

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



School's Out

Sarah Tucker

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About the Book

In school playgrounds across the country parents huddle in worried packs, desperately putting together their final plans to survive the summer weeks of mayhem - school is officially out!

For once, Amanda has a simple, cheap and fail-safe plan to make it through the summer holidays with her three overexcited offspring. But a last-minute addition of fellow-mum Suzanne and her perfect son Orlando quickly shatters Amanda's vision of the quintessential bucket-and-spade summer adventure.

In fact, before she even makes it to the picture-perfect Cornish idyll that is home to her one-time playground comrade Skyler, Amanda has to endure tantrums, floods, and an eerie B&B, all with three ratty kids and a carsick dog in tow. When they finally arrive, dishevelled and exhausted, she discovers that not only must she endure Suzanne at close quarters in a cramped cottage, but also that Skyler's business is in dire need of a helping hand.

In the weeks that ensue, Amanda discovers there is only one way to survive the summer holidays, and that's with a stiff drink, a pair of wellies and a bucket-full of bonhomie!

About the Author

An award-winning broadcaster and journalist, Sarah Tucker was a presenter on the BBC1 *Holiday* programme and anchored *I Want That House Revisited* on ITV1. She regularly contributes to women's magazines, the *Sunday Times Travel Magazine* and *The Guardian*. Sarah Tucker is the author of *The Playground Mafia*, *The Battle for Big School* and three romantic comedies published by Harlequin.

Also by Sarah Tucker

Fiction

The Battle for Big School
The Playground Mafia
The Last Year of Being Single
The Last Year of Being Married
The Younger Man

Non-fiction

Have Baby, Will Travel
Have Toddler, Will Travel

Sarah Tucker

School's
Out



arrow books

Always to Tom ...
And Jerry.

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Chapter 1

Breaking Point

NO SOONER HAVE I entered the large and brightly coloured reception of Dunsfield Infant and Junior School than Julian Warren's mum whose name I can never remember accosts me with a slightly manic-sounding, 'So, Amanda, what are your plans for the holidays?' There are already about fifty other fidgeting mums and listless dads waiting to go into the assembly hall to hear what Ms Gooden has to say about the school's achievements this year. All I can hear in the overcrowded foyer is the buzz of everyone anxiously discussing the latest hot topic, the summer holidays. It's almost July and already my three are starting to get excited with the thought of six weeks of no homework and no uniform, the two bits of 'school-dom' they dislike the most.

'Oh, hi! Erm, we're going to Cornwall for five weeks,' I tell Julian's mum, still wracking my brain on the name front. I know it begins with an L - Linda, Lavinia, Lucy, Lottie? 'We're staying at our friends' bed and breakfast, well, it's more like a family-run hotel, really, as Skyler is endlessly feeding everyone and her afternoon teas and suppers have been a hit. It's down on the coast, in a town called Tremontgomery. Have you heard of it?'

Julian's mum shakes her head blankly.

'It belongs to George and Skyler Blue. Their eldest attended here a couple of years ago. George decided to take voluntary redundancy and they moved to the West Country. I wish my husband Nigel would cut back a bit too,' I say. 'We hardly see anything of him at the moment.'

'Will he be joining you in Cornwall?' she asks, concentrating half on the conversation, half on the assembly-hall doors, which everyone is now looking at expectantly as we wait to be ushered in.

'He's hoping to join us at some point,' I explain, trying to convince myself this will prove true, knowing he's worked the last three weekends running.

Salim Nayar's mum, Malika, has been listening in. 'Lucky you. I can only get two weeks off this year because the woman I work with is getting married. I've had to schedule the kids' activities like a military operation. They're going to Camp Beaumont for the first week, then they have a week at soccer camp, then a few days with their tennis coach, then they're both on a golf camp for a week. That just leaves the two weeks I can get off for our holiday to the South of France. I've had to liaise with Patrick Hamilton's mum to organise pick-ups and drop-offs. It's a nightmare, and it's the same every year! You'd think it'd get easier, but it doesn't, Linda.'

That's it, Linda! 'What are you doing for the holidays, *Linda?*' I ask.

'We're going to the South of France, too. We hired a canal boat last year - Julian was into boats at the time and we were told it would be more of an "experience" for the kids, but it was so painfully slow, we were all gagging for the beach by the end of the first day. So we've decided to go back to camping near a beach this year.'

'Could everyone please come in now,' beckons Ms Gooden's assistant.

As we shuffle through the doors, I can hear lots of other mums bemoaning the competitive-holiday syndrome: parents trying to outdo each other with the imaginative, fun-filled, action-packed breaks they're planning for the kids. Jessica Trent, sponsorship secretary of the PTA, says, 'I've given up on those kids' camps, I want to spend time with Joey this year. He went to one last year, cried all the

time and had to come home early. He said they started at eight in the morning and it was archery, football, tennis and table tennis all day – I felt tired just listening to it. Seems better to just keep him home this year.’

‘Well, I just feel so lucky this year,’ says Cora Jones, who has twins in Jack’s year. She’s an immaculate suited-and-booted mum who regularly writes features in the national press about motherhood and parenting. She’s not exactly popular with the other mums but they seem to tolerate her, despite her writing last month that Dunsfield mums are ‘frustrated underachievers’. ‘Last year I spent a fortune on a nanny for holiday cover, but this summer I’m taking a break from work completely. Jerry’s cashed in some shares, so for the first time ever I’ve got the luxury of not having to worry about holiday cover or signing them up for camps. And Jerry’s managed to book August off. We’ve borrowed a friend’s house in Majorca for the month so it’ll be bliss. I’ve got to draft a book synopsis for my agent while I’m there but Jerry said he’ll look after the children so I can focus on getting that done, which is sweet of him.’

Momentarily distracted from finding our seats, we all look at her with a mixture of envy, bemusement and fury. Oblivious to the reaction she’s causing, she continues: ‘I’m setting up another business to help mothers who need to find holiday nannies. It’s such a pain when you can’t get one, don’t you think?’

I don’t think she really expects an answer, just nods of agreement and possibly even applause, given the look on her face.

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t afford a holiday nanny,’ says Jessica, nobly facing up to Cora, ‘and even if I could I wouldn’t hire one as it’s the only chance I get to spend time with my children, being the frustrated underachiever that I am.’ I stifle a snigger. Another mum I’ve not spoken to before is about to give Cora an earful as well, when I recognise a voice calling my name across the room.

'Amanda, darling!' Suzanne's voice resonates loudly across the assembly hall, causing all heads to turn in her direction. 'I'm so glad you're here. Darling, I desperately need your help! Something dreadful has happened,' she says, rushing towards me and giving me a hug and three kisses on alternate cheeks. She's just come back from an art history and watercolour course in Toulouse, where they kiss three times, but I'm so used to two that she ends up giving me the last one on the lips. I haven't seen her look so anxious before. Is something wrong with her rather delicate son Orlando? Or has she discovered her husband Howard is having an affair? Knowing Orlando and Howard, either's possible. Perhaps they've lost all their money, although this is less likely as Suzanne is one of the wealthiest people in Whitlow and she wouldn't be broadcasting it if they had. In fact, she looks so anxious I suddenly am quite worried that something more serious has actually happened.

'Howard's monumentally fucked up,' she says, plopping herself down on the seat next to me.

Thought so, he's having an affair.

'I've just had the most awful news and you're the first person I thought of. Amanda, you must help me, there's no one else I can go to,' she says, looking genuinely needy, which is a shock to say the least.

'Needy' is a word I wouldn't normally use to describe Suzanne. 'Uber-successful PR exec' is more like it. And need doesn't ever come into it as while managing a team of twenty herself, she also has a full-time nanny, housekeeper, personal trainer and shopper at her constant beck and call.

'I need your advice about holidays,' she says. This is the 'something dreadful' that only I can help with? 'You know we booked a cruise around the Med for three weeks in the summer, with the wonderful kids' club that Orlando will love and which takes them all day?'

I nod, knowing the kids' club is probably more for her benefit than Orlando's and thinking that only your closest friends can try your patience this much. Maybe I should suggest Cora would be better suited to advising her, as whatever's happened, it really can't be all that serious.

'Well, the company's gone completely bust, bankrupt, kaput, and here we are left with two weeks to the end of term and a complete void in our holiday calendar. I had my assistant and the company travel agent hunt for holidays, but everything's booked up. They've looked everywhere; every continent, every tour operator, every villa company. Well, everything decent, that is,' she adds.

'What about your place in Umbria? I thought you tried to keep that free in the summer just in case,' I say, thinking of the rather splendid six-bedroom villa in Italy they happen to own. I have to concede that while for most of us this unfortunate problem wouldn't have conjured up quite the level of drama and anxiety, for Suzanne this is genuinely a disaster of monstrous proportions. She's an utter control freak and, in fairness, she gets so little time off work, it's not surprising this has thrown her into utter panic.

'Yes, I know, I know,' replies Suzanne, looking even more exasperated. 'We have this huge great gorgeous home in Italy, don't we? And what does Howey do? He lets his boss have it for the three weeks we're due to be on the cruise. He's not even charging him for it, the prat, and the guy is loaded. Not that we need the money, of course, but Howey thought it would go down well, and he says there are more important things than money, the hypocrite. Then Howey suggests we go with them instead, but I'd rather stick hot pins in my eyes, to be honest. His boss is a tedious, boorish leech who nitpicks about everything, and she's one of those hyper-hyper, up-at-dawn, run-and-cycle-and-swim types who wants to do something extremely energetic every morning and to boast about it for the rest of the day. I just need a proper rest. It exhausts me just looking at her. And

she's so infuriatingly jolly all the time it makes me want to hit her, Amanda, it really does.'

I laugh, amused that there's someone who gets on Suzanne's nerves as much as she sometimes gets on mine.

'But you are my salvation. You have all your wonderful travel contacts to help me.'

'I only do the odd freelance piece now, you know that. My contacts just aren't as good these days, Suzanne.'

Suzanne looks dejected. 'But you must have someone you know who'd be able to help? You can't have lost all you contacts! That's just not good business sense, darling.' Ah Suzanne, ever the PR gal.

But I genuinely feel I have lost touch with so many of my former colleagues and friends from my old days travelling the world. Settling down to have three kids, managing their day-to-day lives, and keeping the house organised and Nigel happy is a full-time job and leaves little opportunity for the freelancing I'd hoped to keep up. Unlike Suzanne, I've never been particularly good at delegating, not that Nigel and I have any money to hire anybody to delegate to. And I'm less than delighted about Suzanne reminding me that long ago I did have a successful career that I was absolutely passionate about and could have sorted her out with the perfect destination before you could even spell Mediterranean. I worked hard for over a decade to establish myself in a highly competitive industry that was as glamorous on the inside as it seemed on the outside. I travelled the continents, researching and presenting for radio and TV, and writing fun and inspired pieces for newspapers and magazines. I was sent on some wonderful assignments: bungee jumping in New Zealand, whale-watching off the coast of Newfoundland and dune-surfing in the Namib desert. No money in it, of course, but it was a wonderful and carefree life and I loved every single moment of it. In fact, I can feel myself getting a bit dewy-eyed.

'Amanda, are you OK?' says Suzanne, touching my arm.

'Yes, I'm fine, I'm fine,' I lie.

'So what do you suggest? She looks at me intently, like a puppy dog waiting to be fed, ready to pounce on my every word. Oh, the pressure of finding an ideal holiday for the utter perfectionist that is Suzanne Fields. Suddenly I'm very pleased to have a real excuse for not having any good contacts.

'I don't really know what to say,' I reply as we finally settle in our seats. I look up at Ms Gooden, hoping she'll call us all to attention any minute, but she's deep in conversation with one of the mothers. 'All the bespoke tour operators I know that fit your bill would have been booked up a year ago. You remember how early you had to book for the Garden Route safari? I think it was two years.'

Suzanne's still looking at me like a startled rabbit, though it could just be the botox. 'I know, I know,' she wails. 'I thought about Marrakesh, but it's too hot at this time of year, and apparently all the quality riads are booked up or closed anyway. Egypt will be sweltering. I thought about Namibia after you told me about Etosha National Park, but that's booked up too. There are lots of activity holidays, in Slovenia and Finland and fresh-air places like that, but that's not really my thing or Howey's and I don't think Orlando would enjoy it ...'

Realising she's not going to give up easily, I get my brain into gear. 'Have you thought about Brazil? Beaches, good weather, good fashion.'

'Booked,' she says, sighing.

'What, all of it?' I tease, struggling to hide an exasperated smile.

'Well, the bits worth going to. I wouldn't risk going anywhere that's not come recommended by someone credible. I've already been to Vietnam, Cuba and Thailand, even though I hate Bangkok airport - an endless maze of shops selling expensive nonsense and food that looks as

though it's been regurgitated. There're always such long delays that I end up spending a fortune in Ferragamo, and I hate Ferragamo.'

I can't help but nod in agreement at this. My memories of Bangkok airport are also not good and, as they are for Suzanne, are all too clear in my mind, but for very different reasons. It was the last press trip I took before I properly gave up work. We were travelling to Chaing Rai in northern Thailand, heart of the opium-growing region. Jenny was barely two at the time, and I didn't really want to go, but we needed the money. I was feeling so tired, but thought it was just stress. Then, on the Friday before I left, I went to the doctor and discovered I was two months pregnant. I'd been so busy I hadn't even noticed that I'd missed my period. I didn't tell Nigel because he was engrossed with work, and I didn't have any real friends back then as all I did was juggle work and Jenny.

On the morning I was due to fly out, I had the worst morning sickness I've ever experienced. For ten hours I had to sit in economy, squashed between the snotty, brittle editor of *Beautiful People* and a young, talkative reporter from the *Daily Echo* who had a serious body-odour problem. I'd been up and down to the loo so many times to be sick I'd lost count and I felt so dizzy I could barely focus on sipping from the bottle of water I shakily clutched. I remember trying to listen to the young reporter drone on about her boyfriend and how all men were bastards and all I wanted to do was faint, throw up or both. Miranda, the PR girl, kept drifting past to ask if everyone was all right but never stayed long enough to listen to the answer. By the time we arrived at Bangkok airport I was dangerously dehydrated and had also developed worryingly severe cramps. I could barely stand and had to lie down on the floor of the Duty Free as Miranda, looking distinctly pissed off, went in search of a business-class lounge so that I would at least cause less embarrassment to her and the

rest of the group. I think it was when I was lying on the floor, one cheek pressed hard against the cold white tiles and surrounded by shelves of Benson & Hedges and JLo's latest perfume, that I realised what was really important to me. I was passionate about my job, but what was really, really important were those I loved and the health of me and my baby. I vowed never to go on a press trip again.

'Any other ideas, Amanda?' Suzanne interrupts my train of thought. 'You must have some more.' She is almost whining like a lost puppy now. Ms Gooden still looks engrossed in conversation. Does she have nowhere better to be?

'How about South Africa? Children love it and there are wonderful vineyards,' I say. Finally, Ms Gooden steps up to the lectern and everyone falls blissfully silent.

Almost everyone.

'Went there last year, and wouldn't mind going again,' Suzanne whispers, 'but they don't have any first-class seats left and I'm not slumming it in cattle class.'

Thankfully, before I can utter any regretful words of exasperation, Ms Gooden begins to speak. 'Thank you, mums and dads, for coming this evening, in what I know must be one of your busiest times of the year.' Ms Gooden, sixty-something, twenty of those years at Dunsfield, is wearing her usual navy and cream M&S twinset and smiles graciously as she looks around the hall, waiting for the last few murmurings to quieten down. 'The summer term is the shortest of the year, but it's one in which we seem to achieve the most. Exams, sports day, speech day, the summer fête, the school play and that delicious barbecue were all crammed into ten weeks, but thankfully you have six weeks' holiday at the end of it to refresh yourselves and unwind.'

'Who's she kidding?' whispers Suzanne, as some of the other mums giggle.

'All those in Year Six have done extremely well, and Dunsfield continues to be the top-rated state school in the area. This is in no small part due to the support we get from you, the parents, so please will you all give yourselves a round of applause.'

Ms Gooden has been on one too many confidence-building seminars, but the assembly hall spontaneously bursts into applause anyway, including a few laughs and one loud 'whoop' from a dad in the back row. When the applause dies down she starts to talk about plans for the next school year, the new IT room and where the PTA funds are being allocated. I'm only half concentrating as I'm still trying to think of a holiday for Suzanne.

Skyler and I met Suzanne five years ago. It turned out that Orlando, the quietest and most polite little boy I've ever met, was in the same class as my Jenny and Willow, Skyler's eldest. Suzanne had adjusted her hours so she could pick Orlando up from school more often, and we clicked with her surprisingly easily, given the reputation that had preceded her. She was known as being hard-nosed and demanding, but recognising an undeveloped motherly streak in her, Skyler and I turned a blind eye to the playground comments about her and we quickly discovered a side to Suzanne that so often goes unnoticed. She has a wicked sense of humour, and, being in PR, can suss out someone out in moments. She fitted in well with Skyler and me, and joined us at our spot in the corner of the playground, giggling like wayward silly girls, and trying to dodge the PTA committee at the obligatory coffee mornings in the nearby café.

Coffee turned into the odd lunch while Suzanne was working locally, but when she moved to a City firm we started to invite each other to dinner parties instead. She is fiercely bright, independent and funny, but at the same time she can be infuriating in her frankness - sometimes downright rudeness - and her single-minded pursuit of

whatever it is she wants. She already has everything most people would only dare dream of: a huge five-bedroom house with half an acre of garden - unheard of in the centre of Whitlow - hot and cold running staff, a well-paid job and a meticulous timetable of health and beauty regimes, rounded off nicely with a catalogue of interesting and exotic holidays to indulge in. When a glitch occurs, she's able to guilelessly delegate the responsibility and worry to someone else. I'm not quite sure how she has managed it all; I guess she's just ruthless enough only to expect the best. But why does she suddenly think I should help her out? It's not as if I haven't got enough on my plate.

For a start, Hannah is moving to a new school after the holidays. She's a bright girl but she's very unhappy at school. I know she and her teacher, Ms Carter, who unfortunately will also be teaching her next year, don't get on too well. She wrote on Hannah's last report that she 'lacked emotional maturity'. I don't know many adults who have emotional maturity, so it's certainly not a quality I think you can expect in an eight-year-old girl. We kind of stumbled upon Hannah's new school, Dragons, as we'd not really worked out what to do about her increasing anxiety over going to school. When their prospectus dropped on to the doormat it just seemed the perfect answer, and before I knew it we were visiting the school with an enraptured Hannah in tow. Dragons is a private school about twenty minutes' drive from our home, as opposed to the ten-minute walk to Dunsfield, but it has class sizes of less than twenty. The decision to go private has added to our already overstretched financial burden, and since Nigel's deal is taking much longer than he'd anticipated, we've decided to put our house on the market to make sure we can afford the fees.

'How's Nigel?' Suzanne whispers, obviously as bored with Ms Gooden's speech as I am.

'Oh, he's fine, still busy with the deal, but hopefully it should all be sorted by the summer.' Nigel is managing director of a coffee-bar business that's expanded dramatically over the past few years. They went into Europe last year and want to go global next, but they need serious money to do it. Nigel has been in meeting after meeting with financiers, trying to organise a deal for what feels like for ever, and hopefully this year it will all come to fruition. Coffee has been giving me sleepless nights, but it's more through the stress of will it/won't it happen than actually drinking the stuff.

'Don't worry,' says Suzanne, 'the City's such a funny place at the moment, bullish one minute, bearish the next. They all play at being risk takers, but none of them are. It's not their money, after all. They're all like lemmings, following each other's tails.' She affectionately squeezes my hand, perhaps sensing the stress I'm under, although I'm sure she doesn't appreciate the extent of it. Still, she's probably starting to suspect things aren't quite right; she's recently invited Nigel and me to countless £200-per-head balls, operas and expensive restaurants, and we've had to politely decline them all. We're not in her league at all, and though she doesn't show off as such, she talks about money as though everyone has as much as she and Howard do. Like Nigel, Howard works long hours in the City, but Suzanne's happy with the arrangement. She told me once that she gets on better with him when she doesn't see him much, whereas I miss Nigel when he's not around.

'What are you doing for the summer holidays?' she asks, although I'm sure I've mentioned it to her before.

'Staying at Skyler and George's place for five weeks,' I reply. 'I'm going down with the kids when school breaks up and Nigel is joining us as and when he can. The kids are really looking forward to seeing Willow and Rose.'

'Oh yes,' says Suzanne, clapping her hands together. 'Of course, Skyler asked us down too, but we'd already booked

the cruise, and anyway we didn't want to intrude. They've had so much work to do on the house by the sounds of things, and the last thing they want are freeloaders coming down when they probably need fee-paying guests.'

Typical foot-in-mouth Suzanne and, as usual, I'm not sure whether she means to upset me or whether she is just being thoughtless. 'We're not going to freeload while we're there, Suzanne,' I whisper calmly. 'It's kind of a working holiday for us all. We're going to help out wherever and however we can, and anyway, it sounds as though they've got things running near perfect now.'

Ms Gooden's speech has come to an end and everyone is applauding. We clap too as Ms Gooden takes a little bow and leaves the stage.

'If you're really stuck, you could always take her up on her offer, Suzanne, and join me and the children there for the summer. The more the merrier, I would say, and at least it will solve your holiday problems.' Suzanne's walking ahead of me now so I'm not even sure she hears this off-the-cuff idea, which, in fact, I'm now already regretting having said. I might have known Suzanne a long time but we've certainly never holidayed together and I know Nigel and Howey don't get on *that* well.

I follow Suzanne back through the reception area and out to the playground towards her new Land Rover. I walked to school, so we hug each other at the school gates. 'You know, darling, I don't know if Cornwall is really me,' says Suzanne as she kisses me three times again. 'The weather was utterly dire last year in the UK, hot one minute, freezing the next, and everyone was so crabby.'

'That's climate change for you,' I say. I feel I should defend the good old British holiday and, against my better judgement, find myself pushing for Suzanne to come to Cornwall. 'Your best bet is to go somewhere you like, whatever the weather, and be with people you love. That's why I think Cornwall will be so perfect for me this year.'

That and it's going to save me a small fortune and my sanity.

Suzanne still looks doubtful as she opens her car door.

'And remember, Cornwall is extremely trendy these days,' I add craftily, 'home to many supermodels, entrepreneurs, musical impresarios and celebrity chefs. It's not the backwater it once was, and Skyler wouldn't invite you if she didn't want you to come.'

'I'll think about it,' she says, climbing into her car. 'You're all very bohemian, Amanda, you can rough it if you need to. You've been on all these outward-bound adventures where you've lived off an ant for a week and trekked through jungles and stuff, but that's not really me, or Orlando - or Howard, for that matter.'

I laugh. 'Oh don't be silly, Suzanne, this is Cornwall, we're not talking the Sahara desert, for goodness' sake. I'm sure they even have Prada there.'

'Hmm, I'll think about it. Hopefully my travel agent will have turned something up. Someone's bound to cancel their holiday before we get to the end of term.' She's clearly not convinced by my Cornwall suggestion. Can't be *that* desperate for a holiday, then. 'Fancy a lift?' she asks.

'Very kind of you, but I've got to pop into the shop on my way home so I'll walk,' I explain, although I'm doing nothing of the sort. I'm popping into the estate agent's to drop off the spare set of keys so that people can come round to look at the house while we're away. Suzanne waves her hand in a queenly fashion as she zooms off in her car, leaving me to sneak off to the estate agent's.

It's a warm evening and I enjoy the walk, despite my worries. I'm looking forward to the holidays, and especially to seeing Skyler. She's the one person I can always talk to about everything, and I miss her. She used to live just up the road, so I could pop in any time. Then one day at pick-up time she announced: 'We're selling up and moving to

Cornwall.' I was gobsmacked for a few seconds. 'One of George's best friends at work has just died of cancer. He was only thirty-eight and it made George think about lots of things. He hasn't been that well recently through stress, and the markets are particularly bad at the moment. He doesn't like the guys he works with, either, thinks they're a bunch of backstabbing oiks, so we've decided to finally make the move and start afresh. Next month, actually, as George has been able to take voluntary redundancy!' I was shocked, but happy for her. I knew she'd been considering it for a long time. I just thought it would be one of those decisions that gets relegated to life as a pipe dream, along with a holiday house, an Aston Martin, chucking it all in and driving round Morocco in an old VW van with the kids. But Skyler and George had actually taken the plunge, and good on them, I thought. I'm so excited now about going down to see the house for the first time, and about seeing Skyler, who's the one person I can talk to about our financial worries. She'll understand.

I stroll down the leafy high street just five minutes from our house, knowing each shop window by heart. I've pounded these pavements virtually every day on the school run with the children. I can't believe this could all change and that our life as we know it depends on the whim of some financier. Nigel has tried to explain how these deals work and how investors make their decisions, but he usually loses me after the first ten minutes, which makes me cross and him frustrated. Perhaps motherhood and domesticity have made my brain go soft over the years. I don't feel I've challenged myself for ages. But at the same time, I feel more tired than I've felt in years. Nigel gave me a voucher for some reflexology a while back, which I only managed to use last week, just before it expired. The woman told me I had an overactive thyroid and that I was a mess.

'You've worked your body hard and now it's time for some TLC. You need to take care of yourself.' But I have four other people to take care of and I may be losing my home in the next few months, so I'm not sure how I'm supposed to do that.

As I walk up our road, I say out loud, 'God, I'm looking forward to Cornwall.' I wonder whether Suzanne will come. Now I think about it properly, it wouldn't really be all that bad holidaying with her, I'm sure. She's funny and feisty, a doer and decision-maker, so I know she'll have loads of wonderful ideas for Skyler's place. She's as bossy as hell, but she managed to get loads of publicity for Dunsfield's last school fête by bullying the local estate agent's into paying for most of it. And I know she's highly respected in her company. I think she's just been promoted, although she was a bit vague about it when I asked her at our last dinner.

Earnest Avenue, where we live at Number 8, is a cul-de-sac of a dozen or so houses, all quite pristine apart from Mr Durning, our neighbour, who's been building an extension for ever and still seems to be getting nowhere. I unlock our front door, hoping the children are all in bed and that Charlotte, our eighteen-year-old, £12-an-hour babysitter, is sitting in front of the TV watching reruns of *Sex and the City*. As I put my bag down, my mobile rings.

'Hello, Suzanne,' I say.

'Hi. Just wanted to say that Cornwall sounds lovely. I've called Howey and told him my thoughts and Orlando is happy about it too. I just called Skyler to check it was OK and she sounded very excited. Which day are you going?' I'm so stunned at the speed of her decision-making ability that I robotically answer.

'The day after we break up - the Thursday.'

'Well, Howey's working the first week, but he can come down some time after that. I'll drive down with Orlando when you go. I'm able to take three weeks this year

because of my new job, which is one bonus. Anyway, must go. Lots to prepare, or rather get others to prepare. Cheerio.'

I hear her giggle as she hangs up, leaving me standing in my hallway suddenly hoping I've done the right thing. Yes, she's fun to be around, but I can't really say I know her *that* well - although perhaps this is the perfect opportunity to do just that ... Then again, I was so looking forward to just being with my family and seeing Skyler. I wanted to be able to freely chat about my problems, Nigel's work, having to move, everything really, and now I don't know if I'll be able to. But I'm sure it will be OK, I think to myself as I go through to the sitting room, hoping I haven't inadvertently dropped myself and the children into a summer catastrophe.

Chapter 2

Cecile Dies

TWO WEEKS LATER, we are due to set off for Cornwall. We're running late, of course, but the car is packed and the children and our retriever, Hunter, are ready to go. I'm just coming out of the house with the final bag when I see that Mr Durning's builder has parked another huge skip on the road which leaves me almost no room to get the car off our own drive.

'Bloody hell!' I shout at the top of my voice. I'm fed up with these ignorant and bloody-minded builders who hog all the road space. Added to that I've just about had my limit with all the dust, noise and dangerous equipment they leave all over the place, and holes seem to be appearing in the pavements for no apparent reason.

I notice Mr Durning's window is open and am tempted to knock on his door and give him a piece of my mind. I'm summoning up the nerve to go and knock on his door when I see Hannah walking towards me, singing happily for a change and carrying her backpack. Jack is leaping excitedly behind, ever the energetic five-year-old, and Jenny's trying to drag Hunter out of the house by his lead. 'Do you want me to close the door, Mother?' she calls out.

I wish she wouldn't call me that. Jenny is a lovely girl in so many ways: hard-working at school, good at sport, loads of friends, kind and generous, but she has an edge to her even at ten years old, and she knows which buttons to push. Calling me 'Mother' is one of them. It wouldn't be so bad, but that's what everyone called my mother, who was a

difficult woman, so I can feel myself flinch at the words. I try not to let it show, as Jenny will only use it more.

'No, hon, I'll do it,' I reply. 'You get in the car and settle Hunter.'

I walk back inside to check we've got everything. Nigel will be returning to an empty house. His study is full of piles of paperwork, which I don't dare touch. We won't be seeing him for at least two weeks, maybe longer. He's been away from us before, but never during the school holidays as he always used to be able to keep those weeks free.

'Have a lovely time,' he said as he kissed me goodbye this morning, 'and give George and Skyler a hug from me. Still don't know why you suggested that Suzanne join you. She's funny enough, I suppose, but so high-maintenance. You do realise that, don't you?' He was grinning at me.

'It seemed like a good idea at the time and I'm sure she'll be fine,' I replied defensively. 'We get on well and I know she'll have lots of good marketing ideas for Skyler. Orlando's no trouble, either, he's so quiet we'll hardly know he's there.' But I was starting to get worried about how the holiday would work out and that I'd made a serious mistake suggesting Suzanne join us.

He kissed Jenny, Jack and Hannah goodbye, hugging them each individually and then having a family hug in the hallway before he left - even Hunter wanted to join in. I was quite tearful then and am still so now as I look around and realise it's not just a house I will be saying goodbye to if and when we sell this place; it will be my family's life story. Still, at least selling the house and moving somewhere smaller will release the capital we need for school fees. Our cost cutting has also involved letting go of the gardener and the cleaner, so everything is looking rather scruffy at the moment. And I looked in the mirror this morning and realised I hadn't been to the hairdresser for months and my hair now resembles a scouring pad. No wonder Suzanne keeps asking me if everything is OK.

Jack, of course, says he loves me whatever I look like. Always full of beans and smiles, he bounds about the house like some Duracell bunny, brightening everywhere he goes with his mischief. 'I like the garden better now,' he told me when I looked out at it the other day and sighed at the overgrown mess. 'It's like a jungle, and I'm Tarzan and you're my Jane, Mummy, but don't tell Daddy because he might get upset.'

Hannah is rather like a cat; she doesn't care what the house and garden looks like as long as she's warm and fed and has somewhere to sleep at night. She seems very independent for one so young, although she still comes running to Nigel or me when she falls over.

Jenny is more vulnerable but won't admit it. She's always looking for praise and, as she's been a grade A student so far, she's always got it - but I feel occasionally getting it wrong would help her immensely. I don't want her becoming a know-it-all at so young an age or she'll be impossible as a teenager. At the moment she still loves me but I'm just waiting for the day when she'll start to hate and resent me for being her mother and for just, well, being.

As I wander round the house to make a final check and peek into the bedrooms, I realise that although I know we're doing the sensible thing, I really don't want to move. I know it's for the best, but Jack was born here and the house is all the children have known.

I double-check the kitchen, making sure Jack hasn't pushed one of the oven switches by accident. The fridge is well stocked with healthy ready meals for Nigel in case he forgets to eat, which he does all the time at the moment. No wonder his face looks so gaunt. He used to be so relaxed and healthy before work took over his life. He had time for himself and the family then. He would say that he's doing this for the whole family that hopefully, in the long

run, it would mean that he could spend more time with us, not less.

My favourite room in our home is the sitting room, with its huge cream sofas draped with our white and silver wedding blankets, which Nigel and I bargained hard for in Marrakesh. There are the stone and wood carvings from Africa and North America standing proud on the polished wood floors, exquisite paintings from South America, and lush red and deep orange rugs from Italy, all gleaned from my work travels. My favourite is one of Skyler's dramatic flower paintings she gave me for my birthday some years back, which always makes me think of her when I walk past. The bookcases are full of children's books and travel guides, a couple of which I wrote myself, and many of which are signed copies from the people I've interviewed. They're possibly worth something, but for me it's their sentimental value that counts: they're filled with so many memories, journeys and adventures.

I get a bit tearful looking round the dining room, remembering the parties we've had here. The children used to look down through the banisters at all the 'pretty people', as Jenny called them. As I check the windows and French doors, I smile, remembering some of the conversations we've had in this room over the years. I swallow hard, hold back the tears and tell myself everything will sort itself out and, who knows, we might not even have to sell up. I walk out of the dining room, through the hall, check that my note to Nigel is on the table and, with a last look around, close and lock our bright yellow front door.

Our people-carrier, a six-year-old blue Renault Espace that's seen better days, is crammed full. I get into the car. Jenny is sitting beside me, Jack behind her, and Hannah in the back with Hunter. Jack is clinging on tight to his teddy, Fishbowl, with one hand while holding the portable DVD player in the other. Jack's teddy is the reason we are an

hour late leaving. He lost it this morning and we searched the house and emptied the expertly packed car without finding it. Then, as we were repacking the car in a far less organised fashion, Hannah found it inexplicably trapped under her booster seat, looking rather squashed and forlorn. I notice Fishbowl has puffed up a bit now as I turn to make sure all the children are safely secured and Hunter is sitting comfortably with his blanket. I've given him my usual last-minute lecture about behaving on the trip.

'House secure, three kids in the car, everything packed, dog lectured, DVD player and Nintendo DS working, spare batteries, books, iPods charged, drinks and snacks that won't make a mess - right, I think that's everything,' I say briskly and then wonder how on earth I'm going to get this tank of a car past that skip.

Because we couldn't find Fishbowl, we're now in rush-hour traffic. I don't usually mind driving in London, despite the road rage that seems endemic these days. When I don't have the children I drive our red 1960s clapped-out Mini - being aggressive in something nippy and small is so much easier than throwing my weight around in this thing. When I drive the Espace, I get lots of hateful looks from people in their Smart cars. They scowl at me because I'm destroying their planet, which I probably am, but on the other hand I don't know how else I'm meant to ferry about three kids, one dog and all the assorted gear they require. Anyway, this year I figure I'm paying it back in full by not flying the whole family abroad - now that's got to be effective carbon offsetting!

In fact, I'd sworn that this would be the holiday when I didn't overpack, and would, for once, be able to see out of the back of the car. I called Skyler yesterday to ask what to bring and she'd said a little unhelpfully, 'Don't bring anything, just yourselves. We have loads of towels, beach balls, games and outdoor stuff to keep them occupied for the entire summer holiday. No need to overdo it on