several months now but there were still a few finishing touches to be done before it would feel like home. Now she could only pray that she wouldn't see anyone she knew. A few minutes later she was skulking in the corner of the fabric department.

'Frumpy. Frumpy Frobisher!' The honking voice seemed to reverberate through the whole department. Hearing her hated, but at the moment painfully apt, old school nickname, Felicity turned round and came face to face with a mouthful of teeth under a mop of wiry grey hair attached to an extremely large body. Felicity frowned, trying to remember who this woman was, as the voice continued.

'Thought it was you Frumpy. It's been simply yonks. Not since Fizz's coming out dance.' Fizz? Coming out dance? A faint memory stirred. Was it possible that this fat, hearty, and frankly, old-looking woman could have been at school with her?

Felicity replaced the roll of fabric she had been examining and tried to put a pleasant expression on her face as she said, 'Gosh, it's been ages.' Then cautiously she tried a question. 'Where are you living now?' seemed safe enough.

'Got a house near Hurlingham, Timmy's retired, back from Hong Kong for good.' At least she didn't call it Honkers. 'Of course you've never met him. Timmy Bignall, that's my husband. I'm Jane Bignall now.' Then, as if sensing that Felicity still wasn't sure who she was talking to, added, 'Plum. That's what I was called at school. Plum Cranford.'

'Of course.' Felicity felt like hugging her, with the relief at knowing her name. Then without thinking she started to speak. 'But you were so... so... so...' grinding to a halt, realising that none of her thoughts were appropriate. 'Dark,' she ended lamely.

Jane shrugged her shoulders. 'Never seem to have time for the hairdressers. Used to have a figure too, but four children later - what can you do?' She laughed, quite relaxed.

Felicity could remember her now. She had been a big girl, but with loads of style, and a heart-shaped face surrounded by a cloud of dark hair. The years had certainly been cruel. The woman standing in front of her was a good size twenty. She was wearing a shapeless red cardigan, a striped shirt with a piecrust frill, a green dirndl skirt, green tights and loafers. Surely people in Hong Kong weren't still dressing like that. Felicity turned her head away aware that she was smirking. It was good for her morale to see an old schoolfriend looking dowdy. For a few moments she had forgotten her own appearance, then the memory of her reflection in the shop window came back to her. Turning to Plum, she tried to dismiss the image.

'Do you ever see anyone from school?' she asked. She'd meant to wash her hair last night, with that new colour shampoo, but in the end couldn't be bothered, and this morning she hadn't even put on any mascara. It hadn't really seemed worth the effort. Whatever had she been thinking of venturing into Sloane Square dressed like that? She'd no right to criticise Plum. Why on earth had she been called that? Felicity

was hardly listening as the other woman continued, then she snapped to attention as she heard Plum's voice.

'Sally Pelham was in Hong Kong for a while. She's a great chum. But of course you see her don't you?'

'Not since she ran off with my husband.' Felicity knew her voice was icy.

'Oh Lord!' Jane wailed. 'Lummy, put my foot in it as per usual.'

Felicity gave a half-smile. 'Don't worry.' She just managed to say it. 'Happens all the time. I thought you'd probably know. Everyone else seems to.' Then to her fury she felt her eyes smart and her lower lip begin to quiver. 'Got to go,' she muttered and felt Jane pat her arm sympathetically as she blundered past her and through the china department out into Sloane Square. It wasn't just the brightness of the sun that made Felicity fumble in her bag for her dark glasses. All it needed right now was for someone she knew to see her in tears. There were people who managed to look appealing and vulnerable when they were crying, but Felicity wasn't one of them. She walked, hardly knowing where she was going, northwards up Sloane Street.

'Oh fuck,' she thought, but then realised that she must have said it out loud as an elderly couple gave her a disapproving look. 'Sorry,' she muttered to the air, and struggling to keep her thoughts quiet she continued on towards Pont Street. Even in her misery she noticed that summer had finally arrived. The air was warm, the trees were green and young couples in skimpy tops and shorts with long, tanned limbs were entwined on every corner. Enjoy it, she thought bitterly. It won't last.

She could feel her tears turning to anger, which was better, because it made her feel stronger. She debated whether to carry on towards Knightsbridge and the comfort of Harvey Nichols' food department or ring Venetia. Remembering the depressing sight of her too-tight jeans she resolutely got her mobile out of her bag. Squinting at the numbers and then cursing again, but silently this time, she fumbled around for her reading glasses. It wasn't meant to be like this, she thought. She had always imagined that by the time she was fifty-five her life would be a sea of tranquillity. She would be living in a perfect Georgian manor house, with a swimming pool, two labradors and a horse, and a faithful, adoring husband. And indeed she had had that, apart from the pool and the faithful husband. And now she was living alone in a tiny, terraced house in one of the few unimproved corners of Battersea. It all hurt so much and the awful thing was she didn't understand why it had all gone wrong. Sitting on a low wall by the bus stop halfway up Sloane Street Felicity dialled her friend's number. Venetia must have been sitting on top of it because it only rang once when she answered.

'Thank God, you're there. Can I come round?' Felicity gasped.

'You sound frightful? What's wrong?' Venetia was her oldest friend and was instantly concerned.

'How long have you got?'

'I'll open the emergency champagne.'

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Venetia Kent-Fletcher lived in a tall, narrow house in a quiet Chelsea square with her husband Andrew. Like her house she was tall and slim, but unlike her house this was the result of a great deal of hard work. She was a freelance fashion editor for a fashionable magazine and aimed for perfection in all things. She was waiting by the door when Felicity rang the bell and threw it open immediately.

'Oh Fifi.' Venetia couldn't help raising her eyebrows disapprovingly as she took in Felicity's appearance. 'Bad day?' she said, more as a statement than a question, as she hugged her friend.

'They all seem to be lousy at the moment.' Felicity was aware of an unattractive whining tone in her voice as she followed her friend into her drawing room, but that was how she felt. Venetia redecorated constantly but always, it seemed to Felicity, in the same shades of beige and oatmeal. Now Felicity sank down onto an immaculate wild silk cream sofa and quickly held out her hand as Venetia walked across the room and put a glass of champagne into it.

'Netty you're a life saver.' She managed a weak smile before she raised the glass to her lips.

Venetia smoothed her already perfectly smoothed hair and said, 'Bugger tea and sympathy - champagne and gossip's better.' She eyed her friend warily.

Felicity managed a mirthless laugh. 'The only gossip I want to hear is that Sally's given Henry crabs.'

'I'm sure that could be arranged sweetie.' Venetia perched on a chair next to Felicity, her cream Armani trouser suit exactly matching the damask of the upholstery. She raised her own glass to her lips and took a small sip before putting it down on the perfectly polished glass coffee table, with its neat pile of this month's glossy magazines. She took a cigarette out of a packet and lit it with a slim gold lighter, and then leant forward frowning as she held out a hand towards her friend and asked, 'Do you like this colour?'

Felicity looked at the bright orange iridescence on her friend's perfectly manicured nails and with the frankness of an old friendship gave a small shudder. 'No. It's simply vile.'

Venetia sighed. 'I know, it was one of these freebies sent to the magazine. It's supposed to be the new Rouge Noir.' Felicity looked blank. 'The "must have" colour everyone was wearing a few years ago.'

'Not in Little Biddlehampton,' Felicity retorted. She tried to sit on her own hands, but Venetia was too quick for her.

'When did you last have a proper manicure?' Venetia grabbed her friend's hand and eyed the nails with distaste.

Felicity looked at the dehydrated reptile on the end of her arm in astonishment. Where had that dead iguana come from? Surely it was only a few weeks ago when the skin on her hands had been young and springy.

'Obviously ages ago,' she replied, 'there doesn't seem much point.'

'It's time we fixed that. And your hair,' Venetia said, averting her gaze from Felicity's head with a slight grimace. 'I'll make an appointment for you with Pelle.'

'I thought he was a footballer. Things must be desperate.'

'Idiot! It's the name of the salon. Pelle Capelli. What about your face?' she continued relentlessly.

'What about my face?'

'What cream are you using?'

Felicity looked sheepish.

'I find those women so scary - they see me coming. I know what they're thinking. Bells ringing - Emergency! Let me through, I'm a beautician. Do you think they put a matt fixative on their faces in the morning after they've made them up - those mask-like faces?' Felicity was aware that she was babbling. She did not like the direction their conversation was taking.

'Don't change the subject. What cream have you got?' Venetia demanded fiercely.

'I can't remember what it's called. All I know is that it cost about as much as a small family car. The woman said something about free radicals. What on earth are

free radicals? She sounded convincing at the time but now I come to think, it sounds like a slogan you'd spray on a wall, not the ingredients of a face cream.'

'Are you using it?' Venetia was not to be deflected.

'I did use it couple of times, but it didn't make any difference.'

'You're supposed to use it every day, religiously.' Venetia's tone was exasperated. 'And you obviously haven't been.'

'Thanks a lot.' Felicity flushed and tried to wriggle down into the sofa. 'If you remember, it hasn't exactly been a great year.'

'So. Your husband left you. I don't mean to be harsh, but that's no reason to let yourself go completely.'

Felicity looked round the room, willing herself not to be a wimp. She didn't want to cry again. But it was no good.

'Frumpy,' she wailed. 'I'd forgotten that's what I was called at school.'

'Sweetheart, I'm sorry for you. We're all sorry. But if I'm being strictly honest, you have got a bit frumpy since the dickhead left.'

'Don't call him that,' Felicity said automatically.

'Sorry. You know we all love Henry, but he is being a dickhead and the truth is you had let yourself go before that, hadn't you?'

Felicity ignored the question.

'I understand,' Venetia continued, 'you were doing everything, without much help from Henry. You didn't have much time for yourself, did you?'

'It's all right for you,' Felicity said, gesturing dramatically at the expanse of the drawing room. 'You've got all this and Andrew. What have I got?'

'Your health for a start and your children. Your life. Now it's time to move on. Even find a new man.' Venetia sat down on the sofa and leant forward intently.

'In case you haven't noticed there aren't any out there. I'm fat, fifty-five and flat broke. And I don't think I want a new man. I was quite happy with the old one.' Felicity shut her eyes. Nobody understood how bloody it was.

Venetia took her hand and gave it a squeeze. 'Age you can't change. Although Sally Pelham seems to get younger every year. But flat broke is simply not true. You're much better off without Henry draining the bank account. Fat on the other hand...'

Felicity opened her eyes and interrupted Venetia indignantly. 'It's not fair. When you're miserable you go all pale and thin, you don't eat and get even better cheekbones. While I get a morbid fascination with contents of my fridge. It's constant graze. The pounds just pile on,' she sighed and added, 'if you're going to keep going on at me I need more champagne.'

Venetia looked at her with the incomprehension of the naturally thin, but she got to her feet and poured them each another glass. Then like a terrier with a rat she continued. 'First your hair, then the gym.' As far as Venetia was concerned all problems were soluble if you looked right.

'I can't afford to go to the hairdresser,' wailed her friend.

'Nobody can afford not to go to the hairdresser,' Venetia retorted, patting her own sleek ash blonde bob. 'I saw Sally the other day and she looks great.'

'Bitch.'

'I know but she still looks great.'

'I meant you.'

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'Somebody's been letting themselves go, haven't they?' Roberto, owner and queen of Pelle Capelli, stood with one hand on his twenty-eight inch hips and a faint

expression of revulsion on his face as he lifted a strand of Felicity's lank hair with his comb. 'Venetia asked us to look after you so we'll try and wave our magic wand shall we?' With pursed lips he continued to pick up strands of her hair.

Felicity stared at him in amazement, even though Venetia had already warned her that he was camper than a boy scout jamboree.

'Hmm,' he said. 'I think I'll let Sadie look after you. Sadie, come and see what you can do for Felicity.'

Felicity felt a sense of relief as she remembered what her cousin Rose had said. 'Hope you don't have Roberto, he's such a number. Last time Daisy went there he'd had a row with his boyfriend and she came out looking exactly like Danny La Rue.' Felicity obviously wasn't smart enough for Roberto himself to look after. There were compensations for being a country bumpkin.

'Hi Felicity, I'm Sadie.'

Sitting in front of what she hoped was an unflattering mirror Felicity wondered when hairdressers stopped calling their clients Madame or even Mrs Fox. Then she realised depressingly that she was becoming just like her mother. She looked into the mirror and was confronted by a pierced navel with a silver ring in it. Raising her eyes she took in a cropped black top and then a pretty pale face with pierced lip, nose and ears and white-blonde hair about half an inch long. At first she tried not to stare but then decided that no one would look like that if they were trying to blend into the background. She felt nostalgic for Little Biddlehampton and the familiar smell of perming lotion at Hair Today. Did they even do perms here in this minimalist, cool salon with its décor of square glass vases filled with pebbles instead of the dusty arrangement of artificial flowers that had been the principle decorative feature at Hair Today ever since she could remember.

'Have you been hennaing it yourself?' Sadie's voice broke into her thoughts.

'Yes.' Felicity was forced to confess she had. 'But it seems to have gone a rather strange colour so I stopped doing it.'

'That's because you're reely grey.'

'That's why I've been putting henna on it,' Felicity said patiently.

'Henna on grey makes it go that horrible orange. What I'd like to do,' Sadie confided, as if they were friends, 'is put a vegetable dye on. It's all organic ingredients. It's got papaya and avocado oil in it and it'll give a lovely shine, and a reely lovely colour. Then we'll give it a good cut and get rid of these horrible split ends.'

Felicity could only nod and smile. She wondered as she did so whether Sadie actually believed all that about organic ingredients.

'Why don't you look at a magazine, try and find something you'd like to look like?' Sadie called over her shoulder and she disappeared to mix up the colour.

Felicity idly thumbed her way through a succession of photographs. What on earth made Sadie imagine that even with the aid of a top plastic surgeon she would be able to make a fifty-five-year-old woman remotely resemble any of these swan-necked, pre-pubescent girls? Once again she could hear her mother's voices suggesting a sensible style that was tidy and easy to look after, and when Sadie came back she muttered something about not wanting it too short.

'It's not going to be bright red is it?' she asked nervously as Sadie applied a purple cream to her head.

'No, reely subtle, you'll love it.' She thrust her under a drier saying she would have her shampooed in twenty minutes. A child covered in more piercings brought her a Capuccino, which made a nice change from Little Biddlehampton's smartest salon where the instant coffee had always slobbered over onto the digestives in the

saucer.

Felicity picked up a copy of *Tatler* and began turning the pages. Why was it that the only people she knew in the gossip pages were her children's friends? Suddenly she saw a picture of Upton Court. It was the estate agent's photograph from the sale. Bugger Henry, she thought. Bastard. Why did he have to ruin everything? My language included. Her eyes blurred as the tears came, as they had so often in the last few months. She closed them tightly and tried to force the photograph out of her head.

Upton Court. It had been love at first sight. Already in love with Henry, she'd often joked later that she would have married him anyway to live in the house. It was a medium-sized, Georgian manor house, set in parkland at the end of a long, meandering drive. Exactly the house she'd always felt destined to live in. When they were first married Henry's parents had been living there. After a few years they decided they were getting too old and the house too big and moved into the lodge.

Henry and Felicity moved into the main house in those wonderful far off days, when there had been plenty of money, before the disaster of Lloyds. The children had all been born there, first Laura then the twins. It had been tiring of course but there was Sylvie to look after the babies and Felicity had been able to play house with seemingly unlimited funds. Nothing had been touched since Henry's parents had moved in just after the war and it needed a lot of renovation. A new kitchen and two new bathrooms, then new curtains, loose covers and wallpaper everywhere.

Once the house was done there had been several years of fun. Friends to stay, dinner parties, holidays abroad, the house filled with the children and their friends. Henry had never been the most industrious of men, but he had been good with the children and on the whole they had been happy until the Lloyds mess happened.

Not long after that the children left home and went their independent ways. Henry appeared to lose heart at that point and gave up any pretence of trying to earn money. And then he really did lose his heart - to Sally Pelham, and that had been that. Now the house was sold and that chapter, which she had thought would be the whole book, was over. And here she was sitting in a smart Knightsbridge hairdressers, imagining that a new hairdo would help push her out of her depression.

After twenty minutes the drier pinged and Sadie bustled over to inspect her hair.

'Lovely,' she said and then called across the salon. 'Tracy, will you shampoo the vegetable?'

Felicity gave a weak smile; it seemed a bit too close to the truth. 'I was hoping to be spared for a few more years, before it came to that,' she said feebly, trying to make a joke of it, but Sadie just smiled at her blankly. She does think I'm a vegetable, thought Felicity gloomily. However Sadie was obviously a serious-minded girl and probably hadn't intended it ironically. And it seemed unlikely that anyone who'd done that to their own appearance would have a highly developed sense of humour.

'You going anywhere nice for your holiday?' Tracy asked as she massaged shampoo into Felicity's hair.

'I'll probably manage a couple of days in Scotland. How about you?'

'Me and my boyfriend are going to Bali.'

'That's nice,' Felicity said absently.

'You been there? Lovely isn't it?'

'No. But I've heard that it's gorgeous.'

'Sright. We've been three times.'

Felicity was amazed. This girl could only be about nineteen and she'd done

more travelling than Felicity had at fifty-five. What a lot of ground she had to make up.

When she emerged from Roberto's two hours later Felicity felt quite different. She hoped it was an improvement. At least her hair felt light and she couldn't help running her fingers through it. It shone and had bounce, and it seemed to put a spring into her step. She couldn't resist looking at her reflection in the window of an Italian restaurant. For a moment she stood staring admiringly at her new self.

And then behind the glass she saw, sitting at a table for two, Andrew Kent-Fletcher holding hands with Slutty Sonia. Felicity leapt back from the window and walked hurriedly down the street. She couldn't believe what she had just seen. She was tempted to creep back and have another look, but knew it wasn't necessary. How could Andrew do that to Venetia? Her first thought was that she should ring her friend and tell her. Then she decided it probably wasn't a good idea. She needed time to think. She had just seen her best friend's husband in a restaurant, at four o'clock in the afternoon, with a girl who was known locally as the Lay of the Land. Luckily she was driving down to Wiltshire tomorrow to spend the weekend with her cousin Rose, the very person to give good advice, who would know what to do.

