

KARLY LANE

*For Once
in My
Life*

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The paper in this book is FSC® certified. FSC® promotes environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world's forests.

To all the women who still get a shock when it comes to saying your age out loud and wondering how it's possible to suddenly be this old! Pause for a moment and take in everything that's come before: the first loves; the marriages; the children; the first school days; the tears and the teenage tantrums. The endless running around and fixing everyone else's problems. The divorces, the heartaches and the grief. The losses and the victories. The friends we've made and the ones we've lost along the way.

Now look forward and don't be afraid. This is our time to find the things that truly matter to us. Be proud. Be fierce. Be true to yourself. The greatest times are still ahead.

One

Jenny Hayward flopped down on the lounge chair, kicked off her shoes and closed her eyes as she let out a slow breath. Home. The silence of the house was like a soothing balm to the hectic pace of the hospital. It'd been a long day—a long *two years*, if she were being honest. That was when her husband of twenty-seven years had announced he was moving out.

Lost in the shock and pain of his betrayal, Jenny had turned the house into her sanctuary, doing a clean-out of anything she didn't find comforting or calming. Her best friend, Beth—dark-haired, Italian-Maltese—became a slightly more intimidating version of the decluttering queen, Marie Kondo, as she held open a garbage bag and barked, 'Does it bring you joy? No? Well chuck it!' In a couple of days, they'd transformed the house. It had been nothing short of a miracle.

Jenny had never been a big believer in the whole crystals and energy hocus-pocus the way Beth was, but weary and

heartsick, she couldn't have summoned the strength to protest even if she'd wanted to when Beth had told her to 'leave everything to me'.

As far as makeovers went, there hadn't been anyone better qualified for the job. Beth had always had a knack for decorating and had done a course, intending to one day turn her talent into a business. She'd filled Jenny's house with soft furnishings, scattered soothing colours about the rooms and added little touches—a plant here, a Buddha statue there and, of course, her signature crystal-infused candles, which she'd begun making during Covid and had become a booming success.

'When you've been knocked down, bloodstone will pick you back up,' she'd said, then had placed little pottery bowls of tourmaline near the front and back doors and lit a candle, carrying it through the house like a priest performing an exorcism. 'This will flush out all the negative vibes and allow the good stuff back in,' she'd explained as a delicious scent of sage, black tea and bergamot filled the room. In Jenny's bedroom, she'd scattered amethyst, informing her that it would relieve stress and anxiety and promote a chill vibe for sleeping.

And there'd been more. Beth had placed her candles infused with their healing crystals in every nook and cranny, and as much as Jenny—a level-headed, science-based nurse—wanted to scoff at the ridiculousness of the idea, she'd found herself noticeably calmer and the house, which had always been full of the eggshells she'd been walking on, suddenly felt like a *home*. Of course, the candles smelled gorgeous, but maybe there *was* something in the whole crystal thing, because now

her house was a haven and she loved coming home to it at the end of a long shift.

Sometimes it seemed hard to believe the split had been that long ago. Austin had been her life for so long. They'd had a reasonably happy marriage, getting married young and starting a family. Jenny had always wanted a brood of children, but Austin—ever practical—had declared that two kids were all they could afford. Deep down, she'd known he was right. After all, she'd had her hands full with an almost-two-year-old and a newborn. As the girls grew older, she'd learned to ignore the little whimper inside whenever they passed by a baby in the shopping centre. It was silly—she was far too busy for any more children, she'd remind herself.

After Brittany started school and she only had Savannah at home, Austin began to hint at Jenny going back to work. His income as a salesman in a white goods store wasn't stretching all that far and raising two children on a single wage was never going to get them where they were hoping to go. The only job she'd ever had was as a check-out chick in a grocery store from when she'd left school up until going on maternity leave with Brittany, and as much as she'd enjoyed the job and the people she'd worked with, it had been almost five years and everyone she'd known had moved on. She wanted to do something different, only she wasn't sure *what* exactly. Austin hadn't been overly sympathetic when she'd brought up her concerns. 'It's not like you've had any burning ambitions to have a career or anything. We just need something that brings in a pay cheque.' Which she had to grudgingly admit was true, but it did nothing to still that growing restlessness

she was noticing inside. All she was any good at was having babies. She loved being a mother, but unfortunately, you didn't get paid for that, so she knew she needed to start thinking seriously about what would bring in a pay cheque—and what she'd enjoy doing.

In the end, the answer had arrived in the form of her aunty, who'd commented on how short-staffed the hospital system was and that Jenny should think about becoming a nurse.

'But I didn't even finish high school,' Jenny had said.

'You can go in as a mature student. Do a bridging course and enrol in university. You'd make a great nurse.'

Jenny had chewed the idea over in her head for a while. It hadn't crossed her mind before. She wasn't sure why; her aunty was a nurse and she had multiple cousins who were nurses, but she'd always considered herself not quite smart enough to do anything that would require getting a degree.

She'd brought it up with Austin, who'd laughed, then sobered at the look on her face. 'How would we afford university? That's a lot of money for something you didn't even want to do before today.'

'I wasn't planning on enrolling right now,' she snapped, hurt by his lack of encouragement, which immediately caused all her insecurities to resurface. 'It was just an idea.'

She handed her resume to the local supermarket the next day and managed to pick up a few hours a week. She put Savannah into day care for the days she worked, hating every minute of it. Guilt became Jenny's constant companion. She felt guilty that she was putting her child in day care when she should be at home looking after her. She felt guilty that she

resented her husband for making her go back to work so early when she knew the money would help out enormously. She felt guilty for hating a job she was lucky to have when there were people who didn't have one. The guilt went on and on, draining her energy and making her miserable.

Eventually, she'd brought up the nursing idea over coffee with Beth, who'd encouraged her to enrol in a bridging course so she could think about university in the future if she still wanted to. Jenny didn't tell Austin. What if she failed? What if she couldn't even get over this first hurdle?

What if you can? her little voice of reason piped up helpfully.

Jenny studied and submitted her assignments and, to her surprise, she was passing—not only passing, but doing better than she'd ever done at school. She discovered she was enjoying it. *Her! Enjoying study?* It was crazy. Managing to keep her newly acquired diploma a secret, by the end of the year she'd worked up the courage to apply to university to see what happened. To her shock, Jenny was accepted into a nursing degree.

Telling Austin hadn't been as bad as she'd been anticipating, at least not once she'd assured him she could get a student loan to cover her fees, and so there she was, sitting in a lecture room, surrounded by other people like her—some older, most younger—but other people excited to be taking this next step and forging themselves a bright path into a new career. She'd never felt more alive.

It'd been a crazy time, juggling two small children and study, but she'd managed with Beth lending a hand to babysit and cheer her on. Her graduation had been the proudest day

of her life, with her family travelling to be there and Austin accepting all the congratulations and admiration about how difficult it must have been for them all to have taken such a huge thing on. She'd put aside her irritation, deciding not to bring up the countless arguments they'd had over the time, when he'd occasionally had to cook his own dinner or heaven forbid, find his work clothes in the folding when she'd been struggling to meet a deadline.

Jenny gave a small smile. Back then she'd had so many big plans.

After that, life finally started to get easier. The girls were a little older and both in school. She loved her job and the people she worked with and the extra income—nothing outrageously wonderful—but enough to allow them to move into a bigger house with a backyard and room to grow. Austin had scored a job with a large firm and had his sights set a lot higher than being a white goods salesman. He seemed happier than he'd been in a long time.

Then one day she found herself staring down at two red lines on a pregnancy test.

It wasn't that she didn't *want* another baby, it was just that their lives had moved on from nappies and toilet training. Brittany was eight and Savannah was six and now she'd be going back to breastfeeding and sleepless nights after taking for granted the fact that she'd finally got both children sleeping in their own beds.

If she hadn't been so caught up in everything going on, she probably would have realised that it was at this very point in time that her marriage had begun its downhill slide.

‘You can’t be pregnant. Take another test,’ Austin had said after staring at her for what seemed an eternity.

‘I took two,’ she told him dully. But at his insistence, she did a third test and watched his face fall as the twin stripes appeared in the window.

‘I knew I should have got that bloody vasectomy years ago!’ he growled, getting to his feet to pace the room.

‘I didn’t stop you,’ she pointed out.

‘You didn’t make the appointment though, did you?’

It wasn’t her place to do it, she thought irritably. He was a grown man more than capable of booking his own doctor’s appointment and yet maybe he had a point. Had she been the one who’d wanted him to have the vasectomy, she would have definitely booked it in and seen to all the arrangements, but she was beginning to suspect that perhaps she hadn’t felt entirely comfortable with their options being so . . . final, despite the fact she wasn’t exactly over the moon about the news either.

‘We should never have trusted the pill. How did it even happen?’

‘I don’t know,’ she said, sinking to the edge of their bed. ‘It was probably when the kids were sick a few weeks ago. I had a touch of it—an upset stomach,’ she said.

‘You’re supposed to be a bloody nurse. How did you not realise you wouldn’t be protected?’

‘I don’t know!’ she snapped irritably. He was right, she should have suspected that diarrhoea, even a slight case of it, could have affected the pill’s protection. It hadn’t helped that they’d also had sex unexpectedly. Their sex life had been as dismal as their budget over the last few years, with her

exhausted from shift work most of the time, and him traveling with his new job so much. She simply hadn't thought about any consequences—hadn't for so long that she'd almost forgotten about sex being linked to babies and stretch marks!

Eventually, shock had turned into acceptance and Jenny found herself becoming excited about baby number three. Everything would be fine. They'd manage—they always had in the past, they would again.

Chloe had been the perfect baby—adored by her two older sisters and managing to wrap her father around her little finger from the very first moment he'd laid eyes on her. The initial concerns about having another baby seemed to have been forgotten and life settled into a new rhythm. Everything *seemed* to be fine-ish. But she'd felt Austin pulling away. At first it hadn't been that noticeable—his work took him away on conferences and training seminars, so it was normal that when he was getting home she was heading out on a night shift, like ships passing in the night. Then it was *her* job causing issues. She needed to do casual shifts after her maternity leave in order to keep her registration, so she was often stressed and tired, looking after a young baby on top of the odd work hours. Intimacy had naturally taken a back seat for a while. She noticed, of course, but she wasn't too concerned—in a year or two things would settle down and they'd reconnect and get back on track . . . Only they hadn't. Nothing went back to any kind of old normal. Instead, they settled into some *new* normal that was only ever supposed to be temporary.

Over the next ten years or so, the investment apartment in Sydney they'd bought so Austin didn't have to pay for

accommodation on his numerous trips eventually became his full-time residence—for work. Then he'd dropped his bombshell on her: he'd been seeing someone down there for two months. He'd seemed surprised when Jenny had been shocked.

'You barely even notice I'm gone,' he'd accused when he'd come home to announce he wanted out of their marriage.

'That's because you're never here,' she'd thrown back.

'Because I was working. To give you and the kids a better life.'

'And I haven't been?'

'My career has always been the one that allowed us to live the lifestyle we have. Do you honestly think you'd be living in this house or that the girls would have got a new car for their birthdays if it wasn't for my job? Your pay cheque wouldn't cover half of this stuff.'

She'd been stunned, truly shocked by his remarks. She shouldn't have been—she'd always known Austin was ambitious. When they were first married, he'd lay awake at night and tell her all about his plans for making his first million. She'd always let him dream big without trying to pop his bubble—she'd never cared about the money side of things, she had everything she'd ever wanted: healthy children, a stable marriage and a house to live in. But Austin had never been satisfied with what they had for long, always striving for more. And she took offence at his belittling her career. She hadn't become a nurse to make a fortune. She loved her job, despite the fact it was stressful and nurses were underpaid and often under appreciated. She did it because she cared about people and wanted to look after them. And she was good at it.

She still loved her job, Jenny thought as she pushed herself up off the lounge and headed for the black tourmaline candle on the sideboard, lighting it with a decisive strike of a match. There was no room in this house for bad energy anymore. She took a long breath in and let the spicy citrus scent fill her senses.

She wasn't sure why she'd felt a need to let the past intrude on her thoughts like this. She'd spent the last few years learning how to be herself and she had to admit this newfound independence thing could be quite exhilarating. It was time to stop looking back and focus on the future.

Two

The sound of the front door opening and voices chatting drew Jenny's gaze to the living room entryway. She smiled as a small human cyclone came running across the room towards her.

'Nanna!'

'Sophie!' Jenny gathered the grinning toddler in her arms and hugged her until she squirmed and wriggled to be put down. It was hard to believe that in, three short months, her only grandchild was going to be two.

Brittany, Jenny's eldest daughter, had moved back home six months earlier when rental prices skyrocketed in the area after Covid sent the real-estate market through the roof. As a single mother who worked as a teacher's aide in a small school, it had become impossible for Brittany to afford rent. While most of Jenny's friends looked forward to their children moving out so they could redecorate their empty nest, Jenny was happy

to have hers living at home again. The house had been quiet with only herself and her youngest, Chloe, living there.

Shortly after Brittany and Sophie had moved in, Savannah had come home from backpacking overseas to pick up a bit of work before meeting up with some travel friends. The six weeks had turned into an open-ended kind of arrangement. Now, with her three grown daughters back home, it felt like a bunch of flatmates living together, only Jenny still had to play referee and break up arguments over who was hogging the bathroom in the morning. But most of the time she enjoyed this new adult companionship.

‘Leave the cat alone!’ Brittany called after the toddler, who was gleefully chasing the cranky old tabby that simply wouldn’t die. The damn thing had to be close to twelve and was still going strong.

‘How was your day?’ Jenny asked as Brittany dropped a bright pink Bluey backpack on the table followed by her own huge tote bag. She often wondered where her girls had gotten their height from—certainly not from her. Brittany, dressed in a flowy maxidress that would have bunched on the ground if Jenny was wearing it, her long black hair pulled back in a thick ponytail, always looked so graceful—something Jenny had never been able to pull off.

‘Long. How about yours?’

‘Yep. Same.’

‘One more day to go till Friday,’ Brittany said, coming to a stop beside her as Jenny stretched her arm out and fist-bumped her.

‘We got this,’ she said with a determined nod.

‘You’d better go and get ready,’ Brittany said.

Jenny fought back a sigh. Damn it. She’d forgotten.

Once a month, they went down to the markets. Jenny loved the night markets—they were breathing fresh life into Barkley and always had such a great vibe—but she was finding it difficult to summon up the energy to get dressed and leave the house again. Once upon a time, between kids’ activities, work and sport, she’d barely stayed at home. Nowadays, however, nothing gave her more pleasure than an early night curled up in her PJs, watching a chick flick with a glass of wine. But that was not going to happen tonight.



Jenny got out of the shower and wrapped the towel around herself as she walked into her bedroom, noticing Savannah sitting on the end of her bed, curly blonde hair cascading over her shoulder, wide blue eyes studying her mother thoughtfully. Her middle child was the most outgoing of her three children. She was Jenny’s little adventurer. And the one she seemed to worry the most about. She’d left university—or rather, ‘put it on hold for a bit’, as Savannah described it—to go and travel for a year. That had been about five years ago and, other than the compulsory return home after her visas ran out, she’d pretty much been working and backpacking the entire time.

‘What were you planning on wearing tonight?’ Savannah asked as she leaned back on her arms.

Jenny raised her eyebrows at her daughter’s sudden interest in her fashion choices but shrugged nonchalantly. ‘Jeans and a top, I suppose.’

‘That’s what you always wear,’ Savannah said dismissively, then pushed herself up and walked across to her wardrobe. ‘How about this?’ She held up a teal and brown dress. ‘With those tan boots you bought. And maybe a belt.’

‘Don’t you think that’s a little dressy for the night markets?’

‘You should start dressing up more. You don’t want to become one of those women who let themselves go.’ Savannah draped the garment on the bed and bent down to place the boots on the carpet beneath it, giving it a firm nod of approval.

‘I hardly think my seventy-odd dollar jeans and the ninety-nine-dollar blouse I just purchased is letting myself go.’ She’d recently found an online boutique she loved and had been splurging a little more than usual on new outfits.

‘Oooh,’ Savannah said, her eyes brightening as she ducked into her mother’s walk-in wardrobe and produced a garment. ‘This denim jacket you got would look awesome over the top.’

Jenny shook her head wearily, giving up trying to protest. Part of her wanted to see what the outfit looked like. She’d had no idea what she was going to wear the jacket with, wasn’t even sure why she’d bought it in the first place, only that it had looked too nice *not* to buy. Maybe she did need to cut back a bit with the online shopping.

‘Okay, fine. Get out and let me get dressed,’ she mumbled, snatching up the clothing from the bed.

‘And do your make-up,’ Savannah threw over her shoulder.

‘Make-up? It’s just us and Beth going to the damn night markets,’ she said, exasperated by this sudden bossiness. They tried to do something with Beth every few weeks when her husband, Garry, a fly in, fly out worker, was away.

‘Will it kill you to wear some make-up once in a while? Seriously, Mother.’

I’ll give you seriously, Mother *in a minute*, Jenny thought, but eyed her reflection in the mirror critically. Lately she’d been ignoring the faint crinkles in the corner of her eyes. They were laugh lines, she reminded herself, before reaching for the foundation she hardly ever bothered wearing. Maybe she could go and get her eyelashes and brows tinted again soon. It seemed like a waste of time and money when she rarely went anywhere, but if the kids were beginning to notice she was giving up on the maintenance, did that mean her age was starting to show?

She was fifty. Fifty! When the hell had that happened? When she was a kid, fifty had been ancient—incomprehensible, really. Suddenly, though, she was staring down a very confronting barrel. She was a fifty-year-old divorced woman with adult children . . . and a grandchild, she reminded herself. *Crap! She was a divorced grandmother!* God, that sounded even worse. *Stop it*, she told herself firmly as she applied eyeliner and eyeshadow. *You’re being ridiculous.*

When she headed downstairs to the living room a few moments later, she found the others waiting and it crossed her mind that it was a little odd that she wasn’t the one calling to her three daughters to hurry up and get ready. Even Beth had already arrived.

‘Are we ready, then?’ Jenny asked after she’d kissed Beth’s cheek. But she paused when she realised no one else was following her to the door.

‘What’s going on?’ she asked.

‘Okay, so don’t be mad,’ Brittany started, and dread filled Jenny. Nothing good *ever* started with that phrase.

‘The thing is, Mum,’ Savannah said, picking up from her sister, ‘we kind of *did* something.’

‘Did what?’ Jenny asked as real panic began to set in.

‘We’re not going to the markets,’ Beth said. ‘Well, *we are*,’ she corrected, glancing at the other girls, ‘but *you’re* not.’

‘What Beth’s trying to say’—Brittany once again took the baton and ran with it—‘is that we’ve organised a date for you.’

‘You’ve *what*?’

‘There’s this app—a dating app—and we kind of set you up on it,’ Chloe said excitedly.

Jenny had a million questions racing through her head but not a single one of them would come out as she stared with growing horror at her children and best friend.

‘We thought it might take a while to get a response so we didn’t say anything, but the notifications have been going off all day, so we accepted,’ Chloe continued with a small squeal and clap of her hands. Her honey-blond hair was pulled back in a high ponytail that was swinging like a cheerleader’s.

‘You accepted a date *for* me? Without asking if I even wanted to go on it?’

‘You would have said no,’ Savannah said.

‘Of course I would have. This is insane.’

‘Jen,’ Beth started in the calm, let’s-talk-the-crazy-woman-down voice she’d had plenty of practice using on Jenny over the years. ‘The girls just thought this would be something fun for you to do . . . you know, get out of the house a bit.’

'You thought it was too,' Savannah reminded Beth, clearly not about to be thrown under the bus alone.

'Well, you can just go and *un-accept* and explain what happened.'

'We can't,' Brittany said with a slight wince. 'He's on his way over.'

'What!'

'It'll be fine,' Savannah said, airily. 'We checked him out; it's not like we'd set you up with some weirdo.'

'*How* did you check him out?' Jenny asked, suddenly concerned.

'We've been chatting online to him,' Chloe said.

'So, he's perfectly happy to be set up on a date with someone's mother? This doesn't scream *weird* at all?' Jenny asked, searching their faces frantically.

'Well, technically, he thought he was chatting to *you*,' Brittany admitted.

Jenny opened her mouth to yell, but nothing came out. She couldn't seem to manage a single coherent word as she stared at her best friend and daughters, lined up like a football team's front row, staring her down determinedly.

'You can't be serious.'

'We are. It's all been arranged.'

'But I don't *want* to go on a date.'

'We've waited patiently for you to take the first step back out into life again, and you haven't done it. We can't sit by any longer and watch you wither away,' Brittany said.

'You're too young to be an old, lonely woman,' Savannah said with a shrug.

‘An old, lonely . . .’ Jenny let the sentence fade away as she stared at her daughter in shock. ‘I’m *not* old!’

‘Well, you’re not getting any younger, either, Mum,’ Chloe pointed out.

‘Now hold on a minute—’

‘Jen, it’s all right to acknowledge that you’re not as *fun* as you once used to be,’ Beth soothed.

Okay, that one hurt. She was still fun, damn it! ‘I am *not* ready to be sat down in a rocking chair with my knitting just yet, thank you very much,’ she informed them bluntly, then narrowed her eyes as all four of them displayed sporting, smug smiles. Too late, she realised she’d walked into a trap. Maybe she *was* losing her edge a bit—once upon a time she’d have never fallen for something that obvious.

Brittany nodded. ‘So you agree, then, that you’re not ready to give up and you should be out there enjoying life.’

‘I don’t see why dating has to be the thing that’s going to save me from a life of dreary boredom,’ Jenny shot back.

‘Because you’re still young and attractive and you need to get back out there and find someone to have fun with again,’ Savannah said.

‘Among other things,’ Beth added with a wink.

‘Eww,’ Chloe said, with a dramatic shudder.

‘Well, what did you expect was going to happen if you set your mother up on a date with a man?’ Beth asked, seeming genuinely confused by the reaction.

‘I was trying to *not* think about it, that’s all,’ Chloe answered.

‘Would you two stop?’ Brittany cut in before turning back to Jenny. ‘Ignore them. Look, you don’t have to rush into anything—’

‘Good. So, I don’t have to go out tonight then,’ Jenny said.

‘You do. That bit’s already been arranged. But you don’t have to feel *pressured* into doing anything more than going out to dinner, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

Until that point, she hadn’t even thought about what more could be involved than going out for dinner and now she *was* worried. Considerably. Surely this person wasn’t going to expect *sex? Tonight?* She hadn’t even shaved her legs, for goodness’ sake!

‘Uh-oh . . . I think we’re losing her,’ Beth murmured.

‘Nope. I’m not ready for all this.’ Jenny shook her head and backed away.

‘You are. At least, you will be,’ Brittany assured her. ‘You’re never going to feel ready unless you get out there and do it. Remember what you always told us? Whenever we were nervous about doing anything new, you used to tell us to just wing it. Get in there and just do it.’

Well, that seemed like stupid advice now.

‘Yeah,’ Chloe piped up, nodding encouragingly at her older sister. ‘When I had that meltdown about a class presentation I had to do in year seven, you made me go in and do it . . . Actually, you pretty much dragged me into school that day, when all I wanted to do was hide in bed.’

‘This isn’t the same thing . . . that was school and you *had* to do it,’ Jenny said, sensing a touch of malicious revenge in her daughters’ pep talk.

‘Think of this as something just as important. You can’t hide in bed every time something scary happens and you don’t want to face it,’ Savannah replied.

This time, Jenny was positive her children were enjoying the opportunity to fling their mother’s advice back in her face. No one told you what to do when your great and wise parental advice came back to bite you on the arse years later. She’d brought this on herself by being such a brilliant mother. ‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ she muttered.

‘Mum, if you can’t do it for yourself, then do it for us. Be the role model you’ve always been and show us what a brave, independent woman looks like,’ Brittany said, using a motivational tone that Tony Robbins would have been proud of.

Fuck. There was no getting out of this—not unless she wanted to admit that everything she’d used in the past to try and mould these kids into responsible, well-adjusted humans could be ignored once you were an adult.

‘Fine,’ she said tightly. ‘But this is the one and only time. You take me off that stupid dating app and *never* do this again.’

‘So, about that . . .’ Brittany winced—actually winced, as though in great pain. ‘You’ve kind of got a few more dates for the rest of the weekend.’

Jenny stared at her eldest daughter. She thought she’d already been shocked as deeply as a person *could* possibly be shocked . . . but nope, now she was shocked into speechlessness.

‘There’s *more* men I’m supposed to be seeing?’ she finally managed. Who the hell did that, lined up multiple dates with different people all weekend?

‘Well, they all responded to your profile and we didn’t want to risk turning any of them away in case they were, you know, “the one”’, Savannah told her, making little quotation marks in the air.

“The one” . . . ? Jenny shook her head, trying to dislodge the absolute insanity she was hearing. ‘This stops now. I’m not some piece of . . . meat you get to hold out as bait to catch a bunch of crocodiles with.’

‘Seriously, Mum,’ Savannah said, eyeing her pityingly. ‘This is why you needed a push. You have no idea how the world of dating works. You’ll thank us for stepping in and navigating all this for you so you didn’t stuff it up.’

A knock on the door cut short her scathing reply, which was partially a relief since she wasn’t sure she could keep to the ‘no swearing out loud’ rule, as panic quickly settled in.

‘It’ll be fine. His name’s Derrick and he’s an accountant,’ Beth said in a pacifying tone as she walked—or rather frog-marched—Jenny to the front door. ‘He lives in Hamwell. And smile,’ Beth ordered in a sugary sweet tone, as Brittany opened the door to a man who looked to be in his late fifties. He was dressed in a pair of impeccably ironed navy trousers and a crisp white shirt.

‘Jenny?’ he asked, as his gaze shifted between the five women smiling at him—well, four smiling and one frozen in a terrified, caught-in-the-headlights kind of expression.

‘This is Jenny,’ Beth said, thrusting her forward so that she almost staggered into the poor man’s chest.

His face did a quick change from surprise to delight before he stuck out his hand. ‘Derrick,’ he said, as Jenny automatically

shook it. They stood there staring at each other awkwardly until Beth stepped in again.

‘Well, you two kids have a great time,’ she chirped, pointedly ignoring Jenny’s dangerous glare.