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# **Not That Kind of Girl**

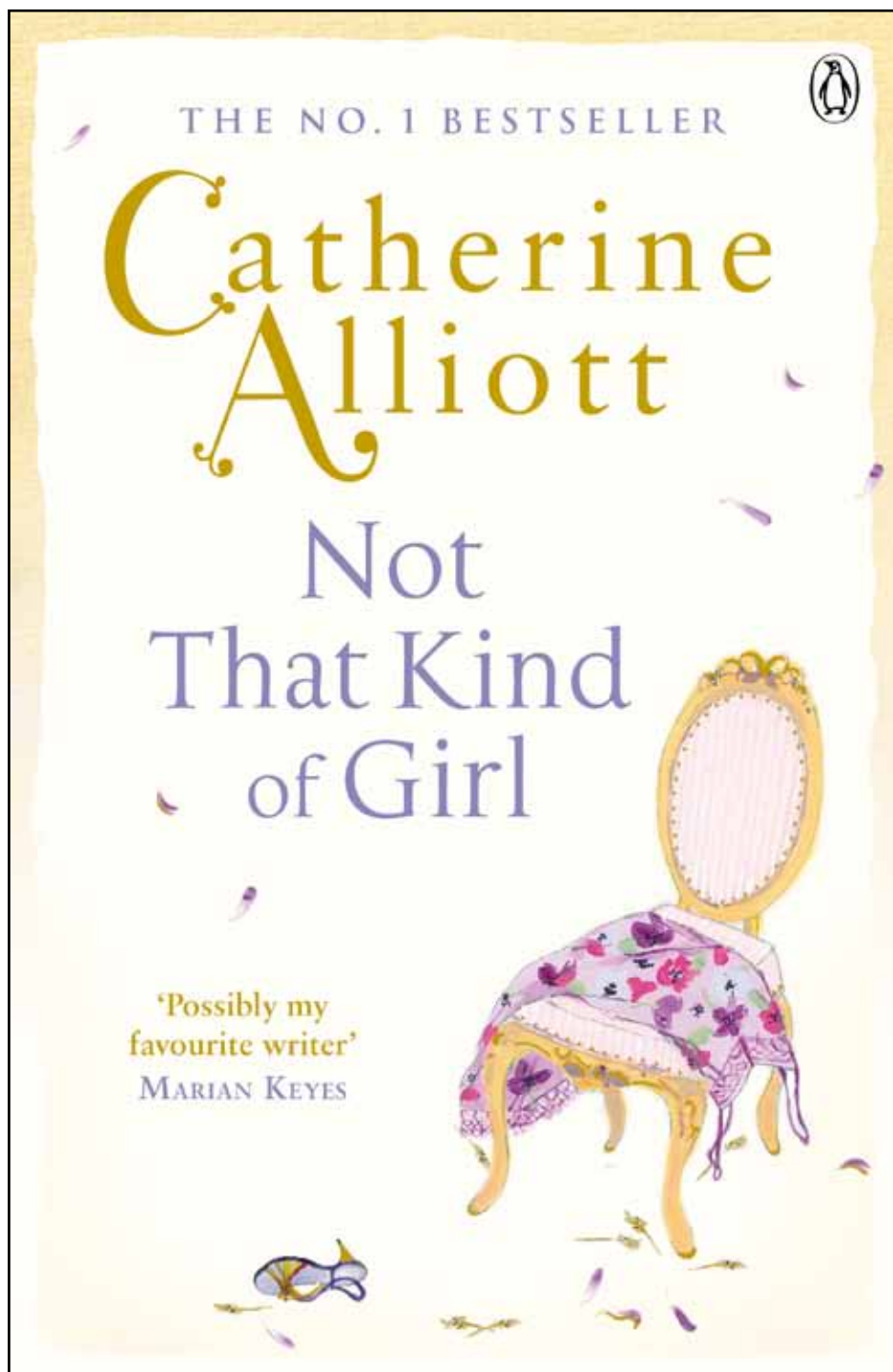
Written by Catherine Alliott

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An extract from Not That Kind of Girl by Catherine Alliott  
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Not That Kind of Girl

by

Catherine Alliott

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# Chapter One

‘What’s up, Mum?’

Angus put his head round the playroom door and saw my face. I hastily wiped my damp eyes on my towelling dressing-gown and pulled it firmly around me as I perched on the sofa.

‘Oh, nothing, darling.’ I sniffed hard, turning away from him.

‘What?’ He came in. ‘What’s wrong?’

‘Well, it’s just . . .’ I licked my lips. ‘Tamsin’s been caught shoplifting again.’

‘Again?’

‘Yes, and you know she’s pregnant?’

‘Is she?’

‘Oh God yes – didn’t you know?’ I swung back to him, wide-eyed. ‘*Yes!* She’s having Jeff’s baby. And when the police came to question her I thought Jeff was going to be livid, but he wasn’t, he was sweet. Completely sweet. Put his arm round her and everything, said he’d stand by her at the trial and – ooh, I don’t know.’ I pulled a tissue from my pocket. Blew hard. ‘That set me off, I think.’

Angus regarded me in the doorway. ‘You’re sad.’

‘No, I’m not, darling. I’m fine.’ I got briskly to my feet and found my slippers.

‘No, as in pathetic. You don’t get out enough, Mum.’

‘Angus, it was a particularly moving scene, all right?’

I snapped, moving quickly to the television to turn it off. 'If you had an ounce of artistic sentiment in your soul you'd appreciate that kitchen-sink drama can be incredibly moving. Ask Harold Pinter.'

'What – *Home and Away*?' He snorted. 'Give me a break. Is this what you do when we're at school then? Loll around watching soaps?'

'Certainly not,' I bridled. 'I only came in to turn it off since you'd been "lolling" in front of it all morning!'

'Well, anyway, Penny's here. I just saw her car coming down the lane. She's probably parking in the drive right now.'

I stared at him in horror. 'Already?' I squeaked. I pushed past him and ran through to the kitchen, clutching my blue bathrobe to my chest as it fanned out behind me. 'She wasn't supposed to be coming until lunchtime!'

I stared out of the window in disbelief as, sure enough, Penny's shiny blue Range Rover, without a speck of London dirt, performed an immaculate three-point turn in the gravel sweep outside. It reversed under the kitchen window and parked neatly by the back door, right next to my tubs, which at this time of year should have been a riot of autumn colour, but instead, with their blank, staring earth eyes, looked more like a couple of Damien Hirst exhibits.

'It *is* practically lunchtime, Mum. It's ten past twelve.'

'Is it? God!' I glanced at the clock aghast. 'Where's the morning gone?'

'In your case, down the cathode-ray tubes – and by the way, Dad rang to ask if you'd picked up the chicken wire he ordered from the farmshop.'

‘No, I haven’t picked up his sodding chickenwire! When does he imagine I’ve got time to do that, in between feeding his goats and clipping his bantams’ toenails? Now quick, out of my way. I must get dressed before Penny sees me.’

I scurried away from the window and made a dash for the back stairs, but in my haste tripped over Angus’s cricket bat, cunningly propped up against the kitchen table. Staggering to stay upright I barked my shin on the table leg, swore violently and shut my eyes tight, seeing stars. When I opened them again, it was to see Penny breezing in through my back door, blonde bob shining in the low October sun, lipstick gleaming, her arms laden with flowers. She stopped in her tracks and beamed delightedly at Angus.

‘Good heavens. My favourite godson! What the devil are you doing here? Didn’t expect to see you at a midweek girly luncheon. You haven’t been expelled, have you, you little toad?’

He grinned as she ruffled his flicked-up fringe.

‘Oops, sorry.’ She hastily poked it back into place. ‘Probably spent all morning petrifying that, haven’t you?’

‘I have actually, and no I haven’t been expelled, although it was touch and go last week. Only kidding,’ he added hastily, seeing my face darken. ‘No, I’ve got an exeat.’

‘An exeat! God, the more you pay, the more you get the little blighters home, don’t you? Oh, and incidentally, I owe you a birthday present, and since I never know what to get you . . .’ She dived into her bag and pulled out a twenty-pound note. Stuffed it into his hand. ‘Quits?’

‘Cool. Thanks, Penny.’

He turned on his heel and made for the back stairs,

keen to squirrel it away no doubt, before his mother could get her thieving hands on it and use it to pay the daily. Rather pathetically, I made to follow him.

‘Just going to change, Pen,’ I warbled gaily. ‘Won’t be a mo!’

But Penny hadn’t been her school hurdling champion for nothing, and in a trice she’d crossed the room, negotiated the cricket bat, and seized my arm.

‘What the hell have you come as? Mrs Shagpile?’

I turned, cowering in the beam of my oldest friend’s critical gaze, caught in her vicelike grip. She was looking as glamorous as ever in pale blue Agnès B cashmere and black bootleg trousers.

‘Golly, what’s wrong?’ She peered. ‘You look terrible.’

‘Do I?’

‘Awful! You’re so pale, and your hair’s all lank and greasy and you’re still in your dressing-gown, for heaven’s sake. Are you ill?’

Spotting a convenient lie, I scurried towards it. Sniffed hard. ‘I haven’t been awfully well actually, but I’m feeling much better now.’ I nodded bravely. ‘I was just going up to shower. But how are *you*, Pen?’ I deflected neatly. ‘Lovely to see you.’ I returned her embrace, horribly aware that I hadn’t brushed my teeth and my dressing-gown was probably a bit ripe.

‘Really well.’ She beamed, then looked concerned. ‘But you should have said you were ill, Henny – I wouldn’t have come.’

‘Oh, I’m not *ill* ill, just – you know. A bit under the weather.’

‘Well, you look ghastly. Oh – these are for you.’ She

turned and tossed the flowers neatly into the sink. ‘I had a feeling it might be coals to Newcastle, but obviously not, judging by the state of your pots. I passed a terrific garden centre on the edge of your village, incidentally; you should pop in. I was a bit early so I nipped in and got all my winter pansies. Only white ones, of course,’ she added quickly, and I made a mental note in my taste file that pansies were fine so long as they were virginal.

‘Oh, and this is for Marcus.’ She tossed me something mauve and frilly.

‘What is it?’

‘A lavender cushion. Someone at work swears by it, says it has him sleeping like a baby in moments. You just tuck it under your pillow –’

‘And Bob’s your uncle. Or not, in Marcus’s case,’ I said wryly. ‘Thanks, Penny, but we have actually been down the lavender route. The bedroom smelled like a tart’s boudoir for a while, but with limited success. I think he’s back on the Chinese potions at the moment.’

‘Ah. Still a problem then?’

‘Oh I wouldn’t say that . . .’

Personally I thought my husband’s obsession with insomnia was his own private fantasy. I’d been lying next to him for nigh on fourteen years, and as far as I could tell the man slept like a baby, but he was convinced he only averaged about four hours a night. Every morning I was lucky enough to receive a detailed account of precisely how many hours he’d slept and which remedy – ranging from the herbal to hard prescription drugs to be used only *in extremis* – he’d resorted to. Currently, we even had a star chart on the back of the bedroom door which he filled



in assiduously with coloured pencils, thus managing to turn sleep deprivation, literally, into an art form. I tossed the cushion up and caught it.

‘Thanks for this though. I’ll pop it in my undies drawer instead. Do it now, while I go and get dressed.’

‘I’ll help myself to a drink then, shall I?’ she yelled after me as I finally made it to the stairs. ‘Since I’ve only driven about sixty miles to see you and taken a whole day off work?’

‘Do!’ I yelled back, ignoring her irony and taking the steps two at a time. ‘It’s in the fridge. Oh – Angus.’ I cannoned into him at the top of the stairs. ‘Get Penny a drink, would you?’

‘OK. Can I have one?’

I stared. ‘Don’t be utterly ridiculous, of course you can’t. You’re fourteen!’

‘So? I’d be on a bottle a day if I lived in France. Piers’s mum lets him have that when they go to their château in Normandy.’

‘Well, bully for Piers,’ I snorted, wondering not for the first time if we’d been right to send Angus to a school where his proximity to minor aristocracy and sons of film stars gave him delusions of grandeur. Next, it wouldn’t just be the wine he wanted, but the château as well.

‘And find her a decent glass, Angus,’ I yelled as I ran to my room. I stopped. Hurried back to the landing. ‘Not one of those horrid dishwasher-stained ones,’ I hissed as he mooched languidly down.

‘Your poor Mum,’ I heard Penny say as he went back into the kitchen. ‘Not well?’

‘Oh no, she’s fine,’ said Angus in surprise. ‘She always

looks like that. Never gets out of her dressing-gown unless she's going somewhere.'

I ground my teeth and gripped the banister rail tight, shutting my eyes and counting to ten as the kitchen door swung shut, muffling their next exchange. When I opened them again, I stood for a moment, gazing through the huge landing window opposite. The garden stretched away, past the hideous blue trampoline which blotted the landscape, and down to the stream at the bottom, fast-moving and fringed with ancient willows and limes, their leaves just turning russet now and dripping aesthetically in the water. On the other side of the stream the paddocks rolled up the gentle slope to the hills beyond, where cows grazed in pure Constable country. A charming pastoral scene. A perfect rural idyll. And the estate agent had said as much, as he'd proudly waved his arm at this very window.

'Look at that! You won't get a better view than that and still have your husband home in time for supper. Nothing to be seen for miles.'

This much was perfectly true. Nothing could be seen for miles; not a dicky-bird. Well, no, quite a few of those actually – but no people. A bucolic dream house in the heart of the Kentish countryside: a long, low white-washed farm with an acre of garden, a couple of lush paddocks, a stream running through the middle and, just for good measure, a handful of ducks gratuitously thrown in by the vendor. And I'd picked it myself, this house. Plucked it from the pages of *Country Life*, not six weeks after Marcus had floated his company, when our bank balance had changed colour miraculously overnight from red to the verdant green of the hills beyond.

‘That’s the one!’ I’d said, running in to show him as he read the *Financial Times* in the bath in our Holland Park townhouse. ‘That’s the one I want, Marcus!’

And I’d said it again a week later, when I saw it through the rain-spattered windows of the car as we parked at the end of the track, getting out eagerly to pick our way down the pot-holed drive, splashing through the puddles. I couldn’t get to it fast enough. It was all I’d ever wanted. And I’d wanted it so badly. And now . . . I straightened up. Took a deep breath. Well, now I’d got it.

Angus was outside now. I could see him sauntering across the paddock, tall and loose limbed, hands deep in his pockets, shoulders hunched, heading for the barn where his quad bike was kept. Off to burn up a few fields, no doubt; off to roar up those hills to the woods. I smiled. Lovely for him. Lovely. And for Lily too. A wonderful fairy-tale retreat to come back to from boarding-school. No doubt she was trotting around on her pony even now. Maybe that was it, I pondered, narrowing my eyes thoughtfully at the view. The fact that they came back to it. Remembering Penny downstairs, I went off down the passage to change.

Not wanting to appear in my usual uniform of jeans and bobby jumper, I eschewed the jumble of perpetually recycled clothes on my chair and opened my wardrobe. The door almost creaked with misuse, and mysteriously, everything inside appeared to have shrunk. I finally came down incongruously, but rather defiantly, dressed in a maroon velvet skirt and a T-shirt of Angus’s proclaiming the legend FCUK.

Penny raised her eyes, but didn’t comment. She was sitting primly on a stool at my recently commissioned

beechwood island in the centre of my kitchen, legs crossed, chin up, looking horribly punchy. In fact, she looked for all the world as if she were about to chair *Newsnight*. As the credits rolled and the music started, she mutated into Kirsty Wark, complete with quizzical gleam and – I’d swear – a hint of a belligerent Scottish accent.

‘Angus tells me you’ve been watching television all morning,’ she said accusingly, cutting to the chase.

And I hadn’t even got my foot in the door. Hadn’t even crossed the terracotta threshold.

‘Yes, I do occasionally,’ I agreed blithely, making for the cupboard where the glasses were kept and deciding at the last minute to bluff this one out. ‘Some women turn to yoga or Pilates to relieve the stress, but I find *Home and Away* does it for me. Don’t you ever indulge?’

She looked horrified. ‘*NEVER*.’

‘Well actually, I only do it occasionally, Pen,’ I said cravenly, caving in dramatically. ‘I was only really switching it off because Angus had been watching all morning.’

‘Henny, is everything all right?’ she asked, ignoring my last lie.

‘Yes, of course it is,’ I said testily. ‘What d’you mean?’ I poured myself a glass of wine and perched opposite her at the island.

‘Well, I’ve been a bit worried about you recently.’

‘Recently? What d’you mean, recently, I haven’t seen you recently!’ I laughed.

‘No, but on the phone. And actually, that’s sort of why I’ve come down.’

‘Oh?’ This sounded ominous. I shifted nervously on my stool.

‘You just don’t seem to have the same skippy enthusiasm for this place as you did when you bought it. You were full of it last summer, and now you seem a bit – I don’t know. Lukewarm. Deflated about the whole thing. I know your dad being ill has rocked you, but on the phone the other day you almost groaned when I asked you about your plans for the garden.’

‘Nonsense, I’m not deflated – you just obviously caught me on a less buoyant day, Penny, that’s all. Blimey, I can’t be like a helium balloon all the time. I’ve got to get down to the nuts and bolts of living in this sodding rural idyll, haven’t I?’

With these last, immoderate words hanging suspended in the air, I slipped off my stool and turned to take refuge in the fridge, opening the door and peering in balefully, pretending to get lunch. Half a lemon and a sweaty packet of Cheddar stared back at me, where there should have been a Waitrose cooked chicken and some Parma ham. Damn. I’d fully intended to get them.

‘And it’s nothing to do with Dad, incidentally,’ I said quietly, finding a bag of salad. ‘He’s been like that for years now. It’s hardly likely to hit me between the eyes just because I’ve moved house, is it?’

‘No. Right. Sorry,’ she said quickly. ‘I shouldn’t have said that. And I’ll say no more. You’re like a pig in clover here and that’s the end of it.’

I sighed. Turned. ‘Well, all right, if you must know, I am slightly . . .’ I hesitated ‘. . . less euphoric about this place than I was a year ago.’

She boggled at this admission. ‘*Are* you? But, God – why? I mean, it *is* idyllic, and so incredibly green-making

for the rest of us urbanites. Why? It was your heart's desire a year ago!

'I know,' I said miserably, reaching up to get a cheese-grater out of the cupboard.

'You begged and bullied Marcus to move out of London. Banged on and on about how you were suffocating there and needed fresh air and space, how the children needed it –'

'Oh, the children *do* need it – they love it, there's no doubt about that. And they were the ones who said they couldn't live outside a fifty-yard radius of the video shop or the Notting Hill Odeon; said they'd get withdrawal symptoms. But no, they couldn't be happier. Angus has teamed up with some local boys who fish and roar around on hideously dangerous quad bikes, and Lily's got her pony and is deeply in love. Spends hours washing his bottom and kissing his muzzle, or vice versa. She's going to make some man very happy one day,' I added archly.

'She certainly is. And Marcus?'

I smiled. 'Ah, Marcus.' I paused in my cheese-paring. Put the grater down. 'Marcus is born again.'

'What d'you mean?'

'I mean he's embraced the countryside wholeheartedly, Pen. The same man who declared it both terrifying and pointless a year ago and came out in a rash on the approach road to Clapham Common, has truly seen the light. The same man who felt weak without carbon monoxide coursing through his bloodstream and pavements beneath his feet is an out-and-out convert.'

'Is he? Heavens. So – what does he do here?'

'Do? Oh, he never stops. Last spring he single-handedly

restocked the orchard, and now he's breeding bantams. In the space of six short weeks my husband has become a leading authority on poultry. He used to take the *Spectator*. Now he takes *Feather and Fowl*.'

'No.'

'I swear it. And he even – get this – enjoys the commute. Relishes it, in fact. Says it gives him time to catch up on his latest deer-stalking periodicals.'

'He stalks deer?' She glanced around nervously. 'Where?'

'Oh, they come strolling out of that wood behind us.' I waved my hand airily in the general direction. 'Wander brazenly into the back garden and nibble at the fast-food outlet I've so graciously provided for them.'

'Sorry?'

'My herbaceous border,' I said grimly. 'One reason, perhaps, for my lack of skippy enthusiasm about the garden. They stand there guzzling their veggie burgers all of ten feet from the back door. Too tempting for Dead Eye Dick, I'm afraid.'

'You mean . . . he shoots them?'

'One,' I corrected. 'He's shot one, Penny, and believe me, there was nothing sporting about it. He was at the bathroom window in his dressing-gown at the time and the kick from his brand new rifle knocked him flat to the ground. I had to slap his face to bring him round, and meanwhile Lily was sobbing and being sick in the other bathroom. Having a Bambi moment.'

'Oh Lord.'

'She's hardly spoken to him since.'

Penny looked stunned. Shook her head. 'Golly, I just

can't imagine it. I mean – he was always a bit of a black jeans and leather jacket man in London. Bit of a dude.'

'Not any longer,' I said darkly. 'In the space of six short months he's metamorphosed from Cool Marcus riding high on his Camden Town Production Company, to Colonel Harry Llewellyn riding Foxhunter.'

Her glass froze en route to her lips. She put it down. 'He *hunts* as well?'

'Oh yes,' I said breezily, sprinkling the sweaty grated cheese over the limp salad. I put the bowl in front of her rather defiantly. 'Twice a week sometimes. We don't see him for dust around here. Him and Fabrice are at it all the time.'

'Fabrice?'

'His new squeeze.'

'Oh Lord.' Penny seized her wine glass again. 'I'm so sorry, Henny. I had no idea.'

'It's his mount, Penny,' I informed her dryly. 'He does indeed squeeze her between his thighs, but happily, she's equine.'

'Fabrice is a horse?' She took a gulp of wine. 'Well, that's a relief. Sounds like something you put down the loo.'

'I wish I could,' I said bitterly, shaking a bottle of salad dressing rather too vigorously. 'But I have a feeling this mare wouldn't flush.'

'But . . . can Marcus ride?' enquired Penny incredulously. She took the dressing from me and sprinkled some over her salad. 'God, I didn't even know he could.'

I shrugged. 'After a fashion. He's had some intensive training since we've been here, went on a six-week course.'



And you know Marcus, he doesn't go at anything half-cocked. He has all the zeal of the recently converted.' I smiled. 'But my spies tell me that's no substitute for being born in the saddle. We're talking big fences here, Pen, galloping across some pretty rough terrain. He's locally known as Teflon.'

'Ah.' She grinned. 'He comes off.'

'Let's just say he's a keen student of the ground over which he travels. Regularly inspects it at close quarters. In fact, I'd go so far as to hazard that Marcus has eaten dirt.'

She giggled and put down her fork. 'God, I remember spilling Chardonnay on his linen suit in the Bluebird once. He couldn't get to the loo quick enough to mop it off. Can't imagine him flat on his face in cow poo.'

'Well, he's never come back with clean breeches yet,' I purred, stabbing at my salad.

'But – doesn't that worry you?' She forked up some rather sad-looking rocket. Regarded it dubiously. 'That he might hurt himself? People break their necks on the hunting field, don't they?'

I considered this, head on one side, chewing slowly. 'I wouldn't mind a *clean* break,' I admitted, 'but I couldn't be doing with pushing him round a bungalow. Up and down ramps.'

'Henny!'

'Oh, don't worry,' I sighed. 'He bounces. At least, he has done so far. And then everyone shrieks with laughter and races to catch Fabrice. It's all part of the fun, apparently. And of course they're desperate for new recruits who haven't been born in the shires with a mouthful of silver.'

‘Pity he’s not black,’ she observed. ‘He could be spearheading their advertising campaign.’

‘Well, quite.’

‘But – what about the production company? Isn’t he still going into London to do that?’

‘Oh yes, a few days a week, but it’s all going so well he’s letting Barry take the reins more now.’

‘Really? But it was his baby. He was such a workaholic!’

‘Because it interested him,’ I said with a sigh. I put down my fork. ‘You know Marcus: he only does what interests him, and then goes at it with a passion. Mucking out is his passion now.’

‘Good grief.’ She blinked at me, astonished. ‘He really has got the bug. Quite the country squire.’

‘Shall I tell you something, Penny?’ I pushed my plate aside and leaned forward confidentially. ‘Marcus has planted precisely one hundred and twenty-two trees in our orchard out there.’ I pointed behind me. ‘Now when you consider that the average apple tree bears one hundred and twenty-three apples, that’s a lot of fruit.’

‘It certainly is. And does he imagine that you’re going to be bottling and pickling it?’

‘Yes!’ I shrieked suddenly, making her jump. I slammed the flat of my hand down on the counter, rattling our glasses. ‘That’s *exactly* what he imagines, Penny – that’s entirely my point!’

Penny gazed at me for a moment, eyes wide. She looked confused. ‘But – hang on. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? Isn’t that why you came down here? I thought you wanted all that gathering in of the harvest, plucking and squeezing in your own cider press –’

'I know,' I wailed miserably, 'I did, because I thought that's what everyone else would be doing. But they're not! They're not doing that at all!' I turned anguished eyes on her.

'They? Who're they?'

'You know, all my neighbours here in Happy Valley. All my embryonic girly chums, the wives of other budding Colonel Rufty Tuftys who've cashed in their City bonuses and waved goodbye to the Northern Line – I thought they'd all be growing their own veggies and selling them at the local WI, organizing barn dances, that sort of thing. But they're not!'

'So what are they doing?'

I sank my head dramatically in my hands. Pulled at my roots. 'They're captains of industry,' I muttered darkly. 'That's what.'

She stared. 'Oh, don't be ridiculous. They can't be.'

'OK.' I raised my head defiantly. 'Let's see.' I put my hand up to tick off my fingers. 'First there's Sara Cowdray who looks like a cross between Meg Ryan and Claudia Schiffer and goes to London three days a week to run her upmarket shirt-shop in Jermyn Street.'

'Nice little sideline.'

'It grosses her eighty thousand a year.'

Penny shrugged. 'OK.'

'Then there's Alice Wynne-Jones who makes beautiful pots in her puke-makingly beautiful converted barn, then there's Harriet Masters who runs a mail-order clothing company – oh, and up the road there's –'

'OK, OK, I get the picture.'

'They all bloody *do* something, Penny. And I had no idea!'

‘Right,’ she said, picking up her glass and swirling her wine around thoughtfully. She looked at me carefully. ‘And you thought you could swan down here and get away from all those people in London who so churlishly asked you what you did all day while your children were at school. Thought you could sink into a glorious rural, yahoo existence?’

‘Certainly not,’ I bridled, refilling my glass. I sat up primly on my stool. ‘You know very well I’ve never had any truck with that sort of rot. I’ve always considered my role as a fulltime mother and homemaker hugely demanding. Never had time for anything else.’

‘But now that they’ve gone?’ she persisted. ‘Now that Angus and Lily are away for weeks on end, only home for exeats and holidays, and even then only pausing to borrow your make-up or block your phone line – what do you do then?’

I bit my lip and got up to put the plates in the sink. Leaned the heels of my hands on the porcelain as I narrowed my eyes out of the window at the meadow, rolling up from the stream to the hills beyond.

‘This house took a lot of sorting out, you know, Penny,’ I said quietly. ‘It was a wreck when we took it on.’

‘But it’s not now!’ she retorted.

‘No, but there’s always something to do. It’s like the Forth Bridge. Heavens, there are still rugs I need for the drawing room, and only this morning I noticed Lily’s curtains absolutely *sbriek* at her carpet. I must change them. And these tiles need a border. They’re desperately dull above the Aga.’ I clattered busily in the sink. ‘Harriet Masters has got a lovely cockerel motif around hers, I might ask her where she got it.’

There was an eerie silence behind me as I rinsed the plates.

‘Henny, have you rung my uncle yet or not?’

I laughed. ‘How could I possibly ring him when this house is still such a mess?’

She got up and stood beside me. ‘This house is perfect and you know it. It took that interior designer precisely six weeks to tart it up at vast expense – Bunny Campbell-Walker or whatever she’s called.’

‘Campbell-Waller,’ I said bitterly. ‘And she lives in the next village where she runs her design showroom from a converted bothy in the garden. Her sister, Louisa, the one who designed our garden, has the top floor for her landscape-garden business.’

‘Henny,’ she said dangerously. ‘Ring Laurence!’

‘But I’m not qualified to do anything, Penny,’ I wailed, dropping the plates in the suds. ‘It’s all right for you, you’re a sodding coffee trader. He’ll want someone *far* more qualified than me. He’s a famous – what is he?’

‘Military historian, and all he wants is someone to *organize* him – and you’ve spent the best years of your life doing that. Houses, children, a husband – you’re supremely qualified.’

‘But he’ll ask me what I’ve done, and I’ve never done anything!’

‘Nonsense, you worked before you met Marcus. As a – gosh, what were you exactly?’

‘A secretary,’ I said dully. ‘Or in my grander moments, a personal assistant.’

‘Well, there you are then!’

‘Yes, here I am then. Fifteen years later and qualified

only to keep someone's diary and pick up suits from the dry cleaners.'

'But that's exactly what he wants,' she insisted. 'I promise you, he's so chaotic, he never knows where he's going to be next – he *needs* someone like you to look after him! I've told him you'd be perfect, and he's dying to meet you.'

I bit my lip and stared out of the window. Penny's uncle was rather famous if one knew one's military historians, which I didn't. Apparently he'd written several weighty tomes on various battle campaigns and lectured regularly on the subject at Cambridge. He presumably shuffled around some dusty gothic pile in a mouldy corduroy jacket and carpet slippers, searching for his glasses, getting increasingly bad tempered, and scratching his beard. Or his bottom. I sighed. I wasn't convinced it was my dream job, but on the other hand, Penny was right. I *could* do it, and it would get me back into the real world. Back into London. And actually, how cool would it be, to go to lunch at Sara Cowdray's or Alice Wynne-Jones's and say, 'Yes, I'm working for Laurence De Havilland, the military historian. Yes, *very* demanding, but frightfully good to use one's brain again, you know, and heavens, you've got to do *something*, haven't you? Can't sit at home all day!'

Penny was watching my face. She reached in her bag and pulled out a pen. Started scribbling on the back of an envelope.

'Now I'm going to go and find my godson, and get him to show me the lie of the land,' she said quietly. 'Get him to talk me through his dad's orchard.' She snapped the biro nib back smartly. 'You, meanwhile, are going to ring Laurence.'

She pushed the envelope towards me and gave me a beady look. Then she reached for my calendar, hanging on the wall beside her and flicked through it. ‘You could go and see him on Monday, actually,’ she observed. ‘You’re not doing anything. In fact, you’re not doing anything at all next week, unless you count a charity Christmas fair. In October, for heaven’s sake!’

‘Oh Pen . . .’ I quaked.

‘Do it!’ she said crossly, making me jump.

She got off her stool and crossed to my bootroom, delving around for some wellies. Dilly the black Labrador began to bark excitedly, knowing a walk was in the offing. Penny took off her kitten heels, slipped some boots on, and made for the back door, Dilly running frantic circles around her legs.

‘And don’t forget to tell him you did history A-level.’

‘I didn’t,’ I yelped, scurrying after her as she went outside. ‘I didn’t do any A-levels, I did a secretarial course instead.’

She popped her head back round the door. ‘I know,’ she said. ‘So lie. You’re good at that.’

I watched as she flung an old Barbour of mine round her shoulders and strode out confidently across the gravel, head back, blonde hair blowing in the wind, a tall, commanding figure, instantly looking the part in this rural setting, as indeed she always did in any setting. Had done no doubt at school as Head Girl, then in the City as a trader, and now, still a trader but a rather more important one. A senior partner, holding her own in a man’s world, despite having a pair of demanding three-year-old twins at home. I noticed she hadn’t brought them with her today. Too clever by half. No, no, she’d left them behind with the nanny.

And I'd never been able to do that. Ever, I thought, moving back to the sink. I'd always had my children on my hip or around my feet, taken them wherever I went. Emotionally I hadn't been able to leave them, but also . . . well, they were my passport to cosy domestic life. I'd worn them like a badge, which said proudly, *I don't go out to work because I do something far more important*. And there was no arguing with that.

But Penny was right, I couldn't hide behind them any more. They were away for weeks at a time, and when they came back, it was home they wanted, not Mummy. I was part of it, but it was the lying around on sofas they needed, the chilling, the kicking at stones in the stream, not my undivided attention. Definitely not my undivided attention. And I had to have more in my life. Had to, or I'd end up like my mother. I shivered and seized a dishcloth to scrub away at a stain on the draining board, just as she would have done. I dropped the cloth, horrified. My hand strayed to the envelope Penny had scribbled on. I stared at it.

Ten minutes later she was back, with Angus in tow, having found Lily too. Lily's face was glowing, her fair curls bouncing off her head like a halo as she came through the back door on a blast of cold wind.

'Phew!' She was struggling under the weight of her saddle. I regarded her affectionately. She glared back. 'M-um!'

'Oh. Sorry, darling.' I rushed to help. Took the tack from her arms.

'And can you put it all in the bootroom, Mummy, I'm whacked. Freckles just jumped the whole cross-country course. Two foot nine!'

'Oh, well *done*, darling,' I gushed as she went – just



about managing to take her boots off – to flop in front of the television in the playroom, followed by Angus. A fight ensued about who took command of the remote control.

‘Can’t she do that?’ enquired Penny, following me down the passage as I whipped it all away.

‘Oh, she does mostly,’ I assured her over my shoulder. ‘But she’s a bit pooped.’

‘And can you give it a wipe too, Mum?’ Lily called. ‘I got some mud on the bridle. Oh – and wash my girth and numnah?’

‘Will do,’ I called back, reaching for the saddle soap and getting a J-cloth from the cupboard under the butler’s sink.

Penny leaned against the wall watching me, her arms folded.

‘So, did you ring him?’ she asked casually as I wiped the leather before setting to with soap.

‘Hmm? Oh yes, I did,’ I agreed brightly, face bowed to my task.

‘And?’

‘And yes, you’re right, he’s awfully nice.’ I rubbed hard. ‘Very sweet.’

‘So?’

‘So, I’m going to see him soon. Going to pop in some time. Heavens, this is filthy.’

‘On Monday.’

‘Er, well probably not Monday, Pen. But you know, soon.’

‘No, on Monday, Henny. At twelve o’clock.’

I glanced up.

‘I rang him,’ she said grimly. ‘From my mobile. Because

I knew you wouldn't. He's got an interview with a journalist at eleven, but he'll see you after that. Now if I were you, my friend, I'd put that cloth down and give it to my daughter. Then I'd go straight upstairs and see to my wardrobe. You might want to sort out some interview clothes since this is the first one you've had in fifteen years. Unless, of course, you think that a crushed velvet skirt and a T-shirt proclaiming you're up for some dyslexic sex is appropriate, in which case, go as you are.'

And giving me an arch look, she relieved me of the J-cloth and went to find Lily.