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Perfect Alibis

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Prologue

HOW TO FEEL HAPPY, strong, uplifted, tingly, light, free and altogether bloody fantastic:

Drink champagne

Eat chocolate

And have three orgasms in the afternoon...

Patsy stepped from the shower, deliciously sensual, beads of water bouncing off skin still slippery with oil. She ran light fingers down her belly, wriggling pleurably at the memory of the hands that had smoothed and massaged, teased and caressed. The set of muscular buttocks she'd admired pumping up and down in the dressing-table mirror, while she'd writhed beneath them.

Mmmmn!

This was sex at its best. The moments when doubts dissolved and she was invincible. She was high and exhilarated, so fortunate to have it all... Her body gleamed in the huge mirror. She struck a pose, hand on hip, back arched, pouting as she winked appreciatively. Not bad!

Body quite firm, boobs still holding up, bottom not sagging. None of that disgusting cellulite stuff to be seen in vast quantities wobbling its way along the side of the pool at the Health club. Her face was still damp with steam. Her hair curled in fetching tendrils around her post-orgasmic flush.

She preened. Not bad at all for thirty-eight.

She picked up one of the fluffy towels and wound it around her shoulders, savouring the feeling of elation that hummed beneath her skin. Never mind Prozac! What one needs, girls, is a bit of Afternoon Delight...

She rubbed the towel down the length of one smooth golden leg and grinned.

This one was a bit different. He had energy and vitality. He thrust her down onto the bed and he went at it for all he was worth. Bit of a change to feel a hard lean body on top (behind/to the side/anyway she damn well wanted it!). The last time she'd had sex with Dave she'd run her hand across the soft layer of jelly over his stomach and she'd actually shuddered. Dave clambered on, grunted a bit and clambered off again. This one, well, this one...

Kicking the towel aside, she threw open the bathroom door, one hand cupping a thrusting breast, her thumb circling the already interested nipple in a way that she knew would give him an instant new hard-on.

"It's no good," she called as she strode into the bedroom beyond. "You're just going to have to shag me again!"

He was standing – still naked – at the other side of the bed. At the sound of her voice he swung round. She saw the startled panic cross his features.

For a moment they hung there frozen. Both staring stricken at the mobile in his hand. From which was emanating a strange series of strangled squawks.

His wife? How had she found out he was here?

He put a frantic finger to his lips.

Bit late for that now.

Despite his height, there was suddenly something vulnerable and baby-like about his naked body hunched over the phone. His voice had a hoarse note that wasn't usually there. His mouth twitched as he spoke into the receiver.

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

She heard the roar as he jumped.

Christ! Dave!

Patsy clutched at her stomach. He flapped his free hand at her, signalling her not to speak. Goddammit she could barely breathe!

He sounded as if someone had hold of his balls – (As soon they might well have). "Of course your wife's not here. I've told you, you've got the wrong number! Calm down..."

She saw his fist clenching and unclenching. She stood, one hand to her mouth, heart thumping.

He was sounding desperate. "I don't know who you are but I can assure you..."

The squawking had stopped. He looked from the phone in his hand back to her.
 "He's coming round!"

For a moment they just stared at each other. Then he dropped the mobile and she made a mad grab for the chocolate wrappers.

Her heart was hammering painfully; adrenalin roared around her body, making her fingertips tingle. She could hear her breath coming in pants as she scurried about the room gathering clothes and belongings.

Knickers! Where are they? "My bra! What did you do with it?"

"You weren't wearing one."

"I was!"

They dashed to and fro, stumbling and fumbling in their panic, screeching recriminations at each other as they scrabbled frantically for clothes, pulled at bed-sheets, swept up wine glasses and tissues.

"Why on earth did you speak?"

"How did I know you were on the phone? Oh Jesus where's my mobile?"

"Didn't you hear it ring?"

"Of course I didn't. I was in the shower. Shit, there's only one stocking here. Why did you answer it?"

"Why shouldn't I? It's my phone. I thought it was Robbie. He always withholds the number."

"Robbie? Who the bloody hell's Robbie?"

"It's his house! He told me he'd warn me when he was coming back."

"You stupid bastard! Where are my shoes?"

"I'm stupid? How the hell did your old man get my number? And how does he know where we are?"

"I have no idea!"

"But he's got the address! Couldn't keep your mouth shut."

"It wasn't me!"

She'd got everything but her footwear in her arms now. He had on a T-shirt and socks. She didn't fancy him at all. "You'd better get some clothes on," she said.

He stood dithering in the middle of the room, his palms rubbing against each other. She saw the fear on his face as he howled, "What are we going to do?"

"I am going to get the hell out of here," she snapped, "and you'd better get downstairs and come up with something bloody good!"

"But how...?" he began plaintively. Ignoring him, Patsy carried her clothes into the bathroom and slammed the door.

She leant back against the blue tiles, her fingers barely able to turn her skirt the right way out. Shakily, she picked up her mobile phone and scrolled through for the right number, pressing the send button, holding her breath as she heard ringing at the other end.

She felt a rush of relief as it was answered immediately. "Get M! I need her. It's all gone wrong. I'm here and - "

Patsy threw back her head in frustration as she was interrupted.

What?? Her voice shot up several octaves, "What do you mean? You know very well what I'm talking about! This is Patsy. Patsy King."

Christ! These bloody trainees. In her panic she'd forgotten. She took a deep breath and started again, her voice icy.

"Mrs K here. Calling for assistance. Red Alert!"

Operation Caught-with-your-fucking-trousers-down.

At the other end of the phone, there was a click and another, more familiar, voice spoke quietly and calmly. "Control. Where are you?"

Right in the shit.

She was breathing more evenly when she came back out. The bed had been straightened, the pillows piled back into the same pattern they'd been in when she'd arrived that morning.

Patsy ran along the landing and down the wide stairs. She saw her shoes on the rug in the hall. He was fully dressed again, and pacing up and down. A ring on the doorbell made them both jump. He moved towards her, blocking her path, and looking into her face in agitation. "What are we going to say?"

She stepped past him, pushed her phone into her handbag, pulled fingers through her hair in the hall mirror. "I'm off. You stay and tell him he's got it wrong!"

"Don't be ridiculous! I can't let him see me!" He grabbed her arm, looking into her face pleadingly.

But Patsy shook him off, shoved her feet into her shoes and swung her bag over her shoulder. The doorbell rang again.

"He heard. He knew it was you!" he said.

"Then tell him he's paranoid."

The bell jangled one last time. As they heard the outer door open, they ran through the doorway into the dining room. Then someone was thumping loudly on the glass on the inner door.

"Let me in!"

Patsy darted across the room, and tugged at the french windows.

Jesus! "They're locked. Quick!"

She could hear the terror in her own voice now as the beating on the door intensified. In a second he was at her side, twisting at the small white catch, pulling the door open and propelling her through. Behind them was the sharp cracking of fractured glass.

"Open up you bastard!"

Patsy darted across the immaculate lawn, putting a hand up to check both earrings were still in place.

Keep him away from the back windows. Keep him talking. Her heart was hammering at full power again. She pushed the hair from her sticky forehead as she reached the summer house and crouched gratefully behind it, panting.

She imagined she could hear faint shouts coming from the house and shuddered as a vision of Dave's fist slamming into her lover's nose filled her head.

He was tall. But Dave was an elephant.

An angry one...

She thought about the gravel drive by the side of the house. To reach it she would have to break cover and run across the grass.

Okay if Dave were still in the hall or one of the rooms at the front but if he were rampaging around the house searching for her and happened to look out of a window at the back...

The tall hedge behind her was too high for her to clamber over. She'd have to get out the front way on to the road.

There was a bed of bushes and shrubs over to her left. Maybe she could use them to hide herself as she made her way around the side of the house towards the driveway. Cautiously, she peered round the little wooden building.

The house looked peaceful and mellow in the afternoon sunshine, no hint of the ructions going on within. There was nobody visible at any of the windows.

Taking a deep breath, Patsy ran full-tilt across the rest of the grass to the side fence. Dropping to the ground, breathing hard, she crawled behind a lavender bush and eased herself along on her stomach feeling like someone from a Territorial Army poster. God, she was going to be filthy. The bushes here were taller, so she was able to get first onto her hands and knees and then into a crouching position to scuttle her way uncomfortably along the hedge towards the drive. Only a couple of small windows here. She held her breath and ducked beneath them. All was quiet.

At last she reached the end of the flower bed. Just a small ornamental wall to climb over, a couple of yards of gravel to cross and she'd be out of sight. But she had to cross in front of the big kitchen window first.

She squinted through the rhododendrons and jumped.

There was a figure at the curtains.

Patsy shrank back against the hedge and curled into a ball, eyes tightly shut, the blood roaring in her ears. God who was that? Dave? Had Dave murdered him? (Terrible waste of a marvellous shag but would at least save all that messy business of endings.)

But her scrambled brain couldn't be sure. Perhaps it was panic that had made it look like her husband. Hadn't the figure been taller than that?

Or had he found untapped strength and fortitude and done away with Dave? (Convenient from a sexual freedom, inheritance and paying out of life policies point of view but there were the children to think of...)

But then surely he'd be out here to see where she was?

She raised her head a fraction of an inch and opened one eye. Heart thumping, she peered through the leaves once more. There was no one there. No sign of movement at either of the windows. She wondered what the hell was going on in there.

She'd have to move now, while she still had the chance. Patsy took a last look and leapt to her feet. Taking a deep breath, she bounded across the grass, hitched up her skirt and straddled the wall. There was a sharp crunch as her foot hit the gravel and her heel snapped off.

Shit! She did a mad hop-dash down the drive, mercifully hidden now by trees, and tugged open the small side gate, gasping as she reached the grass verge beyond.

Come on! Come on! Her eyes flitted anxiously back to the gates as she brushed bits of earth and mud and twig from her once-lemon T-shirt.

Dave could come tearing out here any minute.

She looked at the stockings hanging in ribbons around her blackened knees as a white BMW drew up beside her. The rear door opened.

The girl driving was new. She nodded as Patsy scrambled into the back. "OK?"

"Just drive!"

Patsy flung herself down on the back seat as the car pulled away.

The girl spoke over her shoulder: "I can pull up once we're well away. Start getting your things off."

The girl's hand came back over the seat, dropping a new pale lemon T-shirt and matching shoes onto the floor of the car.

"Careful!" Patsy jerked her head to avoid being struck by an identical heel to the one she'd just broken.

A packet of stockings landed next to the shoes.

"There's some wet wipes down there too."

Patsy tugged at her T-shirt, trying to pull it over her head. Not the easiest exercise in the world when trying to lie flat and keep one's head below the window.

The girl was still talking. "There's two bags of shopping on the floor and an Evening Standard. Weather in London's been much the same as here - not cold but grey, overcast." Her voice was a bored drone: "The train to Edenhurst left Victoria at 4.17 p.m. You had to stand until Bridgewater South. Ticket cost £11.40 for a cheap day return. We've put it on his card."

Patsy was scrubbing at her knees. She turned onto her back, lifting a leg into the air to wriggle the fresh stockings into place. "I'm going to have to sit up in a minute..." She pulled her skirt up round her waist, fumbling with the suspenders.

"We're nearly there." The girl swung the steering wheel as Patsy rose to see the rows of parked cars outside the entrance to Chartwell station. Five minutes down the line from Edenhurst.

As she got out, the girl handed her a carrier bag from Peter Jones and another from Selfridges. "DKNY T-shirt, earrings and a scarf and that moisturiser you wanted. And here's your ticket."

She looked at Patsy critically. "I should do something with your hair and make-up before you get off."

Patsy took the bags. "Yes! Thank you," she said sharply. "Tell M I'll call her."

"Sure!"

The girl got back behind the wheel, started the engine and raised a desultory hand in a wave.

Patsy shook her head. And when I do, I'll have a word about staff attitudes.

She walked onto the platform a moment before the train came in, getting into the first carriage that stopped opposite her. She sank into a corner with her bags, then got out her mirror and stared at her glassy eyes. She looked like a disaster victim. A blanket round her shoulders and she could be an extra on Casualty.

There was still a dark mark on her skirt the wet wipes wouldn't shift. Still, trains were filthy places. She pulled a tube of foundation and a comb from her bag. Where was Dave now?

Or were they both dead? She could see it all. Dave crouched panting over him, viewing the bloody mess of gristle and pulp that was once such a photogenic face while he, in a last-ditch heroic struggle, lifted his right hand (in which he was holding the Sabatier carving knife he had grabbed from the work surface when Dave, hand on his collar, was pounding his head up and down on the continental tiles) and plunged the blade into Dave's heart...

Two funerals, but the distinct possibility she could come out of the whole thing unscathed – especially if she created a story for the tabloids around a passionate disagreement over a drunken gambling debt. Double sympathy from the community at large – a widow and ex-victim of compulsive addiction.

But as she blended in her make-up with a long, manicured finger, she grimaced at the thought of the least palatable scenario. Her husband forcing the truth from him, throwing her out on some paltry amount of maintenance and the Daily Detail writing her up as an incurable old slapper, dredging up her past indiscretions and getting them to give points out of ten for the quality of her blow-jobs...

The train was drawing in to Edenhurst Station. Patsy stood up and moved towards the door, giving her appearance a final check in the reflection of the window. Her blonde hair was back in place, her lipstick freshly applied.

Dave was on the platform, looking breathless and rather red. He rushed up to her, one meaty hand taking her arm, eyes searching her face.

She leant forward and kissed his sweaty cheek. "Darling! How thoughtful of you to meet me!"

He stopped, chest heaving, as she smiled at him.

She looked at him in concern. "Are you all right?"

He seemed to be having some sort of emotional struggle. His lips opened and shut as he grasped her elbow again.

"Good day?" he asked at last.

"Oh you know! Apart from the crowds and the dreadful people."

She shook back her hair at the injustices of department store shopping, deftly disentangling her arm and filling his with carrier bags, taking a surreptitious look at his knuckles as she did so.

"I do hope you haven't parked too far away," she said over her shoulder as she headed purposefully towards the ticket collector, "My feet are killing me."

She looked sideways to check her reflection in the window of the buffet-bar, and gave a tinkling laugh. "Goodness! I look like I've been dragged through a hedge!"

Chapter One

LOSS OF LIBIDO IS a common problem affecting women of all ages. It may simply be that the two of you have got into a rut and lovemaking has become stale or routine. Work together with your husband to bring the excitement back into your marriage. Set aside time for just the two of you, dress up in sexy underwear, watch an erotic film together, try having sex in a different place, at an unusual time or in a new position...

Stephanie slapped down the magazine and moved towards the vegetable rack. What these articles never told you was what to do if you just didn't fancy him any more. What to do if, even after three viewings of Emmanuelle, when you found yourself squashed into the cupboard under the stairs at five in the afternoon with your legs wrapped round your neck, you still just thought, yuck!

"It's not that I don't feel like it sometimes," she'd explained to her friend Millie. "After Nine-and-a-half Weeks was on TV I didn't know what to do with myself. I kept having dreams about Mickey Rourke and waking up all sweaty... But I still didn't want to make love with George."

"Supplements!" Millie had said.

Stephanie selected some potatoes, looking ruefully at the dresser, where a small basket already bulged with pots.

Oil of Evening Primrose stops PMT (in theory).

Selenium ditto.

Ginkgo Biloba improves memory (not always to be recommended), helps reduce appearance of cellulite (not seen much evidence yet).

Korean Ginseng (to perk her up).

Rest-Nerve (to calm her down).

St John's Wort (to stop her being a miserable cow).

She crossed to the bin, tossing in a potato that had turned a luminous and, no doubt, cancer-inducing green, turning another in her hands, looking it critically in the eyes.

Calcium (so her bones wouldn't crumble).

Multi-vitamins (as general precaution).

Millie had not been deterred. "Have you tried Zinc?"

Zinc!

Millie said she'd gone off it after she'd had Ben and couldn't bear Patrick anywhere near her. Then she'd gone to a homeopath, started taking zinc and wham! Back to normal. She'd said they'd done it four times in one day when they went to Barbados.

Stephanie shuddered.

Millie had tried to be helpful.

"What about a drink first?"

"I just can't. Even with a few drinks."

Even in fact with a lot of drinks. Even after George had brought home champagne to celebrate his company's latest take-over and she'd drunk the best part of a bottle and a half. And he'd got out the massage oil. Even then...

"I end up being sick," she'd said.

The difference, thought Stephanie now, poking about among the greens, picturing Millie's high cheekbones and wide sensuous mouth, was that Millie was still sexual.

She filled the sink, hearing her friend's laughter. Saw her tossing back her glossy hair. She could hear her now, "Of course I am – thirty-six – I'm at my peak!"

But Millie had always been bursting with it.

On her wedding day, Millie had looked like a gypsy queen, all long dark hair, red lips, nipped-in waist and swelling cleavage. She had stared into Patrick's eyes as if she wanted to eat him. (In Stephanie's bridal pics, she looked as if she needed a lie-down.)

Millie still arrived here some mornings, flushed and glowing. Millie still pushed her breasts out when she entered a room. Millie giggled and made jokes, passed comments laced with innuendo. Millie still liked sex.

Stephanie plunged her hands into the cold water. She herself felt like a withered old prune in that department. Or she had done. Not only did the bits no longer work, they curled up in horror and hid under the covers (or would do if under the covers wasn't precisely where the danger lurked). Until today.

She pulled back outer leaves, sliced through stalks, pausing to look up through her kitchen window at a tiny white plane in the square of bright blue sky. She thought about the passengers undoing their seatbelts, waiting for the drinks to come round, settling with their in-flight magazines, and felt an odd little ripple down the back of her neck.

Coconut oil on warm skin, cold wine on hot terraces, a vibrant splash of bougainvillea down a white wall... She suddenly wanted to be feeling excited, expectant, going somewhere, anywhere...

Did any of those people up there wish that they were safely back in their kitchens doing the sprouts?

Kelly whined outside the back door, scratching at the wood. Stephanie looked at the clock. Another thrilling day gone. In which she'd done nothing but make beds and scrub toilets and arrange flowers and peel sodding potatoes. And pour coffee for-

The ripple shot all over her.

What was it about past loves? Why did exes still have that power to grab you by the solar plexus and bring up all sorts of feelings that should have been dead and buried long ago?

There should be an operation on the National Health. Attachment Amputation. Separation-anxiety by-pass. So when it's over, it's over. You could see them in the street, trill: Hi-how-are-you? Fine? Oh Good-that-is-good, and feel rather less than you did when talking to the milkman (unless it was that relief milkman that came just for the fortnight three Christmases ago. Mmmn!)

Stephanie thought she had got to that. Thought she'd dealt with it all.

Obviously not.

"You want to get a life!" she told her rubber gloves.

She pulled the plug from the sink and let the water swirl away. "You need," she said to the gritty remains, "to get a job!"

This had been the master plan when Madeleine and Ken came to dinner. George wanted to invite them. Ken bought all the insurance policies for his car dealership through George's company and George could still thrash him at squash.

Stephanie had said, "What a good idea!" not because she particularly wanted to spend all afternoon with a slab of mad cow oozing blood over her kitchen or take hours over a home-made Tiramisu but because Madeleine was a business hot-shot who ran a secretarial agency cum virtual office set-up and even George – who never showed much enthusiasm for any of Stephanie's friends or things female in general – thought she was marvellous.

If Madeleine got her a job, George might stop his discouraging noises. So Stephanie had cooked her heart out and listened to the three of them comparing computer systems she'd never heard of and waited her chance. But when the cue came, George was monopolising their guest.

"How's business then?" he asked as he poured wine.

"Oh!" Madeleine threw back her head and laughed. Rolled her eyes in mock despair. "Fine! If I could just get the bloody staff." Madeleine had a low, slightly raspy voice.

George laughed too. "What a recommendation!" he joked. "Thought you were a recruitment company!"

Madeleine considered her long red nails. "Oh, we're mainly virtual office services these days," she said. "That's where the growth is. Companies who can't afford the big office space and the full-time telephonist use us. Or set-ups where a lot of employees work from home. It's very simple – their customers phone a number and we answer in the company name. Then we find out who they want to speak to and transfer that call to wherever the employee is – whether at home, on their mobile or on voice mail." Madeleine smiled. "The caller is none the wiser – thinks he's speaking to company headquarters somewhere."

"Very clever!" George was admiring. Stephanie heard him asking Madeleine about her telephone systems as she brought in the beef.

"Oh look at that!" said Ken, as she placed the platter on the table. "And what are you up to these days?" he enquired kindly as she sat, positioning the dish of mangetout in front of him.

Stephanie made herself say it. "I'm looking for a job." (I am George! I am!) But George was helping Madeleine to new potatoes. Only Ken was looking at her. In the

early days George and Stephanie used to play the What-do-they-see-in-each-other game when they met other couples. Sometimes the woman would be the mystery, sometimes he was. Madeleine was easy – any man would be attracted to her tall, cool sophistication. But Ken always reminded Stephanie of a pig – short and squat with a snout nose and big fleshy lips. A very kind and amiable pig. He smiled at Stephanie. “What sort of thing are you after?”

She started to explain how graphic design had moved on without her, and anyway there wouldn’t be those sort of openings around here and then she took a deep breath and looked straight at Madeleine and said: “I don’t mind what I do. I thought I might take anything that’s going, to start with. A job in an office, maybe.”

George made a fuss of moving dishes, picking up Madeleine’s wine glass, reaching for the bottle to top it up. Over the top of his arm Madeleine nodded and smiled.

She didn’t say, Oh you must give me a call – I’ll fix you up! She didn’t say anything. She just nodded.

“This looks wonderful,” said Ken, helping himself to another slice of soft red meat.

“Mmmn, marvellous,” murmured Madeleine and the moment was lost.

Suddenly they were all talking about the bar refurbishment at the club and what should be done to get funds in and George was pouring more wine and Stephanie sat quite still and swallowed hard. (So hard in fact that two mangetout went down whole, causing Ken to leap to his feet and slap her vigorously on the back. She managed to start breathing again just before he moved in for the full Heimlich manoeuvre but George, staring across the table into her scarlet face and popping eyes, frowned as if she were deliberately making an exhibition of herself.)

Millie wouldn’t have let it happen. Millie would have held Madeleine’s eyes and said, Got anything good on your books? Filing? Office girl? I make a mean cup of coffee. Millie would have joked and sparkled. Made them laugh till all three were falling over themselves to employ her...

Kelly whined more loudly, thumping her body against the wood of the door. Stephanie dried her hands and opened it.

“You smell revolting,” she said as the dog slunk in.

She tipped the vegetables into a saucepan and banged the lid on. Kelly wagged her tail.

“And you shit all over the garden.” She crashed the pan down onto the ceramic hob. “And who’s the only one who ever picks it up?” Stephanie asked. “Tell me that!”

She could phone Madeleine of course. Make one simple phone call. There was time before Millie got here with the kids. She got the red leather address book from the drawer in the hall and looked through for the right number.

She'd be chatty and casual. Hi Madeleine! You know I was talking about getting back to work? – That's right, just before I nearly choked to death – well I just wondered if you... But as her hand hovered above the receiver the phone rang, making her jump.

The bloke at the garage was not content with explaining what had been causing the car to refuse to start one morning in three and let her down between the traffic lights. He gave a full run-down of all the reasons they'd eliminated, parts checked, theories discussed and tests undertaken before informing her that they'd narrowed it down to a double-widgit-with-expanding-valve and two-way-gauge which was the only bit they didn't keep in stock but he'd get one in tomorrow.

George would have cut straight through this monologue, elicited the delivery time and put the phone down but Stephanie listened and murmured as if she was interested and looked at the clock and wondered if she could really summon up the wherewithal to phone Madeleine anyway and, by the time she had managed to get the receiver back in place, the doorbell rang.

Charlotte and Toby filed past her into the hall with sighs and grunts, dropping lunchboxes and folders as they went. Millie hovered on the doorstep. Stephanie squeezed her arm. "Thanks so much. Aren't you coming in?"

"Can't. Got loads to do and I've left Ben in the car." She was bright and excited. "But I'll see you later. You are coming tonight?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Oh Steph, you must. It's just what you need. And Amanda really needs us. That bastard Stuart's being as tight as anything since he buggered off with the hairdresser. She's got to make a few bob somehow. Don't know how many she's got coming," Millie went on, "but it's always better with a crowd. I asked Jacqui and Sue of course but they can't. Do you know anybody else who'd like to come? –you can invite who you like – the more the merrier."

Charlotte and Toby seemed to have grown again in the eight hours they'd been away. The ceilings shook with the clumping of their great feet. Stephanie looked at the hallway, strewn with shoes and bags and blazers dropped in heaps. Charlotte came back down the stairs and strode past her to the kitchen.

At just twelve she was already nearly as tall as Stephanie and had her father's dismissive air.

Stephanie followed her. "I want you to go and clear up after that dog."

"Ugh, gross." Her daughter had the fridge open and was pulling out packets and jars, looking at labels and shoving them back in disgust.

"You wanted her. You said you'd look after her."

"Yeah." She shut the door and carried the cheese across to the chopping board, pulled open the bread bin and took out a loaf.

"I'm sick of doing everything."

Charlotte frowned in concentration as she sawed away with the bread knife. "Where's the piccalilli?"

"I mean it. I'm going to give her away if you don't start pulling your weight."

"Yeah, right. Like Dad would let you."

Charlotte – coup de grâce successfully delivered – pressed one huge slice on another and gathered the sandwich into her hand. "Come on Kelly. Come with me," she ordered.

The dog appeared immediately and slavered.

"Not upstairs."

"Don't keep on, Mum."

"PAs"

The girl on the other end of the phone had a low, cool voice that immediately made Stephanie stumble. "Oh, um, Madeleine. Could I talk to Madeleine, please?"

"Who's speaking?"

Toby appeared in front of her with his shirt hanging out. He waved a packet of chocolate minirolls enquiringly under her nose.

"I've had three. Can I have another one?" he intoned in a stage whisper.

Stephanie waved him away as a new voice sounded in her ear. Toby brought his face closer to hers.

"Can I?" he asked urgently, warm chocolatey breath fanning her cheek. She turned her face into the receiver.

"Hello?"

Toby took another one and wandered off munching.

“Oh, Madeleine, it’s Stephanie. Yes, thank you, I am. And you? Oh that’s good. The thing is, Madeleine, I was just thinking, I mean I just wondered” – spit it out for goodness sake – “Madeleine!” It came out in a rush. “Would you like to come to a party?”

Stephanie picked up Toby’s shoes. Hopeless! Stephanie Walters – Specialised Subject: Communication Skills. She’d failed as dismally as she had on Saturday. Four hours, three courses, half a bottle of port and two layers of chocolate mints and she hadn’t managed to get a simple question out.

Toby’s bedroom door was half closed, his school uniform in a scrunched heap between it and the doorpost. She could hear the high-pitched explosions of a computer game.

Stephanie knocked and pushed the door wide open.

Toby was leaning forward, his eyes only inches from the monitor screen, his fist clenching the joystick.

“Yes!” He let out a hiss of satisfaction.

She waited till the game concluded in a violent limb-ripping crescendo and he fell back into post-battle slump.

“Good day at school?”

“All right.”

Why on earth did she ask? All Charlotte could ever say was, “Don’t keep on Mum!” Toby’s entire repertoire extended to “All right.”

Children! I cannot stop thinking about a man I used to know...

Don’t keep on, Mum!

Today I saw him again. He came into our kitchen and drank from one of our mugs and showed more interest in me in a single half hour than any of you have done for years.

All right.

I kept watching those hands that had once so moved me. As he talked, they turned and shaped, showed me how things could be...

Mum – don’t keep on.

All right.

"Toby, could you hang your uniform up?

"In a minute!" He was already clicking the box for a new game.

"Now, please, Toby!" Before I scream.

"All right!"

She supposed she should be grateful for small mercies. Pleased that they bothered to speak at all. George often didn't.

"George!" Your wife here! Remember that one you promised to love and honour?

George. Tall, dark-suited, still attractive in a greying sort of way. Uncreased as ever, cuffs as immaculately white as they'd always been. He dropped his briefcase into the usual corner of the hall. They came together in the doorway of the sitting-room.

"Mmmn! Who's a beautiful girl then? Who's gorgeous? What have you been doing today my darling? Have you missed me?"

Kelly put both paws on his chest, tongue lolling. Stephanie wrinkled her nose as the unmistakable odour of hot dog (sadly not the sort that came with onions and American-style mustard) rose in her nostrils.

She positioned herself in front of her husband.

"Have you had a good day?"

George rubbed vigorously at the sides of Kelly's neck. Globules of saliva formed at her open jaws, dripping copiously onto the carpet. Her tail thwacked back and forth against the end of the pale sofa.

Stephanie looked at the long dark hairs with distaste. "Dinner's ready. Don't forget I'm going out tonight."

George looked up in surprise. "Really? Where?"

"I told you. A friend of Millie's is having an accessories party. Earrings and things, I think."

"Sounds scintillating." He grinned at her.

"Just a bit of fun. Millie wants us to support Amanda. Her husband's moved out."

"You'll come back reeking of fags again."

And I've invited Madeleine along. I am going to speak to her at last. And go about changing my life. "Talking of which, that dog smells."

"I'll bath her with the children at the weekend." George fondled the top of the dog's head. "Poor Kelly."

Madeleine put an exasperated hand to her forehead.

"Come on Samantha! You're traumatised! Your husband's disappeared. Your mother's on a ventilator! Your sixteen-year-old daughter's pregnant. Your son's in a remand home. You're upset for god's sake..."

The girl pouted.

"Let's try it again." Madeleine snapped her fingers. "From the top."

She picked up the phone in front of her and assumed a deep voice. "Can I speak to Doreen please?"

Samantha fiddled with her headphones. "Oh yes! Um. Hold on a minute. I'm not sure where she is..." She stopped and sniffed.

Madeleine rolled her eyes. "For God's sake."

Samantha looked pained. "What?"

"What are your hands doing?"

The girl looked at her pink pearly nails.

"Exactly!" Madeleine got up and began walking about the room. "They should be on the keyboard already," she rapped out impatiently. "Calling up Doreen's details, finding her contact number..." She stopped and looked pointedly at Samantha. "While you keep talking."

Madeleine sat down in a chair in front of the bank of monitors and put a set of headphones on.

"Doreen?" she said vaguely, "Oh yes. She's been so good..." A little sob caught in her throat. "I don't know what I'd have done without her." She paused, gulped and composed herself. "I think she's in the bathroom." She took the headphones off and banged them down in front of the row of gleaming switches. "Then you put him on hold! Yes?" She looked up as Jo's dark head poked around the door.

"Mrs K's here."

Madeleine shut her office door and drew deeply on the butt of her cigarette.

"Absolutely useless. I thought she'd been to RADA!"

She opened a cupboard and pulled out a bottle, tipping it invitingly in Patsy's direction.

Patsy, lying back in one of the big leather chairs, shook her head. "It was something like that. Monica said it cost a fortune anyway."

"Well they didn't teach her anything. She hasn't got a clue."

"She'll pick it up."

"She'd better," said Madeleine grimly. "I know she's Monica's god-daughter..."

"Fifteen percent of the turnover."

"But it isn't enough. She's wet."

"She's led a sheltered life. That's why Monica's educating her. At least she'll keep her mouth shut. Anyway," Patsy pulled a face. "The others are no great shakes! The one who drove me..."

Madeleine looked irritated. "Her shift had finished. She needn't have come at all." She tipped a capful of whisky into her own cup. "I'm the one who has the headaches with Recruitment. Apart from Miss Hopeless out there, I don't see you here helping to vet people."

"I'm a sleeping partner."

"Sleeping around partner. You're more of a liability than the damn clients."

She sat down as Patsy got up and walked over to pluck a cigarette from Madeleine's open packet.

"All right, all right!"

Madeleine held out the lighter. "Thought you'd given up."

"I have."

Patsy perched herself on the edge of the desk, pausing to admire the sheer perfection of her stockinged legs as she inhaled.

"It wasn't my fault," she said plaintively. "How was I supposed to know Dave would go rooting through my things! Bloody man's got such a suspicious mind." She blew the smoke out on a long sigh.

Madeleine raised her eyebrows. "I don't believe you sometimes," she said. "What on earth were you doing keeping the bit of paper anyway?"

Patsy shrugged. "I didn't mean to. He gave me his number and this address for me to meet him at. I'd written it down with his name and 'Wednesday' on it. Then he called the next morning and said he'd pick me up at the station. So his number was in my phone and I just forgot about the note."

"Where was it?"

"Don't know. In one of my handbags, I suppose."

Madeleine looked at her. "You're hopeless. I spend all day long saying don't keep anything written down anywhere and what do you do? What did you tell Dave?"

"Just said I'd written it down for you. Somebody wanting a secretary."

"Well if he's in your bag, he obviously thinks you're at it again so you'd better be careful."

Patsy waved a hand dismissively. "He's got no idea, really. He's just being funny because of the Club drinks thing. He says I was groping the barman!" Her shiny plum lips curled in indignation. "Can you imagine?"

"You've almost convinced yourself. I was there, remember."

"I was just messing around. And Dave can talk! He had his hands all over that builder's tarty little wife."

"He'll see that as quite irrelevant," Madeleine said calmly as Patsy's voice began to rise. "Forget it now. Crisis averted. Just learn from it this time." Madeleine pressed the intercom. "Jo! Tell Samantha to go home and make sure she's in on the dot of eight tomorrow. Then bring us some more coffee."

She turned back to Patsy. "Fancy a night out? Something new to play with? Stephanie's got a friend who's got a friend – some lame duck by the sound of it – having a girls' party. She says it's lingerie and accessories. You know what she's like – probably thinks toys are something you buy for the kids."

Patsy pulled a small gold mirror from her handbag and stared into it. "I look dreadful!"

"She wants me to go along. I said I'd ask you too."

"Can't! I've got to go home and shag Dave." Patsy yawned. "He needs settling down. Don't want him cutting up my cards again."

Madeleine picked up the phone and began to dial. She shook her head as Patsy put on her jacket.

"You'd better watch your back. This time you're really pushing it."

Patsy laughed. "That's what you always say!"

Stephanie heard the cab hoot as she stood in the doorway. George was on one sofa, Kelly at his feet. Charlotte lay the full length of the other. Toby sat cross-legged on the floor about three feet from the television, his ears stuck out in silhouette against the glare of the screen.

"Bye, then!"

"See you." George looked up briefly and waved a hand.

Anne Robinson filled the screen in full magnificent Armani as a small middle-aged man shrivelled on his podium. Both children appeared engrossed. Stephanie blew them kisses. Neither moved.

"Goodnight then," she called from the hall as she opened the front door.

"You are the Weakest Link," Charlotte called back gaily as she closed it. "Goodbye!"