

SHE HAS
my heart

BEVERLY HUNT

CHAPTER ONE

Sophie

‘Since when did you become interested in art?’ I place the invitation down on the bench where Hugo had thrown it when he’d stomped in from work earlier. *Men*. ‘And why do you suddenly want to go to an art show? We’ve been married for twenty-odd years and you’ve never once shown the slightest bit of interest in art,’ I can’t help the regret that creeps into my tone. ‘Why the change? It’s just odd.’ I mumble the last bit to myself more than Hugo, my arms crossed. When I realise this, I relax and drop my arms, hoping Hugo hasn’t picked up on my mood. It’s bad enough my voice has a tone but my body language is just rude. Hugo always says I have an aggressive tone when I talk to him. I think he’s being petulant; he would disagree; we often do.

‘Why are you being like this? I do something nice and you’re critical. I can’t win,’ Hugo says with a swift shake of his head ‘Our company did a warehouse conversion for this group. They own a few places around town and we tendered to them. They liked the changes and got us to do the work. They threw a few tickets our way as a thank you.’ His voice is abrupt, angry.

‘Nothing fucking odd about it. I thought you’d like to see a place I designed, not to mention the fucking art that I knew you’d like.’

I back down. ‘That would be lovely, when is it?’ He has never hit me but when he raises his voice I worry he will cross that boundary and one day lash out.

‘It’s Friday night,’ Hugo mutters as he grabs a beer from the fridge. The more I think about it, it was a lovely gesture. I can get so annoyed and angry with him some days and then on other days feel like I’m on tenterhooks, never knowing when he will fly off the handle.

Pouring a glass of wine I settle in front of the television, but I’m not listening to what’s on, adrift in contemplation. Hugo and I have our own particular seats, always the same. Sometimes it feels like we’re in our eighties, not our forties. Predictable, we are so predictable.

Is this all there is to life? My life is dashing past on a downhill trajectory. *Does it get any better than this, or is this all there is?* I’m restless, bored. If I’m honest, I’ve been wanting more for some time now, but I have no idea how to get myself out of this funk. My middle finger traces the rim of my wineglass as I stare into it.

At forty-four, I’m healthy and content, most times, and my children are happy overall. I think I give them a pleasant home life; I drive them where they want and give them as much freedom as they can handle without getting into trouble. I laugh and joke with them, but do they feel the tension between their father and I?

I love my job, mostly. Juggling the professor’s schedule fulfils and challenges me. He’s a professor of mathematics, an absolute

genius, a gentleman, and a great boss. But he lives in his own world. If his schedules aren't written down, he is thrown as to where he should be. It's like having a third child, or fourth child, if you count Hugo. Married to Hugo for twenty-two years, this is what I signed up for.

It took me close to five years to fall pregnant. The first time I miscarried at six weeks I didn't even realise I was pregnant, till I had what I thought was a painful and heavy period, which were always erratic and never regular. After a visit with my doctor and a positive pregnancy test, he informed me that even though I had miscarried, the hormones were still in my body. I had drifted out of the doctor's surgery in a blur, only noticing those around me when bumping into them. Some were aggressive in their tone. 'Watch where you're going lady.' Others were more compassionate when they saw tears rolling down my cheeks. 'Are you okay? Can I help you; you look upset?' Unable to speak, I nodded and kept walking. It felt like the world was running past while I was in the slowest of slow motions.

Aren't women supposed to know when they are pregnant? How did I not know? Maybe I'm not maternal enough to have children and I'm just doing this for Hugo? My thoughts are ingrained in my memory, along with the little soul I lost. I never told Hugo, knowing he was as desperate as I was for a family.

The miscarriage dwelt in my mind for a long time, feeling I had let us down. I struggled through my grief on my own, crying alone in the shower every morning under the cascading water. Then I'd put on my make-up and walk out with my made-up, happy face. No one ever knew, no one ever will.

Four months later I fell pregnant again. This time I realised. The signs were there; tender breasts, nausea and vomiting,

often in the afternoon at work. The girls in the office joked that I was pregnant. I would smile but underneath I was frightened. I didn't want to know. I would go into a mini panic at the thought, afraid of losing this one too; afraid of telling Hugo about the first pregnancy, of hurting him. I remember thinking more about him than dealing with my loss. I didn't want him to feel the pain I felt. The pregnancy test I bought from the pharmacy sat in my bag for a week before I built up the courage to do the test. I was afraid to feel excited, to hope. Further into the pregnancy, excitement grew. *It will be okay; it's been eight weeks now.*

As we ate breakfast at a cafe one morning, Hugo made a remark about how much I was eating. I stopped with the spoon halfway towards my mouth and said, 'I think I might be pregnant.' I didn't feel scared, or jinxed when I said it. It was a relief to finally say it out loud.

Hugo raced round to my side of the table and got down on his knees, much to my embarrassment.

I heard someone whisper, 'Look, he's proposing.' I held up my wedding band to them and shook my head, turning the colour of a beetroot. I whispered to him to sit back in his chair.

He was so excited and attentive during both my pregnancies, and over the moon when Emily arrived. He would nurse her for hours, just watching her sleep, or talking to her. I gave up telling him to put her in the cot. 'Most of all I want you to be happy, because I am so happy you are here. I am so blessed to have you here, with Mummy and me, your Daddy. Yes, I'm your Daddy,' he would say. Sometimes I swear she understood every word.

When Adrian was born, Hugo had tears in his eyes. 'We're complete. He's perfect. We're perfect. There is nothing else

I want or need. I love you so much Sophie. Thank you,' he whispered to me as a sob escaped his throat.

For the first few months after the children arrived, I never got up to either of them through the night. Hugo would be the first one to wake and hear their cries. He'd bring them into me to be fed and put them back in their room when they were settled. He never complained and would sit in the rocking chair till he knew they were fast asleep, then put them in their cot.

When had we drifted apart?

Hugo's voice snaps me back to reality. 'Sophie. Would you like another wine? I'm getting myself a beer.'

'Thank you, Hugo but no, I might head up to bed. Goodnight.' Lying in bed, I wonder where it all went so wrong; are all couples are like this? Coasting along, leading separate lives without realising it.

I pick up my book and read, hoping to switch my brain off.

Annie

Jared and I arranged one of our lunch dates. Usually, we try to meet for lunch at least once a week, if our schedules match. But we can go months without seeing each other and though it's an old cliché, we will meet up months later and the conversation will flow as easily as if we had seen each other only the day before. No awkwardness, no bitterness that we haven't been around a great deal.

We notice each other as we approach our favourite cafe from opposite directions, smiling and greeting one another with a kiss on the cheek. We both have impeccable timing, neither

of us liking tardiness. In one fluid movement Jared opens the door and ushers me into the delicious aromas of ground coffee and baked goods.

I love this place. Brick walls cover two sides of the cafe, balanced by floor to ceiling windows which allow natural light to filter into the space. The cathedral ceiling gives a spaciousness to the place, yet it remains cosy and warm with the lights that hang from the crossbeams.

Candice, our young waitress, greets us with the warmth of an old friend. We have been coming here for years and she directs us to our regular table where the chairs are so comfortable yet far enough removed from the other tables for our privacy.

‘Thank you, Candice.’ I’m never sure if she’s heard me, as per usual, she hasn’t taken her eyes off Jared. For a few seconds her gaze is held by him as if she is in a trance, hypnotised by his emerald green eyes with a Celtic twinkle that could charm anyone into doing anything. His mousey-blond hair is perfectly mussed, but despite its casual appearance, I know Jared has spent a lot of time and an enormous amount of hair product to get his couture cut just perfect. I think it’s the only thing that Jared gets just right; his hair. He tells me it’s like a ritual, a meditation to him and the bigger the case he has, the longer he spends on his hair. Not out of vanity, but to relax him and allow him to run through the case before he goes into court.

‘Hello Annie,’ Candice acknowledges me. ‘Hello Jared,’ she says, a blush spreading across her cheeks at his name. ‘Coffee to start?’ I thank her and she disappears with a nod to give our order to the barista.

Jared steps behind me and holds out my chair, something

he has done for as long as I can remember, no matter if we were in a small cafe like this or a five-star restaurant. After I'm seated, he moves around to his chair and sits down. 'I want you to come with me to the opening of the art exhibition,' he says. 'You have to come with me. I want you there, please, this is important to me.'

'Why? I know nothing about art, and it sounds pretentious,' I reply, picking up the menu out of habit. I know the menu off by heart and most days order the same thing, unless one of their specials takes my fancy. I give him a brief glance over my reading glasses.

'Please come.' Jared continues to look at me with those big green twinkling eyes. 'If I'm wrong about him, I'll have you there as my date so I won't look so desperate.'

'You could never look desperate Jared. Cool, yes. Desperate, no. And besides if I come as your date, it will look like you've bought your mother,' I say.

'You don't look that old, darling. Besides, it would honour me to have you on my arm. My little fag hag.' Jared tilts his head sideways, knowing very well he's winding me up.

'Stop calling me that!' I slap his arm in good humour. 'I'm not your little fag hag, your fruit fly. I'm a lesbian, and some days I feel old enough to be your mother.'

'Unless you started having sex with boys at a very young age darling, you are not old enough to be my mother. And besides, even though you were a late bloomer, we both know you were looking at girls at thirteen,' he said with a smirk and a wink.

'Not all of us are not so self-aware or perceptive as you, to think it was not just a phase as so many others do. You knew at fifteen, but you just wanted to be sure. You were of the opinion,

as soon as you told your parents, it was real. You did two years of soul searching. I just had to discover it myself; or discover it on feeling my first set of breasts on the one we shall never speak of.' I laugh as I poke my tongue out at him. 'And by the way, twenty-one is not a late bloomer.'

I met Jared about twenty years ago when I was volunteering at a drop-in centre for gay and lesbian youth. The centre offers support, counselling and a haven where kids could come and meet other like-minded teenagers. Jared and I clicked from the beginning. At fifteen, he had maturity beyond his years, an old soul with a wicked sense of humour. He cared for people, often putting others before himself. At fifteen you expect kids to be more about themselves, but there was such a caring nature about him. Twenty years later his soul and caring nature hasn't changed. That's what I love about him, his passion and his insight, not just into himself but others also.

Jared came out to his parents before he finished college. He had done a lot of soul searching for about two years prior and wanted to tell them when he was sure of his sexuality and not just a phase he was going through. He needed absolute certainty that this was the way he was and the way he wanted to live his life.

Jared asked me to come with him the night he would tell his parents he was gay, for support. It was one of the most amazing scenes I have witnessed but not all families can be so welcoming and amazing at the same time.

His parents accepted the news, his father saying it wasn't a surprise given his caring nurturing side, even as a teenager. His father's primary concern was how society would accept him. Not all people are forgiving, his father would often say. Both men

hugged and cried at the same time.

His mother just stood there, looking at father and son, silent tears cascading down her cheeks. She had her hands to her mouth, stopping herself from sobbing.

I walked over to her and put my arm around her for support. “Are you okay? You don’t appear surprised by his news,” I asked.

“I always knew he was special. I always knew he was gay. I’m just happy that his father is accepting it. That was my biggest fear when Jared came to the realisation of his sexuality, that his father would push him away. These are tears of joy.” She smiled at me through her tears. I knew then where Jared got his smile.

Over lunch we fill the conversation with the upcoming art show, the artists involved; it would be the first time many of them had shown their art in such a sizeable space.

‘How did the art show come about? How come you’re involved, or how did you become involved in it?’ I ask.

‘The artists approached the firm asking for help and advice about staging their own show. As new artists they were finding it hard to show their work in galleries, so they took matters into their own hands and are putting on their own show. They’re nervous about it. It needs to be a success, so they don’t lose money. It’s a big gamble for them, but they believe in their work, which is great. I admire their passion and the belief they have in themselves. It’s my job to review the contracts from the gallery they have hired, for the artists, or for some of them at least. Marcus is one artist I’m working with,’ Jared said. ‘Annie, I can’t wait till you meet Marcus. He’s just an amazing, beautiful person. Inside and out,’ Jared gushes.

‘Tell me more about him. I get the beautiful inside and out bit;

but tell me more. Fair, dark, tall, short, skinny, not skinny? Come on, spill.'

I haven't seen or heard Jared like this for a long time and it's good to see the life back in him, the sparkle back in his emerald green eyes. Not that he ever showed how dark his world felt. During those bleak times I would just lie with him and hold him while he cried, sobbed, or just stared into space. This profound change in him brought a smile to my face. I couldn't help but enjoy his animation and happiness. I never want to see Jared in pain again.

'His name is Marcus. He's thirty-two, so three years younger than me. His parents emigrated from Spain years ago. Marcus and three of his siblings were born here, he's the youngest of five. Two brothers and two sisters, and they all have kids. He is Uncle Marcus to six nephews and seven nieces. He has black curly hair, loose curls... soft, loose curls.' Jared shows by waving his hands around his own hair. 'Olive skin and the darkest, biggest brown eyes; they're almond shaped with the longest, darkest eyelashes I have ever seen. I think he's caught me staring at him, and his eyes, they are hypnotic. He's a little shorter than me with swimmer's shoulders.' Jared gestures at his own shoulders for emphasis... 'And just a likeable person. He's not flamboyant, quiet like he's thinking before he speaks,' Jared takes a breath. 'I like him.' This last part is a whisper, as if trying not to jinx himself. 'I feel I'm in a tough situation. I need to be professional, so asking a client out is not on the radar. Plus, I don't even know if he is gay so that's even more of a risk.' His foot taps nervously on the floor, his leg slightly rattling our table. I steady my cutlery and Jared continues, 'The firm have had a few lunch meetings with the artists and Marcus

and I would always end up sitting next to, or near one another. I don't seek Marcus out, and doesn't seem like he's seeking me out either. It always ended up that way and we would just talk. He's so easy to talk to and I need to remind myself we're at a business lunch, so we best listen to the boss. I do not want to get on the wrong side of Aaron. Did I tell you he's been made senior partner?'

'Yes, you told me last week.' I flutter a hand dismissively, not wanting the conversation to turn to Jared's uptight boss. 'I can sense how much you like Marcus. You phone me after every meeting you have with him. Going on about how gorgeous he is, how shy, unsure of himself as an artist he is, how modest he is. I've not seen you so affected by someone for a long time.' I smile. 'It's good to see you happy.'

'So please, will you come with me?' Jared said with all seriousness. 'It's this Friday.'

'Yes of course, I'll be there with you,' I said without a second thought or hesitation, wondering why I sounded gruff with him earlier when he asked me to come with him. 'What time do you want to be there? Work is horrendously busy, so you might have to pick me up from there. I want to tie up some loose ends so I can have a free weekend.'

'Can you be ready by 6.30? That way we'll be there by 7. The show doesn't start till 7.30 but I need to get there earlier.' Jared said, still a little nervous. 'You will be on time?'

'I'll shower and change at work. Besides, when am I ever not on time?' Jared's eyes narrow and I hastily correct, 'With that *one* exception, I'm always on time.' I wink, trying to put him at ease.

'Even I thought she was hot darling! I don't even know how

you got out of there alive. She could have turned me and I'm a gold star!' We both laugh as we remember back to the blonde who wouldn't let me go. Jared and his euphemisms. He loves telling women that he is a gold star when they flirt with him, asking him to come home with them. It's something he is proud of, having never slept with a woman. 'I know this is important for you and I'll be there, J, and I'll even be early.' When I shortened his name to J, he knows I'm serious.