

## CHAPTER 1

**T**HAT'S IT. ENOUGH'S ENOUGH. I'm leaving.' Beth's mouth fell open in surprise. The row hadn't *nearly* got to that stage yet. It had only just reached 'The reason I'm marking essays *now* is so I don't have to do them after we get back from the theatre tonight.'

They hadn't even touched on 'Why do you have to drive the kids everywhere? Why can't they go on their bikes?' (Because we're seven miles out of town and who was it wanted to buy a house in Fenbourne anyway?)

And it was unheard of for Alan to skip 'You shouldn't encourage them with this singing and dancing nonsense. It's not going to equip them for life, you know,' or 'Why doesn't anyone put anything away in this house? How am I supposed to bring clients back for a drink when every room looks like a jumble sale in a bomb shelter?' (To which the answer was that Alan had never shown the slightest desire to bring clients back for a drink. He took them to his club or a hotel depending on how much money he thought he was going to make out of them. And the house wasn't untidy *all* the time.)

Alan marched upstairs to fling his golf things together, his standard response when her 'unhelpful attitude' clashed with his dictums. Angry footsteps dented the floorboards. Beth put her fingers in her ears and tried to concentrate on marking. Such a stupid row – just because Natalie's and Robin's friends were coming back for lunch after the *Stagestruck* class. Why Alan should object to having them in the house now and again (they didn't *live* here by any means) when he'd once stood Robin's entire football team an end-of-season party, she failed

to see. Mind, that was before Rob had given up soccer because the practices clashed with dance classes.

The footsteps clumped down the stairs. Alan swore as he struggled with the front door. Beth heard his car unlock with a servile bleep, heard him curse with an uncharacteristic lack of regard for the neighbours. Then he came back, opened the hall cupboard for his golf clubs and went out again. And then he came in again. And went out again. And came in once more.

Unease stippled across Beth's mind. She went into the hall. 'Alan!' she cried, aghast.

He dumped a bag of shoes into the boot of his car.

'Alan, do you want to talk about this?' Beth heard the slight edge of panic in her voice and tried to suppress it.

'No,' said her husband, scooping a rackful of coats off their hooks. He folded them onto the passenger seat. Through the rear windscreen Beth could see a mountainous bundle wrapped in what looked like the top sheet off their bed. Panic set in with a vengeance, the full ten thousand watt, adrenalin-pumping sort. 'I'll put the kettle on,' she said. 'Let's sit down and –'

'No,' he said again, his face as indifferent as the time he'd told her how he'd severed the Amalgamated Haulage contract because they weren't giving him good enough rates. 'You'll only trot out the same old platitudes. Frankly, Beth, I'm sick of them. To coin a phrase, you should have been paying more attention to the market. Customers vote with their feet. Goodbye.' The echoes of the front door slamming were lost in the roar of his car starting up.

It wasn't possible! Beth skidded into the lounge to glimpse his tailgate already disappearing up the street. Her legs folded under her. She sat down hard on the window seat, her body pulsing with unexpectedness. She looked numbly at the table.

Spike Taylor's essay lay open with her red pen on top of it. It was too incredible to take in. Alan couldn't have just left her! He couldn't! Something so life-changing couldn't possibly happen this quickly! Mechanically, she picked up her cup. Even the tea was still warm.

'Sorry,' Beth called through the Galaxy's window as she swerved to a halt in the empty car park.

'S'all right. We've been earwigging under the window. We're going to be in *Wind In The Willows*.' Natalie paused as she opened the car door. 'God, Mum, you look awful.'

Thank you, daughter. Really.

'We're all going to be in it,' said Robin. 'Lisa and Jack too.'

'Mr Edmonds had me sing twice,' boasted Natalie, 'and he said Lisa's dancing was cool.'

'Like you were the only ones he was watching,' said Robin. He and Jack scrambled in and banged the door shut. 'What's for lunch?'

Lunch? Beth's stomach recoiled at the mere thought. 'Pizza and salad. You can put your own toppings on.'

'Decent. Can I have peanut butter and cream cheese?'

'Gross!' squealed the girls.

Beth's mind scrabbled around like an out-of-control spinning top as she pulled away, automatically filtering out the teenage squabbling. Alan. How was she ever going to tell them about Alan?

The air was heavy with thunder. Fat drops of rain squeezed from the sky and fell on the windscreen. She left the kids to turn the freezer upside-down and mounted the stairs with leaden legs. The bedroom looked horrible. Alan's wardrobe hung gappingly open, his drawers pulled out and empty. In the en-suite bathroom, the empty spaces where his

razor, toothbrush, flannel and toiletries should have been shrieked at her. Where had he gone? To his club? To the hotel he recommended to business visitors? The mind-boggling thought occurred that maybe he had a lover; Beth pushed it away as an absurdity.

‘Oh my stars,’ said Sue when she arrived later to pick up Lisa and Jack. She stared at the denuded room. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Pass. Wait for him to come back. Wait for him to ring.’ It was such an ordinary row – how had it ever blown up into this?

‘What about *Oklahoma!*?’

Give me strength, thought Beth. My husband has just left me after twenty-five years of marriage and my best friend asks whether I plan to go to the theatre tonight! Shock touched her again, sending her mind skittering to safe, everyday subjects. ‘How did the casting go?’

‘Six singing rabbits, eight dancing weasels and stoats, two acting squirrels and a couple of mice. Our four included and we’re up for the panto too.’

With an effort, Beth crammed Alan and her cartwheeling thoughts into a space at the back of her mind. ‘Terrific.’

‘Keep it under your hat. The girls are bumptious enough already. Think they know the lot.’

A trace of Beth’s usual humour broke through. ‘Naturally. They’re fifteen.’

Sue grinned and squeezed her hand. ‘Cheer up. Ten to one it’s a storm in a teacup. He’ll be back tomorrow.’

If only. Beth shut the bedroom door, wishing it was as easy to close her clamouring head to Alan’s absence.

‘Dad’s left? Are you serious, Mum?’

'No, I'm just saying it to enliven the afternoon! Of course I'm serious, Nats!'

'But why? What happened?'

'Nothing! Nothing any more than normal. We were having a row and right in the middle he announced he was leaving. I'm not sure we ought to go out tonight.'

Natalie looked incredulous. 'Just because Dad's got the hump? That's not fair!'

'He might meet us there.' Robin offered a sop to his sister's rising temper.

'Yeah, that's right! He wouldn't want to miss it!'

Beth stared. The mind of the average teenager was stunning in its self-absorption. Had they seriously never noticed that Alan only came to musicals on sufferance? That without the threat of 'Everyone else's dad will be there', he'd even have passed up their school shows in favour of making friends and influencing people somewhere more convivial? 'I just don't think it's a very good idea. Suppose he rings?'

'Put the answerphone on!' Natalie's cheeks were scarlet. 'We always go to *FOOTLIGHTS* shows. And we've been looking forward to *Oklahoma!* for weeks!'

'He's probably forgotten,' said Robin. 'What with the row and everything. I'll e-mail him a reminder. He's got his laptop and mobile with him, hasn't he?'

'Yeah, that'll be enough. Why should we suffer just because he's attention-seeking?'

Attention-seeking? Beth had often wondered what her children learned in PSE. Not being a form tutor, she didn't have to know these things. She supposed she must still be in shock. That was why she couldn't make the kids see that going out to the theatre the same day the head of the household walked out of the family home wasn't what most people would

consider normal behaviour. 'OK, send him a message, Rob.' Even if the world was exploding Armageddon-style around him, Alan would still collect his e-mails.

'You need a nice mug of tea,' said Natalie, solicitous now she'd got her way. 'And I'll choose you something to wear. Are we eating here or when we get there?'

Beth was possibly the only member of the Cambridge Corn Exchange audience not to appreciate the glorious voice of the leading actor that night. The familiar songs might have been being beamed from Mars for all the impact they had on her. Her thoughts were wholly centred on the empty seat at the end of their row. She clutched the programme and stared unseeing at the unfolding drama on stage. Panic threatened to drown her.

'Wasn't he cool, Mum?' enthused Natalie as they hurried under rumbling skies to the car park.

Beth returned from the nightmare circle of her thoughts. 'Ellery Valentine? Too sure of himself for my taste. I've said so before.'

'Not *him*.' Natalie was disgusted by her mother's obtuseness. 'The one who played Jud Fry! He can really *act*.' She shivered deliciously.

Understanding briefly broke the surface of Beth's worry. 'Oh, the good-looking one.' Robin grinned at her.

Natalie ignored them. 'His name is Sebastian Merchant. I wonder what he'll be in *Wind In The Willows*?'

Beth's thoughts jolted into a different direction. Firmly tied to a girlfriend, please God! She knew all about actors' reputations. Almost, she could appreciate Alan's distaste. Except – the kids loved performing. And they were good at it. And Alan didn't object because he was worried for *them*, it

was more that Natalie's singing and Rob's dancing weren't the sort of abilities he could make capital out of on the golf course or over a business lunch. God, this whole thing was so *silly!* The kids were who they were. She was who she was. You didn't have to share the same interests to care about someone. There had to be some way they could sort things out.

The house was in darkness when they got back, the answerphone silent. Beth left another message on Alan's mobile, wrapped herself in the duvet and lay sleepless on her side of the bed while outside the sky crashed and the rain ran steadily down the window pane.

'All sorted? How's Alan?' asked Sue breezily in the staffroom on Monday.

Beth shoved exercise books into her pigeon-hole. Her anxiety had now ballooned into full-frontal, gut-clutching fear. This couldn't be happening. Not to her. 'No idea,' she said. 'He hasn't been home. Every time I ring his mobile, I get asked to leave a message. I'm not teaching this afternoon so I'm going over to the office to have it out. Can you give Rob and Nats a lift back?'

With an expression of confidence she was far from feeling, Beth pushed open the swing doors to *Alan Trower Associates*. 'Hi, Judy. Is Alan - ?'

'Go straight in, Mrs Trower. He told me you'd be arriving.'

Oh, had he? Despite her mounting fury, Beth paused on the threshold of the inner office to look at him. Well-cut dark hair, nice body... 'I hear you're expecting me.'

Her husband looked up. 'Have a seat.'

She felt her body stiffen at the casual tone. 'I'd rather have a fight.'

His brief smile came nowhere near his eyes. 'Been there. Done that. Too late, Beth. I've left you.'

Oh God, it was true. She sat down in a rush and made herself answer. 'Do I get to hear why?'

Alan leant back in his leather chair. 'Don't you think it ironic that you have to come here to talk to me?'

'I *tried* to talk yesterday. I left enough messages.'

'In between marking books and preparing lessons.'

She gritted her teeth. This was an old tactic. Don't let him do it. Don't let him put you on the defensive. 'It's my job, Alan. I'm an English teacher.'

'And a good one. And you enjoy it. Which is fine because you'll almost certainly need to extend your hours.'

Extend her hours? When he'd been on at her for years to cut back? Judy brought in a tray of tea and biscuits. As she left, Beth passed a hand across her forehead. 'What are you talking about?'

'I'm tired of playing second fiddle to the children, Beth. I'm tired of playing second fiddle to your job. So I'm moving out and taking my income with me.'

'Alan, they're *our* children! Yours and mine. You can't just turn them off. They *need* attention. They need transport.'

He smiled in that unnervingly calm way again. 'Which you're happy to provide.'

'It's because they don't do anything you like, isn't it? You didn't complain when Robin was into football. You were the first one on the touchline, running up and down, yelling advice.'

'I'm not arguing with you any more, Beth.'

Dammit, how dared he look so – so distant! And so smug! She returned to the attack. 'And how can I not teach? I'd go mad if I was at home all day.'

He poured out the tea. 'I know. I've faced that. Your commitment was one of the things I fell in love with. But twenty-five years on you're still a teacher, whereas I –'

Alan picked up a digestive and snapped it neatly in half. In the silence, Beth heard the crumbs falling to the plate. 'Whereas you've gone from junior clerk to boss of your own company,' she said slowly. She sat stock-still, her brain functioning for the first time in two days. 'I begin to see.'

'I'm only forty-nine, Beth. Prime of life. I intend to spend the next twenty-five years with someone who is interested in *me*.'

She put a hand on his. He was feeling neglected. Maybe she *had* been concentrating a mite hard on teaching in the run-up to the exams, but she had students she wanted to get the best out of. She had a duty to them. 'It's half-term next week,' she said in a conciliatory tone. 'Why don't you take it as holiday? We can spend it at home, the four of us.'

'Oh, yes, the May half-term. The one where you're constantly nagging at the kids to revise.'

Beth snatched back her outstretched hand as if she'd been stung.

'I've spoken to the solicitor,' Alan continued, as calm as if all this had been decided months ago. 'I'll pay maintenance for Natalie and Robin, of course, and half the mortgage on the house. It comes to term in five years; I imagine you'll be able to take out another mortgage then to buy back my half. I won't press for it until. I don't intend to be unreasonable.'

Beth felt events sliding away from her. 'Alan, this is silly. We can't just throw away all our history. There has to be something we can do. What about marriage guidance? RELATE or whatever it's called these days?'

He looked at her, perfectly good-humoured. 'And waste another year? No. The sooner you face facts the better, the main one being that you aren't going to have nearly as much money as you're used to. You need to see the Head this week. Apply to work full-time.'

A fresh rush of anger beat against Beth's disbelief. 'Sod the Head! What are we going to tell the kids?'

Alan shrugged. 'The truth. I'll tell them after work, if you like. Neither of them have activities tonight, do they? I'll want to see them from time to time anyway.' His massive calm was impenetrable, he was a stranger.

'Fine,' said Beth, the sentiment ash in her throat. She swallowed some tea. 'Where are you staying?' Please not with another woman – spare me that failure at least.

His eyes expressed faint surprise that she had to ask. 'At the club. I've made an offer on one of those flats they're converting in the Maltings.'

All in one day? Oh, come *on!* How the hell long had he been planning this? Waiting for an appropriate row. *Manufacturing* one, even. Nausea filled her. She stumbled to her feet. 'I don't know what to do. Do I kiss you or do we just shake hands?'

He stood too, an executive showing an unsuccessful client out. 'I'm only forty-nine,' he repeated. 'This is my future I'm thinking about.'

A large lump had got lodged in Beth's wind-pipe. It made speaking difficult. 'You'll be over later, then? To – to discuss –'  
'Sure. Tagliatelle alla Carbonara would be nice.'

*Tagliatelle alla* – ? She clamped her jaw shut on rising hysteria. She blundered down to the car but it was too big, too spacious. She wanted to be somewhere small and dark and shut away. She pulled up her knees and huddled herself over

the steering wheel and let out soundless scream after soundless scream after soundless scream.

The evening passed in a frozen horror. It was as if the four of them were inhabiting an unconvincing soap opera or one of those cruel practical joke scenarios. At the point where Alan said, apparently in all sincerity, that there was no reason they shouldn't remain friends, Beth almost found herself looking for a hidden camera.

Natalie's face changed first to red as Alan talked and then to wax-white, throwing up the dread that she would revert to the teenager-from-hell of a couple of years ago, when a simple enquiry about what she wanted for tea elicited a furious diatribe on how her mother was always hassling her about her diet. But it wasn't until Alan had breezed out, taking with him the decanter and glasses his parents had given them and leaving behind a list of the things he'd be back to collect once he'd moved into the Maltings flat, that the storm broke.

'Nats, please – ' Beth said wearily after half an hour of defamatory language that she really hoped Natalie hadn't learnt from her. She supposed she should have expected this kick-back of rejection, should have taken steps yesterday to prepare the kids for it. Was she going to spend the rest of her life feeling guilty? 'We're just going to have to give Dad some space on this. He's – ' it sounded lame even to her own ears 'at an awkward period in his life.'

'No he isn't,' said Natalie crudely. 'He wants to trade us in.'

'Actually,' said Robin, eyeing his older sister with a caution which showed that he too remembered the Hades years, 'I'm not that bothered. I mean, it'll be weird not having him around, but at least I won't have to pretend to like squash any

more. And I can take that extra modern-dance class without him moaning.'

Rob was so blessedly normal. The heavy fog of oppression lifted a little and Beth smiled for the first time that evening. 'You might have to do a paper round to pay for it, sweetheart.'

Robin shrugged, unbothered. 'Most of the boys in my class do one.'

Natalie poured herself fluidly on to the settee next to her mother. 'What do you mean? Won't there be enough money? What about my singing lessons?'

Beth shut her eyes, drawing strength from the kids' nearness. 'Dad will probably be back by September. We'll manage.'

Famous last words. The bank statement arrived just after half-term. Beth gasped in disbelief. She stared at the alarmingly small sum in the final column and tried to remember when pay-day was.

'I did warn you you'd have to cut back,' said Alan when she rang. 'Did you see the account is just in your name now? Oh, and I've cancelled the joint Visa. The form for your new one is on its way. I shouldn't let it run up too high. Have you seen the Head?'

So much for him being back by next term. At this rate she'd be in a debtor's prison by the first week of the holidays. She tried to concentrate. 'The Head? She was delighted I wanted more hours and she's bumped me up to form-tutor too. But I won't get the extra wages until *September*, Alan.'

She could almost see his pleasant shrug. 'Advertise yourself as a crammer the way you did when we were first married. Turn the box-room into a study and tutor re-sits over the summer. And I've said before that it's high time the children

got holiday jobs instead of depending on us for pocket money. Incidentally, I don't want any of the furniture. I've decided to buy new for the flat.'

'He's really not coming back,' said Beth to Sue after school. Robin and Jack were in the lounge. Lisa and Natalie had raced upstairs to finish their History coursework to the supportive accompaniment of *The Darkness*. Beth stared out of the kitchen window. 'I still can't believe it.' Understatement of the year. Her entire life had gone into shock. 'Sue, what am I going to do about money? This house bloody *eats* it!'

'You *could* cram, I suppose...'

'God, yes, I've already put ads in the *Echo* and the *Evening News*. But what about when the exams are over?'

'Lodger in the spare room?'

Beth made a face. 'Suppose we hate them?'

Sue drained her tea. 'B&B then. Cambridge is full of tourists during the summer. Some of them might want to stay out in the sticks.'

'One room's rent is hardly going to make a difference. I suppose there's the box-room too, if I cleared it. And we could convert the playroom – it's not as if it's been used since Robin discovered the great god, Nintendo.' She winced at triumphant yells from the lounge and hauled open the connecting door. 'I thought you were revising,' she said over the noise.

'We are,' yelled Robin. 'We're playing *Smash Bros* in French.'

'Oh, that's really going to impress Mr Baxter.'

'It should.' Neither boy took their eyes off the screen or their hands from the controllers. 'We've got all eight of the secret characters and *he's* only got the first two.'

'Ian Baxter is a computer game freak?'

'Yeah. We did a *Legend of Zelda* translation today.'

Beth slumped back into her chair and looked at Sue. 'I give up. In a world where the Modern Languages department has been taken over by Nintendo, me doing B&B when I can't even boil an egg in the morning without intravenous tea sounds almost sane. Where do you suppose I register?'