Say When

Elizabeth Berg

Chapter 1

Of course he knew she was seeing someone. He knew who it was, too. Six months ago, saying she needed a new direction in her life, saying she was tired of feeling helpless around anything mechanical, that she had no idea how to even change a tire, Ellen had taken a course in basic auto mechanics - "Know Your Car," it was called. She'd come back the first night saying it was amazing, she'd had the admittedly elitist idea that mechanics were illiterate, but this one was so well-spoken, and he'd walked into the classroom carrying a pile of books he'd just bought - hardback! Mostly new fiction, she'd said. But also Balzac, because he'd never read him.

"How do you know?" Griffin had asked.

"Know what?"

"How do you know he's never read Balzac?"

"Because he told me. I had a question after class and then we just started talking . . ."

"What was your question?"

She stared at him, a tight smile on her face. Then she said, "My question was about the battery."

"But what about it?"

She looked down, embarrassed. "I wanted to know how you clean it. Okay?"

"Why didn't you ask me?"

"Oh, for -"

"No. Why didn't you ask me? I could have told you."

"Because," she said, slowly and deliberately, "it never came up between us. It came up because I am taking a class about cars. And I had a question for the teacher. Jesus, Griffin. What is this?"

"Nothing," he'd said. "Forget it."

Griffin didn't forget it, of course. Week after week, he'd watched Ellen dress for class, each time paying more attention to herself: fresh eyeliner just before she left one week, a more deliberate hairstyle the next, a lingering scent of perfume in the

bedroom the night she'd gotten ready for the last class - the ridiculously expensive perfume Griffin had given her for her last birthday, for the record. He felt helpless against her drift toward another man, felt as though he were standing around stirring change in his pocket when he should be waging an earth-pawing kind of war. But the truth was that from the time he'd married her ten years ago, he'd been waiting for something like this to happen. She was always just beyond his grasp, in one way or another. He supposed, actually, that her cool reserve was one of the things that attracted him to her.

She couldn't be serious about this obvious attraction to someone else. She was nearing forty, that was all. He would let her have this, this secret relationship, this thrilling little romance. Let her and Mr. Goodwrench meet for coffee and have moony-eyed discussions about Mary Oliver and Pablo Neruda and Seamus Heaney, all of Ellen's precious poets. Let her talk until she was finally exhausted by all that "so much depends upon a red wheelbarrow" crap, by all those supposedly deep thoughts written by people who were undoubtedly a bunch of first-class hypocrites. Ellen seemed to think her pale gods spent all of their time sitting at their desks in rapturous torture, scribbling away with quill pens, when in fact they were probably mostly standing around scratching their asses and contemplating the contents of their refrigerators just like everybody else. It might actually be a relief for her to have someone to talk about that stuff with, so she would finally stop trying to make Griffin swoon over it - though lately she'd been pretty good about not asking him to read anything. She wasn't sleeping with the guy, Griffin was sure of that. She would never do that.

He leaned over her now and looked at her, her hair splayed over half her face. She was not a beautiful woman, but Griffin had never met anyone who appealed to him more. She exuded an earthy sensuality made more attractive by the fact that she didn't know it. "I love to look at you," he sometimes told her. "You're just . . . perfect." "Oh, God, Griffin," she would say. "Stop."

She moaned slightly in her sleep. Griffin lay his hand on her shoulder, then slid it down her back and onto her palm-sized sacrum. When she was in labor with Zoe, he'd given her a back rub against the awesome waves of pain. When he'd felt her sacrum, he'd thought it was the baby's head and had yelled, "It's coming!"

"Ohhhhhhhhh, really?" Ellen had moaned. "Really?"

"Yes, it's coming," he'd said, for a good forty-five minutes or more, until the doctor came in and informed him that he was not feeling the baby's head at all. They'd chuckled together over his erroneous assumption.

Ellen had gotten furious. "This isn't funny!" she'd said.

The doctor had winked at Griffin. "Pain pretty strong, Ellen?"

He was met with a nearly palpable silence.

"She's doing really well," Griffin said, then added proudly, "She hasn't had any medication!"

"Well, it's too late for that now, anyway," the doctor said.

"Why don't both of you just shut up?" Ellen said, and the doctor had winked again. "She's in transition," he'd whispered to Griffin. He patted Ellen's foot, and left.

Now, eight years later, Ellen seemed to be in another kind of transition. She was preoccupied: bereft-looking when she thought Griffin didn't see her, guarded when she knew he could. Twice he'd heard her on the phone when he came home, saying hurriedly, "I have to go." She wouldn't talk to him, not really, except to fill him in on necessary bits of business about Zoe, about what bills needed to be paid next, about who would take the cat to the vet.

It all made sense now.

Well. You had these times in a marriage, everyone knew that. You just waited them out, that was all. Griffin kissed Ellen's cheek lightly, then got out of bed to get his robe. It was Sunday. He'd make coffee and hash browns, eggs over easy. Zoe would sleep late, she always did, and Griffin and Ellen would sit at the kitchen table and read the Sunday paper together as usual. Maybe they'd find something on sale and go and buy it. He sat on the bed to put his slippers on.

"Where are you going?" Ellen asked sleepily.

He turned to look at her. "Downstairs."

She said nothing.

"To make breakfast."

"Stay here, okay?"

Sex? Griffin thought, and felt his penis leap up a little in anticipation.

He took off his robe and slippers and got back in bed. God, how long had it been? Ellen put her arms around him, her head beneath his chin, and sighed heavily. Oh. Not sex, then.

"You know something's going on, right?"

He stopped breathing.

"Right?"

He shifted his weight, checked, for some reason, the time. Ten after eight. "What do you mean?"

"Griffin, don't do this. We have to talk about it."

He said nothing, waited. She started to say some-thing, then stopped.

"What," Griffin said.

"Oh, I don't know how to do this!" She sat up. "Look, I'm . . . Okay, I'll just say this: I'm in love with someone. And I . . . want a divorce. I'm sorry."

He lay back against his pillow, closed his eyes.

"Griffin?"

He didn't respond.

"I'm sure you're aware that I haven't been happy for a long time." Her voice was light, false. "And I don't have to remind you that -"

He opened his eyes. "Jesus, Ellen."

"It was never right between us, you know that."

"No, I don't know that."

"Right. I knew you'd make this difficult."

He laughed. "As opposed to what?"

"What do you mean?" Some color was rising in her face. Her voice shook.

"Difficult as opposed to what? This is supposed to be easy? You drop this bomb, and it's supposed to be easy?"

"Be quiet! Zoe will hear!"

"Your concern for our daughter really moves me. Let's get a divorce, but let's be quiet. Let's make it easy."

She would not look at him. Her mouth was a pale, straight line.

"Well, I won't make it easy for you, Ellen. Do what you have to do. But don't look to me to help you."

He got out of bed and went downstairs. He felt curiously light, emptied out. Numb, he supposed. Protected by a specific kind of anesthesia. Well, here's what: He'd make coffee. Just like always. Six cups, Bed and Breakfast blend. He'd make the same Sunday breakfast he always made. The cat, Slinky, came into the kitchen, meowing, and he fed her. One and a half packs, tuna flavor. He turned on the faucet, and then, for just a moment, gripped the edge of the sink.

Behind him, he heard Ellen come in and sit at the kitchen table. She watched him for a while as he made the coffee, as he got out the frying pan, the potato peeler. Then she said quietly, "I thought at first I could just have an affair."

An affair!

"I felt restless, crazy, really sad, and I thought . . . Oh, I don't know, I thought if I did that, maybe I'd feel better, maybe I'd feel something. But I got deeply involved with this person. I fell in love with him. I wanted to talk to you about it right away, tell you . . . well, tell you who it was and everything. But then I figured you knew anyway." She hesitated, then asked, "Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Did you know?"

He came to the table, sat down opposite her. "I knew you were seeing someone, Ellen. Yes."

She looked down at her hands, rubbed at one thumb with the other. "I want you to know I was really careful, okay? We used -"

We. "What the hell difference does it make, Ellen? Can you remember the last time you had sex with me?"

"Well, that's what I mean, Griffin! It's been so bad between us for so long. We're like . . . brother and sister. And with him, I feel I've finally found something I've always wanted, but never knew I could have."

Griffin stopped listening. He watched Ellen's mouth moving, her hands pushing her hair back from her face. He looked at the top button of her nightgown, half opened, half closed. He saw the thrusting motions of another man, entering his wife.

He looked out the window. It had begun to snow; huge, quarter-sized flakes waltzed lazily downward. To catch a flake like that on your tongue would feel like receiving communion. Ellen had seen this, too, he was sure of it. But suddenly neither one could remark on it. Nor would either of them awaken Zoe to see it.

The last time he saw snow like this was on a winter day many years ago, when he and Ellen were students at the University of Illinois. He lived in a dorm; Ellen lived in a tiny, slanted-floor apartment. Her roommate, Alexandra, was a sullen girl with long, greasy red hair. She wore only black, wrote lines of obscure poetry in a ragged journal, rarely spoke except to read her poetry out loud, and believed that wearing deodorant was giving in to the system. "Why don't you get another roommate?" Griffin would ask, and Ellen would always shrug and say, "She pays the rent. I don't think I could find anyone else, anyway."

On that long-ago winter day, Griffin went to Ellen's apartment with a sprig of lilac for her. Alexandra opened the door. "Lilacs!" she'd said. "Where did you ever find lilacs?"

"At the florist's," Griffin had answered, stepping into the apartment, thinking, Where else would I get them?

Ellen had come into the room fresh out of the shower. "What have you got there?" she'd asked, adjusting the towel she had wrapped around her wet hair.

"Lilacs," he'd said proudly, handing them to her.

"Oh, my God. Now?"

He nodded, feeling suddenly foolish. He'd paid twelve dollars for this single sprig, which now lay wilting inside the cellophane.

"Well . . . thank you," Ellen had said, laughing. She'd put the sprig into a wine-bottle vase, set it on the kitchen table. "Lilacs in January!" she'd said, and it seemed to Griffin that she was more bewildered than charmed. A fortune teller he'd once visited on a dare from Ellen had told him, "You're not too good with the ladies. You do everything wrong."

Ellen's mouth was still moving; she was explaining, pleading. Of course she had slept with him, he thought. How could he have deluded himself so? How many times had the two of them done it? How many ways?

She was saying something about Zoe now, about how they needed to keep her routine as stable as possible. Griffin forced himself to pay attention. "She needs to stay in the same house, in the same school. I've thought about this a lot, Griffin. And since I'm the one who stays home with her, it only makes sense that you be the one to move out."

He felt his stomach tighten, his heart begin to race. The coffeemaker beeped, signaling its readiness, and Ellen got up and poured two mugs. She set one in front of Griffin, one in front of herself. Griffin watched the steam rise up and curl back on itself, then dissipate. He said quietly, "I'm not going anywhere."

"Pardon?"

"I said, I'm not going anywhere. I'm not moving."

She nodded. "I see. Well, I can't. I have to be here to take care of Zoe."

Griffin pictured his daughter, a redheaded tomboy who would grow up to be a redheaded beauty who would knock the stuffing out of any man who crossed her. "All right, you can stay, too," he told Ellen.

"Griffin. One of us has to go."

He picked up his mug, took a sip. "Well, let's see, now. It isn't going to be me. You try to figure out the rest, Ellen. And from now on, call me Frank. I don't want you to call me Griffin. That's what my friends call me."

He went outside to get the paper. A world of news, not one bit of it about her. Or them. When he came back inside, Ellen had gone. He picked up her full mug, dumped the coffee down the drain. Then he got out the potatoes and began to peel them.