

Chapter 1

Alison

It had to be time to get up for work. Surely. Alison stretched her arm out from under the duvet and retrieved her mobile from the bedside drawers. The bedroom briefly illuminated as she checked the time. 5.38 a.m. Not time for work, then.

She turned her head towards the window. It had been raining for three hours and forty-seven minutes now. Starting with a torrential downpour at 1.51 a.m., it had now settled into a slow but steady rhythm. And she'd been wide awake for every single drop.

Beside her, Dave was in a deep untroubled sleep, punctuated by the occasional grunt or snore.

She slowly turned over to face him, but he had his back to her as usual. He muttered something when she gave him a gentle nudge, but didn't wake up. She was about to give him a harder shove but stopped herself. What was the point? He'd only tell her to go back to sleep. Sleep? If only she could. And he'd tell her that getting upset about it wasn't going to change anything. No, it wasn't. But a hug and comforting words might help her find the strength to face the hardest day of the year.

Peeling back the duvet, Alison pulled on her fluffy dressing gown and padded downstairs to the kitchen.

The familiar feeling of despair enveloped her as the fluorescent tubing flickered then burst into life revealing the concrete flooring, bare plaster, and dilapidated dark wood units. Oh, the joys of living with a builder: a house full of unfinished projects because Dave couldn't bear to spend his evenings and weekends doing what he did all day. Of course, paying someone else to do it was completely out of the question. She'd stupidly suggested that once. Never again.

The dining room had been out of action for four years because it was packed out with boxes containing the new kitchen. It wasn't good to moan about that either. Besides, they had no social life, so who would they invite round for a meal even if it was in use?

He'd promised this would be the year for sorting it, though, and had even booked a week off work next month to finally fit the kitchen. She wouldn't hold her breath.

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Alison placed a giant mug of milky, sugary tea on the coffee table in the lounge and took a few deep breaths. It was time.

Crouching down, she opened the cupboard on her grandma's old dresser. There it was, nestled under *Trivial Pursuit*, a guidebook for Corfu, and a pack of playing cards. She lightly ran her fingers down the navy spine of the large photo album, goosebumps pricking her arms, then carefully removed it.

Curling up on the large tub chair with the unopened album resting on her legs, Alison closed her eyes and breathed in and out slowly, trying to steady her racing heart. Fifteen years. Had it really been that long?

As she slowly turned page after page, photos first, then newspaper clippings, the rain continued its patter against the front of the house and Alison's tears kept in time with the slow and steady rhythm of the drops.

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Alison was in the kitchen eating breakfast when she heard Dave thunder down the stairs. She glanced at her watch, tensing. He was running late as usual, which would somehow be her fault.

'Where've you put my phone?' he demanded as he strode down the hall, sounding more like an army sergeant than a loving boyfriend. A hefty six-foot-three rugby player, he dominated the kitchen doorway, blocking out the natural light from the glass either side of the front door.

'I think you might have plugged it in to charge in the lounge,' she said softly, knowing full well that he had.

When Dave returned to the kitchen, phone in hand, she looked up at him expectantly, but he didn't even glance at her. She willed him to look at her, to hug her, to tell her he was there for her. He'd forgotten last year but surely he wouldn't do that again.

'What were you doing up so early?' he asked, his voice still gruff.

Alison felt herself deflate. 'I couldn't sleep,' she muttered. 'Too much in my head.'

He yanked open the fridge. 'Where's my butties?'

Alison's shoulders drooped even further. 'In the blue container.' She picked up her second warm croissant and slathered it with butter, blinking back the tears. He'd forgotten it again; he was more concerned with his sandwiches than her, as usual.

Pushing a stray dark curl behind her ear, Alison took another deep breath. She'd have to prompt him. Last year, she hadn't said anything until the following day and he'd had a go at her for not reminding him on the day. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

'So, it's the 11th of May today.'

He closed the fridge door and stared at her. 'And...?'

'And... well... it's... you know...'

'Ali! I'm late. Spit it out or shut up.'

His eyes bored into her and she felt that momentary burst of confidence ebbing away. 'Never mind. It's nothing.'

Dave dropped his packed lunch into his toolbox. 'Where's the bananas?'

Damn! She *knew* she'd forgotten something. 'Still on the shop shelves? Sorry. There's pears.'

'Bloody hell, Ali,' he snapped. 'When have I *ever* liked pears?'

She continued eating while he wittered about pears being the devil's fruit. Why did he have to make such a fuss about little things like that? Especially today.

Watching him choose a pear from the bowl – with such a disgusted look on his face it could just as easily have been a decaying mouse – Alison shook her head and bit into her croissant again, closing her eyes as the melted butter oozed onto her tongue. Heaven in pastry format.

'Jesus Christ, Ali!'

She snapped open her eyes, startled to find him right next to her.

'No wonder.' He shook his head. 'No *bloody* wonder.'

She flinched as he grabbed his toolbox and stormed out of the kitchen.

As the front door slammed, she ripped off a piece of croissant and crushed it between her thumb and forefinger, a mixture of guilt and frustration flowing through her. She hadn't needed to ask him what he meant. She could fill in the rest of the sentence for him. *No wonder you're so fat. No wonder you keep ordering bigger uniforms. No wonder the stairs leave you breathless. No wonder we never have sex.* She surveyed the plateful of pastries, the full-fat butter, the luxury jam, her third giant mug of milky, sugary tea. All for one person. Yes. No wonder.

She had a good excuse for the feast that morning, though, not that Dave had acknowledged it.

As she cleared the table, tears welled in her eyes once more. How could he have forgotten again? Maybe he'd remember that evening. Maybe he'd come home with flowers and a hug. Alison wiped the table with such a furious swipe that crumbs scattered across the concrete. Sod it! They could stay there.