

Chapter 1

Bunty realised that her marriage was probably over, once and for all, the day she received the bill for her husband's vasectomy.

Bunty threw the offending envelope across the breakfast table. 'What the hell's this?'

Graham scanned the letter, a liverish flush seeping up his neck. 'Bollocks. It's an invoice. I told the woman I didn't need an invoice.'

Bunty shook her head in disbelief. Trust Graham to answer the wrong question. 'What the hell's this' hadn't actually referred to the piece of paper, the printed statement of the fact that her husband had, unbeknown to her, checked himself into hospital and paid someone several hundred pounds to sever the tubes to his future paternity. His answer was not 'Oh, maybe I should have told you about that'; or 'Ah, yes, well the doctor said I had to for my particularly horrible and life-threatening medical condition and I didn't want to worry you'; or even 'Bloody hell, that's some amazing mistake – as if I'd have a vasectomy without you knowing!' No. He was only annoyed because they'd billed him at home.

Graham's non-sequitur was supreme evidence of their growing distance from each other. Alienation. He was actually starting to look a bit like an alien, thought Bunty. Green-tinged. Ears sticking out even more as the hair on his pate thinned. A strand of Orange Shred stuck in his teeth. No, not an alien, she realised. Shrek. Her husband looked like Shrek. Perhaps it was a very good thing that they wouldn't be having any more children. Even so, she would have liked it to have been a joint decision. Something they'd discussed. Even mentioning it in passing in a cast-off 'Don't forget the dry cleaning' manner would have been an improvement.

'So,' she said slowly, making sure that Graham could fully comprehend what her point was, 'you went off to have a vasectomy, didn't tell me or even ask me what I thought, and then put the bill on my Visa card. What is wrong with this picture?'

'Don't you go getting all holier than thou. I do pay for the bloody card,' said Graham, not unreasonably, as he did, indeed, foot the bill for all of Bunty's expenditures on credit. They weren't exactly excessive, however, and she couldn't quite follow Graham's logic when he added, 'And you put all your haircuts on it. Once a month, a hundred quid, it all adds up.'

Bunty drew herself up to her full four feet eleven-and-a-half inches. 'Graham, it's not really the same thing, is it? I go to the hairdressers once a month because my hair, you know, grows back. Your chopped tubes won't grow back. Sperm won't start popping out of your hair follicles. You've just taken this unilateral decision that affects our whole future, and didn't even tell me. Were you ever going to tell me? Has this bill just ballsed up the whole "keep Mrs Graham in the dark" plan? No pun intended.'

At this, Graham had the grace to look a little shame-faced. The dull maroon mottling his cheeks flared a little. 'It's not as if we've not talked about it though, Bun. You've said yourself you couldn't stand another child, another one like Charlotte; how you've had to devote your whole life to this ungrateful human who treats you like a bank slash hotel slash chauffeur . . .'

That was, in fact, true. She had said all those things. Sometimes she'd even meant them. Much as Bunty loved her newly teenaged daughter, the thought of having two morose, monosyllabic Pod People (or should that be iPod people) slamming doors and bumping into furniture did not fill her with any desire to frog-march Graham into the bedroom and procreate. Come to think of it, though, there wasn't a great deal that could persuade her to get Graham into the bedroom these days. Several pints of rough chardonnay combined with a heady dose of sunstroke had been the cause last time, and with the slight scare over the day-late period heightening to full-on hysteria, Bunty could see why Graham would assume she didn't want any more kids.

She could almost have felt sorry for him – if she'd actually believed him.

'You said it was a squash injury,' she said accusingly, pushing her toast away from her in disgust as she remembered him staggering around the bed trying to get into his trousers, wincing, cradling his blackened scrotum like a newborn kitten.

Graham smiled weakly. 'It was, sort of. Squashed tubes.'

'Funny.'

What the hell's happened to us, she thought. Bunty propped her head on her hand, with its chewed fingernails and wilting plaster from yesterday's contretemps with the tofu she was chopping for Charlotte's new vegan diet, and stared at her husband. He'd always been dependable, solid. That's what she'd loved about him. So unlike her other flighty boyfriends. He was the one with the sensible job in insurance, the Volvo instead of the Ford Capri, the two-pints-after-rugby-then-straight-home mentality. Getting a surreptitious vasectomy was by far the most spontaneous thing he'd ever done. Or maybe it wasn't spontaneous – perhaps he'd been planning it for years, sneaking off for consultations with the gonad doctor. Maybe it was a woman. He'd been having an affair with the gonad doctor, and couldn't justify any more visits without actually getting the chop. To foil the receptionist, he'd allowed his manhood to be physically attacked. She could picture the whole scene, à la General Hospital:

Graham: She's onto me, I'm sure of it.

Sexy Gonad Doctor, hoisting Graham's legs into callipers: But how could she know?

Graham: Perhaps three visits a week was a bit excessive.

Sexy Gonad Doctor, removing her surgical mask: Then kiss me. We may not be able to do this again.

Scene ends on Graham, legs waving like a dying insect, being leapt on and straddled by Sexy Gonad Doctor, her lips puckered.

It was rather difficult to imagine though, even for Bunty and her overstimulated creative bent, now that his dependability had morphed into potato-on-the-couch dimensions. It was hard to get him interested in anything other than the football results and the occasional afternoon visiting the local steam railway, where Bunty became infuriated at the way he turned all Thomas the Tank Engine, droning on about the grand age of steam as if he'd been born in the Victorian age, in the home counties, instead of in Sheffield in the sixties. He was still solid all right, too solid in certain parts – his stomach, for instance, which had very nearly blocked his view of the offending groin; and the lardy parts where his shoulder blades used to be. Although . . . Bunty peered more closely across the marmalade jar. Hadn't he lost a chin? And he had been going out rather more recently. Squash, he'd said. Right. Maybe his tubes weren't the only things he was having chopped off.

Graham stared back at her for a few moments, then slurped back the rest of his coffee, apparently satisfied that Bunty would not be giving him the third degree. Time to make his escape. He motioned towards the lounge, where his briefcase was resting on the sofa, ready to be picked up, along with his laptop, mobile phone, mobile phone charger, and diary with newly tested ballpoint pen. ('I always write my appointments in my diary. Love this technology, but wouldn't totally trust it.'). He looked longingly at the couch. 'I'd better . . .'

Better what? Shag the babysitter on the sofa? Kristiana was twenty-six and on the buxom side; Charlotte didn't really need a babysitter so much as a jailer these days. Or perhaps he needed to delve behind the cushions and find some more bills. For handcuffs. A Porsche. Plastic surgery (what had happened to that chin, after all?). Quite clearly, Graham was going through the mid-life crisis to end all mid-life crises. If he actually had a secretary he'd no doubt have cast off Bunty and announced the engagement by now – a new blonde model, barely older than Charlotte, not care-worn and slightly shrewish about it, as Bunty knew she had become, and flexing the credit card with her outrageous need for monthly haircuts to hang onto her gamin looks.

With a sigh, Bunty watched Graham's retreating back, looking for evidence of love handles and finding that they, too, had dwindled distinctly. She got to her feet and started clearing the table. 'Take Charlotte to the bus stop, will you, lo— Graham?'

Graham stopped adjusting his cufflink, taking in the dropped 'love', then nodded briefly. 'Charlotte! Going now,' he yelled up the stairs.

Their daughter appeared, iPod wires trailing from her ears as if she'd just unhooked herself from a battery charger (and there were times she could certainly do with it). She jammed her hat down over the fresh cluster of spots along her hairline, dropped her skirt two inches further down her hips so that the hem tickled her ankles and a line of pale lumpy flesh appeared above the waistline, and scuffed her way over to the kitchen bench.

'Morning, darling,' called Bunty cheerfully.

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. 'I hope you've not made that heinous disgusting tofu mush you made yesterday,' she pronounced, stuffing her sandwich box into her back-pack. 'There were red bits on it, like blood or something, and it was totally gross. I'm a vegan, Mother, I can't eat stuff with blood on it.'

'It was blood. Mine,' said Bunty cheerfully. 'And don't call me Mother.'

Charlotte paled even more, sticking her tongue out like some pubescent gargoyle. 'That is foul! How could you give me food with actual blood on it? Forget the lunch, I'll get something myself. Dad, you got a tenner?' Being vegan didn't mean checking on the animal fat content of the local chip fryer, apparently. Bunty offered her cheek up for a kiss, and after much rolling of the eyes, Charlotte obliged. 'Later, Mother.'

'Love you too,' said Bunty.

She favoured Graham with a look that she hoped said, 'Approach if you dare,' and watched them leave, standing with folded arms at the lounge-cum-diner-cum-kitchen window. Waiting. Waiting for some emotion to swamp her once they'd left the house, vacated her territory, allowed her to become Bunty, Person, once more.

Nothing.

As she pushed the trolley around the supermarket an hour later, having loaded the dishwasher, arranged for someone to come and check the drainage in the back garden, and given the floor a desultory flash-over with the vacuum cleaner, Bunty worried that there was something missing. Not from her life. From her. In the last couple of hours she had discovered that her husband, who she'd always considered too docile to be bothered to have an affair, was gearing up for a shagfest. Knowing how reluctant Bunty had been to partake in such events in the last few – What was it? Weeks? Months? Almost into years, now she thought about it – then she could hardly imagine the shagfestee was meant to be her. Graham was losing weight, sneaking out for furtive ball-gropings, albeit by legitimate ball-groppers perhaps, and having the route to financial claims by aggrieved new mothers firmly and surely cut off. And yet she still felt nothing. Nothing more than perhaps a mild curiosity as to when he'd been planning on leaving her. Or perhaps he wasn't planning on leaving her. He could be standing in the adulterer's patisserie, rubbing his fat paws together at the prospect of the cakes he could have, eat, or just lick from time to time. Surely that should instil some sort of emotion in her?

She paused over the fresh figs, immediately reminded of the spectacle of Graham's engorged gonads, and to her immense surprise and the alarm of the nearby pensioner choosing potatoes, she laughed out loud. It still didn't seem feasible. If anyone was going to have an affair, she had always assumed (as had Graham, thus far) that she would be the adulterer. Bunty the flirt. Bunty the tease. Bunty the tamed wild-child. In fact, it had been far too easy to provoke Graham into a state of mouth-frothing jealousy with just a few more smiles than were strictly necessary, the touch of a colleague's arm. At first she had thought it

sweet, how easily she could goad him into a frenzy. Recently, she'd treated it more like sport. Something to alleviate the boredom.

Suddenly she realised why she wasn't actually feeling anything about Graham's debauchery and wild dissembling. She was bored. Bored catatonic with her ordinary life, her ordinary house, her ordinary, ordinary family – now so very ordinary that her husband had hit forty just ahead of her and was moving on. This wasn't how it was meant to be. She'd been the girlfriend of rising rock-stars. Like Adam, who would have been great in Take That but was too pretty for the ZZ Top of Taunton he'd played for. Too pretty for her, in the end, or the many other bimbos he'd bedded over the months of their relationship. Nevertheless, she'd been the one he'd cried over, written songs for, begged for forgiveness. How could she have traded all that, and the dancing on tables and the vodka-induced skinny-dipping on the Taunton shore, for this? For Graham? For . . . Ordinary?

It wasn't until she reached the checkout that that she remembered that Graham's big attraction had been his healthy bank account. Heaving steak, half a dozen bottles of wine and a whole camembert for baking in its wooden box smeared in honey like some fifteen-year-old wunder chef on the Food Channel had done, Bunty packed up her bags, swiped her loyalty card and handed over the Visa before the lady behind the till had even spoken.

'Sorry, how much?'

The operator, sporting a very dubious auburn rinse, grinned cheerfully. 'Miles away, were you, love? Happens all the time. One hundred and twenty-three pounds and forty-five pence.'

'Oh Christ!'

It was no more than usual. Too much, but no more than usual. But the feeling in her gullet was far from the norm. Handing over her credit card, she heard Graham's voice in her head, telling her that he paid the credit card bills. He did. And the mortgage, and Charlotte's exorbitant private school fees that would have funded a whole state school for a year, and the frequent haircuts.

That was why she had settled for Graham. For dull, steady Graham. He was her very own Flexible Friend. Adam had squandered more than just her love. His requests for money had become more and more frequent. Not until years later, when she was investigating the whole issue as a means of making sure Charlotte avoided it, did she realise that the amounts and frequency of the loans had been directly related to the redness of his eyeballs, the terrible sniffing, and the sallow waxen finish to his skin. Most of the trust fund her great aunt had left her to help her in her education, to set her on her own feet in life, had gone up Adam's nose.

And then there'd along come Graham, her financial advisor, helping her to save what she hadn't already wasted on her un-ordinary rock-star hopeful of a boyfriend. He had given her low risk options, locked the last remaining couple of grand into a long-term account that she couldn't get to, and moved her into his own house within ten days. The fact that a man in his early twenties had a house at all had not struck her as odd; he was her hero, her saviour, her anti-Adam.

So that's how it had been for the last sixteen years. Mr Dependable and Grateful, shocked out of his usual steadiness by his adoration of this Bambi, this fawn of a girl, and Ms 'I settled'. Bunty didn't like thinking that she'd gone for any easy option, but deep down she suspected that if Graham had been less free with the bill-paying, she might have been a bit less free with her love. Of course, she wasn't that shallow. They'd got along, very well on occasions. When they weren't getting along very well, they were getting by. Just fine. And she did love him. How could she not? But did she still? Had she ever . . . really?

'Pin number, love?' the cashier was saying.

'Sorry. Sorry.' Bunty keyed in her code, fighting the temptation to hyperventilate.

There was the crux of it. She'd believed he would never leave her. But now he was doing the unthinkable. And no Graham meant no bill-paying. No hairdressing. No steak and wine and whole hunks of imported cheese. It would be no fun whatsoever. And she had no discernible talent, other than flirting, with which to make a living for herself.

She stared wildly at her bottle of Penhaligon wine, vastly overpriced because of the import duty from New Zealand. It would all have to stop. Graham wouldn't see her penniless, she was sure, but the blonde bitch he was likely to take up with would overtake her in the hairdressing stakes, demanding fortnightly highlights. They'd have children. Charlotte would be tossed aside and sent to the local comprehensive, running the gauntlet of the drug runners and knife gangs that Bunty was convinced populated the whole place.

At last her whole chest cavity was flooded with emotion. It wasn't what she'd imagined – grief, sorrow, sadness for the loss of her husband. It was fear – pure white, flashing, asphyxiating fear. She was about to be discarded from their marriage and she had no options.

'I need a back-up plan,' she informed the cashier hoarsely.

Mrs Auburn frowned. 'Is that like the loyalty card? You'll have to go to customer services.'

'Customer services.' Bunty nodded rapidly, sweeping carrier bags off the conveyor belt and into the shopping trolley, oblivious to the crash of glass, the drip of prized NZ sauvignon blanc onto the tiles.

Back-up plan. Back-up plan. That was it. She chanted it like a mantra as she jogged to the car. It wasn't customer services she needed. It was Kat.