

Part One

Agatha

I am not the most important person in this story. That honour belongs to Meg who is married to Jack and they are the perfect parents of two perfect children, a boy and girl, blond and blue-eyed and sweeter than honey cakes. Meg is pregnant again and I couldn't be more excited because I'm having a baby too.

Leaning my forehead against the glass, I look in both directions along the pavement, past the greengrocer and hairdressing salon and fashion boutique. Meg is running late. Normally she has dropped Lucy at primary school and Lachlan at his day nursery by now and has joined her friends at the café on the corner. Her mothers' group meets every Friday morning, sitting at an outdoor table, jostling prams into place like prime movers on the vehicle deck of a ferry. One skinny cappuccino, one chai latte and a pot of herbal tea . . .

A red bus goes past and blocks my view of Barnes Green, which is opposite. When it pulls away again I see Meg on the far side of the road. She's dressed in her stretch jeans and a baggy sweater, and carrying a colourful three-wheeled scooter. Lachlan must have insisted on riding to his preschool, which would have slowed her down. He will also have stopped to

look at the ducks and at the exercise class and at the old people doing t'ai chi who move so slowly they could almost be stop motion puppets.

Meg doesn't appear pregnant from this angle. It's only when she turns side-on that the bump becomes a basketball, neat and round, getting lower by the day. I heard her complaining last week about swollen ankles and a sore back. I know how she feels. My extra pounds have turned climbing stairs into a workout and my bladder is the size of a walnut.

Glancing both ways, she crosses Church Road and mouths the word 'sorry' to her friends, double-kissing their cheeks and cooing at their babies. All babies are cute, people say, and I guess that's true. I have peered into prams at Gollum-like creatures with sticky-out eyes and two strands of hair, yet always found something to love because they're so newly minted and innocent.

I'm supposed to be stacking the shelves in aisle three. This part of the supermarket is usually a safe place to skive, because the manager, Mr Patel, has a problem with feminine hygiene products. He won't use words like 'tampons' or 'sanitary pads' – calling them 'ladies' things' or simply pointing to the boxes that he wants unpacked.

I work four days a week, early mornings to three, unless one of the other part-timers calls in sick. Mostly I stack shelves and sticker prices. Mr Patel won't let me work the cash register because he says I break things. *That happened one time and it wasn't my fault.*

With a name like Mr Patel, I thought he'd be Pakistani or Indian, but he turned out to be Welsher than a daffodil, with a shock of red hair and a truncated moustache that makes him look like Adolf Hitler's ginger lovechild.

Mr Patel doesn't like me very much and he's been itching to get rid of me ever since I told him I was pregnant.

'Don't expect any maternity leave – you're not full-time.'

'I don't expect any.'

‘And doctor’s appointments are on your own time.’

‘Sure.’

‘And if you can’t lift boxes you’ll have to stop working.’

‘I can lift boxes.’

Mr Patel has a wife and four kids at home, but it hasn’t made him any more sympathetic to my pregnancy. I don’t think he likes women very much. I don’t mean he’s gay. When I first started working at the supermarket he was all over me like a rash – finding any excuse to brush up against me in the store-room or when I was mopping the floor.

‘Oops!’ he’d say, pressing his hard-on against my buttocks. ‘Just parking my bike.’

Pervert!

I go back to my stock trolley and pick up the price gun, careful to check the settings. Last week I put the wrong price on the canned peaches and Mr Patel docked me eight quid.

‘What are you doing?’ barks a voice. Mr Patel has crept up behind me.

‘Restocking the tampons,’ I stutter.

‘You were staring out the window. Your forehead made that greasy mark on the glass.’

‘No, Mr Patel.’

‘Do I pay you to daydream?’

‘No, sir.’ I point to the shelf. ‘We’re out of the Tampax Super Plus – the one with the applicator.’

Mr Patel looks queasy. ‘Well, look in the storeroom.’ He’s backing away. ‘There’s a spill in aisle two. Mop it up.’

‘Yes, Mr Patel.’

‘Then you can go home.’

‘But I’m working until three.’

‘Devyani will cover for you. She can climb the stepladder.’

What he means is that she’s not pregnant or afraid of heights, and that she’ll let him ‘park his bike’ without going all feminist on his arse. I should sue him for sexual harassment, but I like this job. It gives me an excuse to be in Barnes and nearer to Meg.

In the rear storeroom I fill a bucket with hot soapy water and choose a sponge mop that hasn't worn away to the metal frame. Aisle two is closer to the registers. I get a good view of the café and the outside tables. I take my time cleaning the floor, staying clear of Mr Patel. Meg and her friends are finishing up. Cheeks are kissed. Phones are checked. Babies are strapped into prams and pushchairs. Meg makes some final remark and laughs, tossing her fair hair. Almost unconsciously, I toss mine. It doesn't work. That's the problem with curls – they don't toss, they bounce.

Meg's hairdresser, Jonathan, warned me that I couldn't get away with the same cut that she does, but I wouldn't listen to him.

Meg is standing outside the café, texting someone on her phone. It's probably Jack. They'll be discussing what to have for dinner, or making plans for the weekend. I like her maternity jeans. I need a pair like that – something with an elasticised waist. I wonder where she bought them.

Although I see Meg most days, I've only ever spoken to her once. She asked if we had any more Bran Flakes, but we had sold out. I wish I could have said yes. I wish I could have gone back through the swinging plastic doors and returned with a box of Bran Flakes just for her.

That was in early May. I suspected she was pregnant even then. A fortnight later she picked up a pregnancy test from the pharmacy aisle and my suspicions were confirmed. Now we're both in our third trimester with only six weeks to go and Meg has become my role model because she makes marriage and motherhood look so easy. For starters, she's drop-dead gorgeous. I bet she could easily have been a model – not the bulimic catwalk kind, or the *phuwoar* Page Three stunner kind, but a wholesome and sexy girl-next-door type; the ones who advertise laundry detergent or home insurance and are always running across flowery meadows or along a beach with a Labrador.

I'm none of the above. I'm not particularly pretty, nor am I

plain. Unthreatening is probably the right word. I'm the less attractive friend that all pretty girls need because I won't steal their limelight and will happily take their leftovers (food and boyfriends).

One of the sad truths of retailing is that people don't notice shelf-stackers. I'm like a vagrant sleeping in a doorway or a beggar holding up a cardboard sign – invisible. Occasionally someone will ask me a question, but they never look at my face when I'm answering. If there was a bomb scare at the supermarket and everyone was evacuated except me, the police would ask, 'Did you see anyone else in the shop?'

'No,' they'd say.

'What about the shelf-stacker?'

'Who?'

'The person stacking the shelves.'

'I didn't take much notice of him.'

'It was a woman.'

'Really?'

That's me – unseen, inappreciable, a shelf-stacker.

I glance outside. Meg is walking towards the supermarket. The automatic doors open. She picks up a plastic shopping basket and wanders along aisle one – fruit and veg. When she gets to the end she'll turn and head this way. I follow her progress and catch a glimpse of her when she passes the pasta and canned tomatoes.

She turns into my aisle. I push the bucket to one side and step back, wondering if I should nonchalantly lean on my mop or shoulder it like a wooden rifle.

'Careful, the floor is wet,' I say, sounding like I'm talking to a two-year-old.

My voice surprises her. She mumbles thank you and slides by, her belly almost touching mine.

'When are you due?' I ask.

Meg stops and turns. 'Early December.' She notices that I'm pregnant. 'How about you?'

‘The same.’

‘What day?’ she asks.

‘December fifth.’

‘A boy or a girl?’

‘I don’t know. How about you?’

‘A boy.’

She’s carrying Lachlan’s scooter. ‘You already have one,’ I say.

‘Two,’ she replies.

‘Wow!’

I’m staring at her. I tell myself to look away. I glance at my feet, then the bucket, the condensed milk and the custard powder. I should say something else. I can’t think.

Meg’s basket is heavy. ‘Well, good luck.’

‘You too,’ I say.

She’s gone, heading towards the checkout. Suddenly, I think of all the things I could have said. I could have asked where she was having the baby. What sort of birth? I could have commented on her stretch jeans. Asked her where she bought them.

Meg has joined the queue at the register, flicking through the gossip magazines as she waits her turn. The new *Vogue* isn’t out, but she settles for *Tatler* and a copy of *Private Eye*.

Mr Patel begins scanning her items: eggs, milk, potatoes, mayonnaise, rocket and Parmesan. You can tell a lot about a person from the contents of a shopping trolley; the vegetarians, vegans, alcoholics, chocaholics, weight-watchers, five-two-ers, cat lovers, dog owners, dope smokers, coeliacs, the lactose intolerant and those with dandruff, diabetes, vitamin deficiencies, constipation or ingrown toenails.

That’s how I know so much about Meg. I know she’s a lapsed vegetarian who started eating red meat again when she fell pregnant, most likely because of the iron. She likes tomato-based sauces, fresh pasta, cottage cheese, dark chocolate and those shortbread biscuits that come in tins.

I’ve spoken to her properly now. We’ve made a connection.

We're going to be friends, Meg and I, and I'll be just like her. I'll make a lovely home and keep my man happy. We'll do yoga classes and swap recipes and meet for coffee every Friday morning with our mothers' group.