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## Lessons in Duck Shooting

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### Chapter 1

#### Are You Raising Children on Your Own?

The queue in the post office is twelve people deep. Having expected to sail straight up to the counter, I am reduced to making frenzied calculations about just how late I will be if I wait. Twelve people times approximately one and a half minutes each, divided by three counter assistants - no, wait, one has just closed her window so that makes two. I'll be here for at least six minutes. Probably ten.

I decide that, on balance, it is worth being a few minutes late at the school gates rather than another entire week late with my nephew's birthday gift (which is what will surely be the case if I miss this opportunity). So I shift from foot to foot and try to pass the time without appearing overly irritated.

To my left is a shelf full of brightly coloured leaflets. Their titles are difficult to decipher, as someone has obviously disturbed them and replaced them in a great hurry, and with complete disregard for the original leafletstacker's carefully considered system. I can see The Family Tax Credit Made Simple, and a pile of what look to be motoring-related documents. At the far end of the shelf, partially obscured by some leaflets on housing benefit, I spot one that asks, rather nosily I think, Are you raising children on your own?

Casting a sideways glance to make sure that no one is paying particular attention, I reach out to take the leaflet for single parents, grabbing one on tax discs at the same time to put any casual observers off the scent. Leaflet safely in hand, I take a second to regain my composure, avoiding the eyes of the filth-splattered builder ahead of me, who has turned round to identify the source of all the rustling.

On the cover of the leaflet is a photo of a family, I suppose, though it's not like any family I've ever seen. There is a youngish woman surrounded by four children, each one from a different racial background, all beaming into the camera in apparent delight at the political correctness of their



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multiracial single-parent family. Boy, she must have been busy, I think, looking for some sign in the woman's eyes. Tired yet determined. Resigned. Desperate for a lie-in. Anything would do really, other than the bright-as-a-button smile she actually proffers.

With five people still ahead of me in the queue, I open the leaflet to find a series of headings. I can see immediately that the most important ones are missing. A quick scan reveals that there is plenty of advice about what money is available, and how to collect it, but where, for instance, is the bit about how to adjust to the sudden, vast emptiness of your bed? And the long, hollow days of every second weekend? Where does it tell you how to train yourself not to reach out for that hand you've held a thousand times, or about all the different ways you're going to have to find to say to your children this is not your fault? And where's the advice about how to fix a blocked shower drain or a malfunctioning waste disposal unit once the person who used to do these things has left home?

But the most glaring omission is the section about how you ever find another man. Where's that one? Nowhere, that's where. Because you're not going to find one. Unless you are Elizabeth Hurley, with best mates like Elton and David, you're not going to be invited to parties heaving with handsome men seeking out the singular charms of a single mother. And even Liz didn't have too easy a time of it at first, if the pages of Hello! are anything to go by.

No. Once a divorced mother of two, likely always a divorced mother of two. I fold the leaflet in half and stuff it into my bag, just as the bespectacled woman at the counter beckons to me. I would have put it back on the shelf where it belongs, but I don't want anyone to take me for a desperate single mother on the make.