It's the Little Things

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ERICA JAMES



Chapter One

Doctor Chloe Hennessey had long since mastered the art of maintaining a perfectly neutral expression.

'Exactly how much bigger do you want to be, Chelsea?' she asked.

Chelsea Savage put her hands in front of her chest – a chest that looked to be about the same size as Chloe's – but before the girl could open her mouth, her mother piped up, 'She wants to be a 34GG.' A stout, blousily dressed woman in her mid-forties, Mrs Savage worked part-time behind the bar at the Fox and Feathers and was well known for her ability to stamp on any potential bar room brawls. She was also known for starting a few brawls in her time and more than lived up to her name. Not for nothing was she nicknamed The Pit Bull at the surgery.

'And you are currently what size, Chelsea?' Chloe asked her patient. She blamed the ever-increasing number of women and young girls wanting breast implants on all those makeover shows on the telly. You couldn't switch it on these days without seeing some poor woman having her body knocked into a supposedly better shape.

'She's a 34A,' chimed in Mrs Savage. 'And it's making her depressed. She's a right pain at times, let me tell you. Always mooching about the place with a face on her like a wet Sunday in Bridlington.'

Chloe kept her gaze deliberately on the sixteen-year-old girl before her. She was pretty enough in a bland, unremarkable way, but as with so many teenage girls, her face had been clumsily painted with too much make-up. 'Are you depressed, Chelsea?' she probed.

Shifting her chewing gum from one side of her mouth to the other, Chelsea nodded and twiddled with a large hooped earring. 'Now and then, yeah.'

Yes, thought Chloe. Show me a teenager who isn't.

'The thing is,' Mrs Savage butted in again, 'if she's going to make it as a model, she'll have to have them made bigger.'

Ever since Chelsea had been crowned Eastbury's May Queen last year and had been paraded through the village in a canary-yellow, open-topped Smart car, Mrs Savage had bragged to anyone who would listen that this was the start of things to come. Her daughter was going to be famous; she would be on the front of every magazine and tabloid you could care to mention.

'If I'm not mistaken, Mrs Savage,' Chloe said patiently, 'most catwalk models don't have a double G cup size. Quite the reverse, in fact.'

'I'm not talking about those zero-sized airheads who can't keep a meal down them,' the woman said. 'Chelsea's going to be a glamour model.' She turned to her daughter and smiled proudly at her. 'Isn't that right, love?'

Once more Chelsea nodded and twiddled with her earring. 'So what do you think, doctor? Can I have the surgery? For free, like.'

'It's a little more complicated than that, Chelsea. You see, you are only sixteen and we have to decide whether you really—'

The Pit Bull raised a heavily ringed hand and bared her teeth. 'Whoa there! End of. Absolutely end of. I'm not going to sit here and listen to any mealy-mouthed back-pedalling.'

'Mrs Savage, all I was trying to—'

'No, now you listen to me, doctor. I know my rights. Chelsea's rights too. If she's not happy with her body and it's causing her mental anguish, then she's entitled to have implants on the NHS. Now give us the forms or whatever it is we need to sign to get the ball rolling for the necessary referral and we'll be on our way; we've got an appointment

at the tanning centre in ten minutes. And no offence, but if you don't mind me saying, you could do with some implants yourself. With a decent pair of hooters, you might not spend so many nights on your own.'

Great, thought Chloe. All those years of training, hard slog and sleepless nights only to wind up being verbally trashed and told how to do my job.

With afternoon surgery over, and only running a few minutes late for her home visits, Chloe slipped out unnoticed to the car park at the rear of the building before the practice manager could collar her. It was Chloe's first day back after a week away skiing in Austria, but she didn't doubt Karen could find something to nag her about. Usually it was her timekeeping. She spent far too long with the patients, she was frequently warned. The other doctors could keep to the schedule; why couldn't she?

She liked to think it was because she was a maverick, put on this earth to confound and frustrate, but actually it was because she was just plain old thorough and liked to spend time with her patients. She hated to upset her more elderly or timid patients by rudely hurrying them. There were exceptions, though. Some mistook kindness and understanding for pity and they required a much more robust bedside manner.

At the age of thirty-seven, Chloe was the youngest doctor at Eastbury Surgery, and was perhaps, as the other doctors regularly teased her, still the most idealistic. The practice had doubled in size in the last ten years due to the expansion of the village, sitting as it was within commutable distance of Manchester. Farmland that had been in the hands of Cheshire families for generations had been sold off to make way for a full range of properties, from doll's-house-size starter homes through to five-bedroomed executive dwellings that boasted saunas and under-floor heating. The latest must-have accessory to these upmarket houses was a hot tub installed in the garden.

Chloe had wanted to be a doctor ever since she could

remember. Probably because her father had been one and she had considered him the cleverest and bravest man alive. But then, at six years old, you think anyone is a genius if they can cure you of a painful earache, and as for being able to look at a dead body without screaming or bursting into tears, that surely took courage beyond words. Now, of course, she knew better: it was all smoke and mirrors.

Her first home visit was only a five-minute drive away, up Chapel Hill and then onto Lark Lane. Ron Tuttle lived in one of the original sandstone farm workers' cottages. There had been a Tuttle living on Lark Lane for more than a hundred and seventy years. But not for much longer unless Ron – the last in the line of Tuttles – took better care of himself.

She parked on the road outside his cottage and, case in hand, walked up the short path that was lined with daffodils – King Alfred's; they were tough and sturdy and gave the impression of standing guard. She gave the door knocker a loud rap and adopted her most robust bedside manner. Anything less would be deemed as patronizing and give Ron cause to take his walking stick to her.

Minutes passed and she risked another go at the tarnished knocker. 'I heard you the first time,' came an angry shout from inside, as well as the sound of a lock being turned. The door opened. 'Who do you think I am, Roger-flipping-Bannister?'

'Roger Who?'

'First man to run a mile in less than four minutes. Don't you know nothing, girl?'

'I know plenty. Now can I come in or do you want me to examine your prostate here on the step?'

'Mother Teresa's love child, that's you!' he roared.

'That's an improvement on a fortnight ago when I was Harold Shipman's love child. These sweet endearments of yours will have to stop, you know, or people will talk.'

The old man's eyes glinted with a smile and leaning heavily on his walking stick, he stood aside to let her in.

She noticed he had made his usual attempt to smarten himself up for her visit. She also noticed that his shirt collar looked a little looser around his neck, a sign he was still losing weight. Closing the door after her, he said, 'I never had this trouble with your father. He never gave me any lip. How is he?'

'Making hay with Mum. They're hardly ever at home these days. Whenever I call round or telephone them they're just about to go somewhere. They're like a couple of kids.'

'What would you rather they were doing? Sitting miserably at home waiting to die? Anyhow, give the doc my regards when you do see him next. Cup of tea before we get down to business?'

'Thank you, but another time perhaps.'

Ron Tuttle sniffed. 'Your father always had time for a brew.'

With the last of her visits completed, Chloe decided to nip home for an hour before evening surgery. A few of the patients she had seen that afternoon were elderly, and much of what they'd had to say to her had been gilded with nostalgic references to The Great Doctor Hennessey Senior. Chloe had no problem accepting that her father was a hard act to follow or that she would always be compared with him. Or that some people couldn't take her seriously because they remembered her as a child tearing around the village on her bike with her brother, Nick. None of this mattered to her because the vast majority of her patients were incomers and had never encountered her father or known her when she was little. There was also Dad's own testimony that spurred her on. These same patients who now claimed he could do no wrong had once upon a time complained unstintingly that he was nothing but a smooth-talking upstart who didn't know a bunion from a green stick fracture.

Dad had retired five years ago from the surgery he'd joined when he'd been Chloe's age. In those days the word

of the local GP was the word of God. How different it was now, when the Savages of this world were able to demand their rights and dictate the terms of their treatment. Chloe had never intended to move back home to Eastbury, but then she'd never intended to very nearly lose her life and the man she'd thought she would marry.

When that had happened, throwing her life into turmoil, the pull of her childhood roots had seemed the answer to her crisis and as if by magic everything had slipped into place. A new GP was needed at Eastbury Surgery, and Pocket House, an end-of-terrace cottage facing the village green, came on the market. It was a stone's throw from her parents, as well as her closest friends, Dan and Sally. Thankfully nobody had dared utter the words 'It's meant to be' – had they done so, Chloe might have been tempted to give them a lethal injection – and by Easter 2005, almost four months after surviving one of the world's worst natural disasters, she'd moved from Nottingham back to Cheshire and her life had taken on a degree of normality again. As had Dan's and Sally's lives, for they, on holiday with Chloe and Paul, had also been caught up in the disaster that would for ever be known as the Boxing Day tsunami.

She locked her car and walked round to the back of the cottage. It was a beautiful March afternoon, and spring was very much in the air. Her small but cherished garden was teeming with new life. The magnolia tree, the forsythia bushes and the camellias basking in the late afternoon sun against the stone wall of the garage were all in full flower. As were the daffodils and grape hyacinths her mother had helped plant last autumn. The clocks had changed to British Summer Time at the weekend and to Chloe's great joy, the days were longer and brighter. This was her favourite time of the year, when, against all the odds, hope sprang eternally.

She let herself in and walked through to the conservatory that she'd had built onto the kitchen. It had opened up the space beautifully and she now had an airy and

spacious room that gave her a view of not only the back garden, but also the village green at the front. What made it her favourite room was the wood-burning stove she'd had put into the fireplace, which the previous owners had boarded up.

With only forty-five minutes before she had to be back at work for evening surgery, she made herself a cup of coffee and checked her answerphone. The first message was from her brother apologizing for having somehow ended up with her ski gloves in his suitcase and saying he'd post them on to her.

The next message was from her mother, hoping she'd had a good holiday with Nick and his friends and reminding her that it was Dad's birthday on Friday. 'He's insisting on trying out the new recipes he learned during that cookery weekend, so be warned. See you Friday, at eight.'

The third message was from her father. 'Just to say I'm under orders from your mother to cook her favourite seafood risotto for dinner on Saturday. See you at seven.'

Her parents ran the Ministry of Misinformation. They did it effortlessly and to great effect; the one rarely knew what the other was up to.

The fourth message was from—

Chloe put down her cup of coffee and backed away from the machine as if it was about to explode. Hearing that voice – *his* voice – her insides churned. Time was, the churning would have been with lust and desire for him. Not now.

'Hi, Chloe, it's Paul. Yes, I know, this is probably the last voice on earth you expected to hear again. The thing is …' The sound of rustling and a throat being cleared filled the kitchen. 'Oh, hell, I didn't think it would be so hard to do this – look, what I want to say is … I—' More throat clearing. 'I don't suppose there's any chance we could get together for a chat, could we? It would be a place and time to suit you. I'll leave that entirely for you to decide. You can contact me on my mobile. My number is—'

But Paul – *That man! That snake in the grass!* – as her mother had renamed him, had taken so long with his message, he'd run out of space on her machine. He hadn't rung back to give her the number either. He'd probably assumed that she'd received his message in full.

Which she had, loud and very clearly, exactly three weeks after they had flown home to Nottingham after that disastrous holiday on Phuket. Off work with her leg in plaster and a fractured collar bone, and numerous cuts and bruises, he'd announced that he didn't love her any more. 'Surviving the tsunami has brought it home to me that we only get one chance in this life,' he'd said. He'd gone on to give her every other possible cliché about there being no dress rehearsal, that this life was the only one on offer and that if there was a chance of happiness one had to grab it with both hands. He'd even said that one day she would thank him for having the courage to leave her.

It turned out he'd been having an affair for goodness knows how long and coming so close to his own demise had sharpened his focus and helped him to make up his mind who he really wanted to be with. From then on, Paul Stratton, one-time prospective son-in-law to Jennifer and Graham Hennessey, became known as *That man! That snake in the grass!*

Now, three years and two months later, he wanted to get together for a drink and a chat.

Did he really think she'd agree to meet him?