

CHAPTER ONE

As Adam scanned the morning's agenda Lisa could hear the chatter of the girls as they filed into assembly. The closed office door muted the sound, but she knew when they entered the hall it would be like the bird house in a zoo. She stood next to his neatly organised desk ready to fill in any details he was unsure of.

"So, Mrs Stannard is going to introduce me and give a brief explanation, and then I'll take over?" he asked, looking up at her.

"Yes, we thought that would be best. It will give some sort of continuity."

"And you'll be ready to prompt me on the agenda," he said, grinning.

"Yes, but I'm confident you won't need me," she replied with a reassuring smile.

He glanced at his watch, a slim classic that matched his gold cuff links, clipped his Montblanc pen into his pocket, picked up the file and rose briskly from his chair, his six foot-four frame towering over her. He fastened the middle button of his suit jacket, a dark blue that together with his pale blue shirt enhanced his fading tan. His broad shoulders filled the jacket to perfection and he could have stepped out of a clothing catalogue if it weren't for the few stray locks of hair that fell over his brow despite him constantly finger-combing them back.

"Let's go. Wish me luck," he said.

"Good luck," she said, wondering if he knew just how much he would need it.

They crossed the passage to the assembly hall and when he swung the door open for Lisa there was a momentary hush, but as he followed her up the steps and onto the stage a babble of excitement broke out, hushed to silence by the teachers who sat in the aisle beside each class.

A tight-lipped Mrs Stannard was already sitting behind a table on the stage, framed by the red velvet curtains that hung closed behind her. A lectern stood to the side and behind it sat a nervous senior girl ready to read the day's religious or inspirational thoughts. Adam pulled out a chair for Lisa and then sat between the two women. Mrs Stannard handed him a copy of the reading that was to be presented by the senior girl, and while he scanned it for its suitability another round of whispering broke out amongst the girls. There'd been rumours about Miss Edwards leaving, but who was this man? Surely he couldn't be the new head – a man! And why was Mrs Ryan, the secretary sitting with him?

Finally he nodded to Mrs Stannard who got up to speak and the girls lapsed into an expectant silence.

"Good morning, girls."

"Good morning Mrs Stannard," they chorused.

"I hope you all enjoyed the holidays and are now back and eager to work."

There were a few mumbled 'yes, Misses' before she continued.

"You'll be sad to learn that Miss Edwards has taken early retirement due to ill health." This was no shock or surprise as most of the girls had been aware of her dementia. "No doubt you all know that Miss Edwards has served the school loyally for over twenty-five years and it is a sad loss." Very few of the girls were listening, some because Mrs Stannard's voice did not carry well to the back of the hall, despite her encouragement of the drama class to project their voices, but mostly because they were all watching Adam, impatiently twisting his pen between his

fingers. "However, you'll be pleased to hear that Mr Wild has been appointed your new head teacher until further notice."

The hubbub of excited anticipation drowned her next words. "Mr Wild will now address you."

Adam threaded his way round the table to the front of the stage, his presence and self-assurance immediately commanding their attention and they fell silent. "Good morning, ladies." The surprise at being addressed as ladies instead of girls was doubled by the realisation that he had an American accent. His deep male voice filled the large hall, so unlike the sometimes timid voices of the female staff.

"My name is Adam Wild. You may address me as Mr Wild, or Sir." He waited a few moments before continuing. "Those of you who are no longer looking directly at me, but into their laps, are probably typing my name into the Google search engine of whatever electronic device is taking up your attention. Well I'm going to save you the bother and tell you all you need to know, so please switch them off. And I might add that you won't find me on Facebook, or Twitter or any of the other similar websites."

Lisa felt a slight flush of shame. Googling his name had been the first thing she had done after meeting him.

He paced the stage waiting for the scuffling of school bags and electronic beeps to recede as the guilty ones switched off their phones and returned their attention to him.

Hooking his thumb in his trouser pocket he sat on the corner of the table and surveyed them. "Firstly, I want to make it clear that all phones and electronic devices are to be switched off within the school building. You may use them in the schoolyard only. I will be doing periodic checks. If I find a phone switched on I will confiscate it until the end of the day. If it should ring while in my possession I will assume that the call you're expecting is more important than my instructions and I'll be obliged to answer the call, or read the text message in order to convey its contents to you. Is that clear?"

A few disgruntled murmurs could be heard.

"I said – Is that clear?"

"Yes, Sir," chorused the girls.

"And there is another new rule. The school gates will be closed at five minutes to nine. If you arrive after that you will have to press the gate buzzer and then report to me with your excuses. No one will be allowed outside the school during school hours without my approval. That is from nine a.m. until four fifteen p.m. – and that includes the lunch break."

Horried gasps came from the girls who had regular lunchtime trysts with boys, and those who preferred crisps and sweets to school dinners. Lisa heard a distinct, "That's not fair," from Glenda McKenzie and her cronies, who were the main culprits in lunchtime dates with the boys. Glenda's face flashed with the vengeance of a teenager thwarted.

St Mary's Academy for Girls' and St Mary's Academy for Boys were both part of the same building, mirrored, but each with its own separate entrance and attached by a joint kitchen which served meals to the boys' and girls' dining rooms. Both schools had the same governing body, but were otherwise autonomous.

"You will only be allowed out during the lunch break if you can provide a valid reason, accompanied by a note from a parent or guardian, which I will verify with a phone call," said Adam.

There were mixed reactions to their new head teacher. The more 'forward' of the senior girls did not appreciate having their wings clipped. Others, who normally slouched and wore a permanent look of boredom - the default face of teenage girls - were suddenly sitting up straight and adjusting their clothing to show off their figures to better advantage. But many of the junior girls were hanging onto his every word.

"It's going to take me some time to learn all your names, so I have arranged with the art and craft teacher to make name badges. These will be worn inside the school premises, but will be removed or covered when outside the school property. I don't want any of you receiving uninvited attention."

The new head was obviously not going to be the pushover that Miss Edwards had sadly become, manipulated by the girls, and sorry to say, some of the teachers. Adam Wild had been used to barking orders while in the navy, he had set a new tone for the school, but Lisa wondered if there would be an eventual backlash - girls could be manipulative in ways that men sometimes did not recognise.

As she looked round the assembly hall Lisa noticed a subtle change in some of the staff. They had taken more care with their choice of clothes, and make-up had been more diligently applied.

"As you can tell from my accent, I'm from the US," Adam was saying as he now paced slowly back and forth across the stage, one hand in his pocket. "Hawaii, actually." Girls were exchanging wide-eyed glances. He was becoming even more romantic. "And yes, I do know that a car has a boot and a bonnet, and not a trunk and a hood. And that colour is spelt with a U. And I don't much like the rain and cold here, and yes, I do go home to Hawaii for the holidays." He paused while the laughter subsided before continuing. "My father was in the US navy and I followed him into the service. I left the navy after he died and pursued my passion to become a teacher. That's how I met my wife." A few groans of disappointment.

He hesitated and looked down, and they waited expectantly. Looking up again he said in a quieter voice, "Five years ago she, and our eight-year-old daughter, Kirsty, and four-year-old son, Sean were killed in a motor accident by a driver high on drugs. Kirsty would have been your age now and probably at this school, following in her mother's footsteps." He glanced across at the large wooden plaques adorning the walls of the hall. "She was head girl. You can see her name, Michelle Roberts. Her younger sister, Nicole was also here. I think you'll find her name on the honour roll."

The effect of his words was electric. *Oh, Adam, thought Lisa. Don't you know you've just made all the girls fall in love with you? You're a lamb to the slaughter.*

His voice stronger now, he continued. "If anyone in this school is found with drugs it will mean instant suspension. I will be instigating a zero tolerance. If I have the slightest suspicion of drug-taking or dealing I won't hesitate to bring in sniffer dogs. I will be sending letters to your parents informing them. Do I make myself clear?"

This time there was an immediate chorus of, "Yes, Sir."

It seemed to Lisa that her Google search had unearthed some things that he wasn't going to mention, like medals he'd been awarded when in the navy, and martial arts trophies. He'd also failed to tell them that most of the payout he'd received on the death of his family had been put into a drug rehabilitation programme, and together with a large donation from his mother's wealthy family they had opened a centre for addicts in Hawaii.

He dealt smoothly with the rest of the assembly, but it was during the closing hymn when his powerful male voice rang out that Lisa knew he'd made his presence well and truly felt.

The girls filed out noisily discussing this new development in their school life, and she followed Adam back to his office wondering what impact he would have on the rest of them.

He sat down at his desk and tilted his chair back. "So, how do you think they took to having a new headmaster instead of a headmistress?"

"I think they got the message that discipline will be stepped up," she replied.

"There are several changes I have in mind for my office," he said.

"And we also need to get the sign changed to Head Teacher instead of Headmistress," said Lisa, grinning. "Fred Smith should be able to organise it. He's been caretaker for years and knows all the building suppliers. I think he's past retirement age, but he loves his job."

"And I'd better meet the kitchen staff and nutritionist," said Adam. He glanced at his watch. "Now would probably be a good time. Let's go."

Lisa re-directed incoming landline calls to her phone and followed Adam out of the office.