Busy Woman Seeks Wife

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Extract

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Chapter 1

'In my bed! They were at it in my sodding bed!'

'Never!'

'Yup. Right there. Big hairy bum in the air and Manuela's legs … oh God, I don't even want to think about it.'

'You must have given her the fright of her life!'

'Well, I think I've probably rendered him impotent for life. Ugly sod. Oh God, Saff … I feel so dirty, like I've been violated or something.'

'Want to come over?'

'Can I? Will Max mind?'

'Course not. He loves ya. Anytime – though I'll have to sort out the kids.'

'I'll bring a bottle. I need anaesthetic. I'm in shock.'

Saffron laughed. 'Stay calm.'

Alex put down the phone and turned back to the chaos in her room – her cushions strewn everywhere, a bowl of foreign change smashed on the floor, the blanket from the bed hurled into the corner. She wanted to throw up.

She'd heard the strange noises the minute she'd shouldered open the front door, back home earlier than anticipated with an overnight bag in one hand and a laptop in the other. Dumping them in the narrow hallway, she'd thought Manuela might be moving furniture in her bedroom to clean behind it. Though that would be a first. Her Spanish cleaner didn't move anything if she could help it and struggled at the best of times to figure

out the workings of a can of Pledge – oh, the irony. Alex had purposely thumped about the flat a bit so as not to give the poor woman a fright, and called her name before opening the bedroom door.

For a moment she hadn't quite been able to work out what was going on, and had said 'sorry' as if two people screwing in her bed at 2.15 on a Wednesday afternoon was normal. Then the horror of the situation dawned on her, not to mention the wobbling nether regions. The man's suit on the floor – tartan boxers off, shirt and socks still on – and Manuela's red stiletto shoes were discarded. The woman herself appeared to still be fully dressed, and not for cleaning.

'What – the – fuck – are – you – doing?' Alex's screech sounded loud even to Alex and the couple's heads shot round, their expressions freezing for one blissful moment in total disbelief. 'Get – out – of – my – bed!'

If it hadn't been so disgusting, the scramble that ensued would have been funny. The man, grey-haired, bearded and overweight, reversed out of Manuela and off the bed, frantically searching for his underpants whilst holding his shirt-tails over his genitals in some ridiculous attempt to preserve his remaining dignity. Manuela pulled down her dress and tidied her hair with her hands as she pushed her feet into her shoes. Clearly knickers were not a consideration.

'So sorry …' he puffed as he struggled with his trousers. 'Didn't know, you know … we were …'

'Get out,' Alex hissed through her teeth.

'Yes, yes of course.' Stuffing his feet into shoes – quite smart brogues, Alex noticed – he shrugged on his jacket, his face red and sweaty, his neck thick where it was stuffed into the collar of his shirt. He appeared to be about fifty, perhaps fifty-five, a wedding ring on his podgy finger. He made towards the door

and Alex stood back to let him through. Then he stopped suddenly, putting his hand inside his jacket and fishing out his wallet. He pulled out some notes and it wasn't until he turned back towards Manuela that Alex twigged.

'I think *I'll* have that, thank you.' She snatched the notes from his hand before Manuela could take them. 'It'll go towards some new sheets. Now get out!'

He bolted like a rabbit, slamming the front door of the flat behind him. Alex turned to Manuela, so angry now she could hear the blood pounding in her ears. The little Spanish woman was straightening the sheets and puffing up the pillow. Lunging forward Alex grabbed her thin brown arm. 'Get out, you bitch. You whore,' she shrieked. 'Get out of my flat. Get out,' and as Alex wrenched at the bed sheets, Manuela tottered to the door.

'But señorita.' She turned to Alex, her face outraged as if it was her who had been wronged. 'What about my pay? I've done the bathroom …'

It was all Alex could do not to thump her. 'And it looks like you've well and truly done the bedroom too. How dare you! Get out. You're fired!'

As if possessed, Alex continued to pull off the sheets. Bundling them up into a ball, she hurled them with all her might out of the room, followed by the pillows and duvet, then, opening the flat door, kicked them down the communal stairs to the hallway below, narrowly avoiding Manuela as she bolted out of the front door. Grabbing her overnight bag to prop open the flat door, Alex turned back to her bedroom and pulled on the mattress, her hands struggling to find a grip and slipping painfully. It was heavy and she had to push hard against it to squeeze it through the door. Her tight jacket didn't help and she could feel herself sweating. She was aware she was grunting

inelegantly, but eventually she managed it, and pushed it to join the sheets below. Throwing her jacket back into the hallway, she followed her bedding downstairs, clambering over it to open the front door of the building and, in two journeys, dumped it all in the builders' skip outside the house opposite, her duvet cover joining brick rubble and broken plasterboard.

It was then that she'd phoned Saff.

What now? She slowly began to straighten the chaos in the room, picking up the shards from the broken bowl carefully, before scooping up the coins and dropping them into a drawer in her dressing table. She must have knocked the bowl as she struggled with the mattress.

In her room. They'd done it in *her* room and in her lovely bed that she'd bought the day she'd completed on the flat. The lovely bed with its pretty bedding where she and Todd made love and read the papers together on a Sunday morning. Well, she read them anyway while he usually did his hundred press-ups before going on a run. She'd have to call the cleaning agency, of course, and get Manuela struck off, but as Alex folded up the bed quilt, piling it up with the cushions on the bare divan, she realised that wouldn't go any way to ridding her of the suspicion that today's liaison was probably not the first.

Changing out of her work clothes, crumpled from the horrendously early start in Stuttgart and the flight, she purposely turned her back on the denuded bed as she slipped into joggers and her favourite T-shirt. Comfort clothes. Of course, she'd have to sell the flat, that was obvious. Heaven only knew how many sexually frustrated, overweight married men had been entertained by Manuela over the weeks she'd worked here. No wonder the place was never very clean. The tart was too busy turning tricks.

Gathering up her clothes and stuffing them in the washing

machine, Alex could feel her blood pumping loudly again. She tore open the fridge, knowing full well there wouldn't be anything in there to eat – there rarely was – but there wasn't even the measly pint of milk she'd asked Manuela to get. The request had been written on the same note about putting the bed sheets through the machine; clearly another thing that hadn't been done. Alex grabbed her purse, fishing out a few quid, and, locking the flat door behind her, dashed downstairs and to the corner shop.

'Hello there, Alex girl.' Rajesh's toothy smile peeked out from behind the counter piled high with displays of chewing gum and chocolate bars on special offer. 'Where have you been? Off on your travels again?'

'It's been a bit of a marathon,' she sighed, picking up a basket. 'Geneva, Amsterdam, Frankfurt, Stuttgart. I think.' She picked up a few things, including a paper which she knew she wouldn't have time to read, but it was a nodding attempt to keep up with world affairs, and handed over the money to Rajesh.

'Oh, it's no good. A lovely girl like you shouldn't be off on a plane every minute. You should be at home with babies.'

Alex rolled her eyes. 'You are as bad as my mother, Rajesh.' Laughing, she left the shop, as the little shopkeeper shook his head and went back to reading the local paper.

As she elbowed open her door a few minutes later, a rather tired bunch of daffs, a warm bottle of Chardonnay and a loaf of sliced white under her arm, which had been all that was left on the shelf, she could hear her mobile ringing. By the time she'd dumped her shopping it had stopped. The office.

'Yup, Camilla? I'm back now.' Alex tucked the phone under her chin as she leant into a cupboard for a vase. 'Sorry I missed your call. I managed an earlier flight so I'm home.'

'Oh, that's great,' her assistant's soft voice cooed down the phone. It was as pretty as she was, but Alex was grateful that despite her petite frame and doe-like blue eyes, she was awesomely efficient and a rock in Alex's choppy seas. 'It's good to have you back. Just a few things to keep you up to speed. Tetril's factory are happy with the samples date you suggest, the twenty-fifth is fine for the ice hockey and the shoe people want to talk to you about the colour range.'

'OK – can you put something in my diary for a meeting? But, Camilla, tell them I haven't got long or they'll have me there all day and I haven't got time.' Their footwear team put as much dedication into the construction of a trainer as scientists had into the Stealth Bomber and talked with such passion about aerodynamics, cushioning and arch supports, it was almost kinky.

'Oh, and your Yankie dreamboat called by the way. He couldn't get you on your phone – you must have been on the plane – but says he'll be landing at Heathrow after his stop-off in Paris.'

Alex felt a tingle of anticipation at the news of Todd's arrival in the country until she remembered she'd have no bed for him to climb into. Not when the mattress was in the skip, and there certainly wouldn't be room for his muscle-bound body in the tiny single in the spare bedroom where she'd have to sleep. It would have to be the Holiday Inn for him. Hanging up the call, she scanned over her notes quickly. Things were looking good for the next few weeks. Product launches always got her excited; massive build-up, even more massive preparation, then the nail-biting wait to see how the product was received by press and public.

Bread with some cheese she'd found loitering at the back of the fridge, in one hand, and laptop on her knee, Alex now

scrolled through the plethora of email messages, chewing absent-mindedly. Everything seemed to be going smoothly in the office. Camilla had held the fort pretty well while she'd been away and Alex sent her an email saying as much. Then she turned to the pile of post on the table. All the envelopes had windows, except for one reminding her of the date of her next dentist appointment – which would have to be changed. The only other uncontroversial-looking one turned out to be from her neighbour in the flat below complaining that unless she did something about her leaking shower and the water coming through his ceiling, he'd issue legal proceedings. Alex stuffed the letter behind the microwave, where she filed everything she couldn't handle immediately, and her eye was caught by the flashing light on the front of the washing machine. It was stuck in the middle of the programme, and no knob twiddling would get it to move on. Damn. She scrabbled in the kitchen drawer to try and find the instruction book. Where was it? All she could find was 'giblets' – plastic bags of Allen keys and screws, the extras from gadgets and appliances she'd bought when she moved in two years ago. She'd look again later. Then she dialled her mother's number and with shoulder scrunched up, phone to one ear, she pulled out bedding from the tiny airing cupboard and began to make up the single bed.

'Hi, Mum, I'm back.'

'Hello daaarling,' her mother's sultry tones came down the line. 'Good trip? I don't know how you put up with all that filthy travelling.'

Alex sighed silently. 'Cos I have to. Can't talk for long, how's things?'

'Busy busy, you know. And now I'm about to tackle the ivy on the front of the house. It's gone mad.'

Alex sighed audibly this time, stuffing a pillow into a pillow case. 'Oh mum, can't you wait? I said I'd do it. I'll come over at the weekend.'

'Well, sweetie, you've been saying that for a while. Do you really think you can this time?'

Ignoring the tone of disapproval, Alex did a mental scan. 'Er, hang on, actually, I'm off to Toronto on Sunday afternoon but—'

'Quite. I'll be fine, darling, up my little ladder.'

Alex had a vision of The Bean, as everyone called her, demure little hat on her head and the most elegant and unsuitable of gardening gloves bought through one of her gardening catalogues, teetering on the step ladder clipping at the ivy. 'No, Mum, wait. I'll come over on Saturday. I'll have an hour or so then. That ivy needs a serious assault.'

'Well, dear … I don't know …' And The Bean went off on some diversion involving her oldest friend Ursula and some blazared lothario who was wooing her at the Arts Club.

Alex pulled up outside Saffron's an hour later than planned and it was already dark. Camilla's call, which had come through just after she'd shaken off her mother, had put everything else on the back burner. Apparently Gavin, her boss, could not now get to Toronto before the key presentation meeting next week. Could Alex do the business for him with the clients over there? So, with assurances from Camilla that she'd help out with preparing notes and the audio visual, Alex dropped everything to begin trawling for information to persuade the sceptical Canadian sales team that the cutting edge properties of their new range were vastly superior to anything the industry had yet been able to offer.

Max opened the door. 'Hello stranger. Glad to see you've

dressed up as usual.' Alex playfully punched his shoulder. 'How vos der trip, ja?'

'Oh tedious.' She returned his warm hug. 'Those Germans have no sense of irony and every hotel looks exactly the same.'

'I get it.' He lead her through to the bright, warm kitchen. 'If it's Tuesday and the bathroom's on the right, must be in Baden-Baden.'

'Something like that.'

Max took the bottle of minimart Chardonnay from her, looking suspiciously at the label and, clearly revolted, put it away in a cupboard to join her other dodgy offerings from the past. 'God, I hope you know more about sportswear than you do about wine,' he'd teased her once, and she now took perverse pleasure in finding a bottle that would guarantee to make the affable TV executive wince. He put a glass of something dark and red in front of her at the kitchen table and she took a deep gulp, comforted now by the flavour as it ran over her tongue. There was a delicious smell wafting out of the oven. Max and Saffron's kitchen was like a security blanket to her – the bright, hand-painted mugs on the dresser, the apron on the back of the door, the children's pictures on the fridge. To Alex it felt like the home she'd never managed to achieve, the only normality in her mad world.

'Saff's just turning off Oscar's light. There's been a homework drama but she's soothing frayed tempers,' said Max. They then chatted briefly about work; they were both absorbed by the totally different but equally challenging worlds they moved in – media and marketing from two opposing directions.

Eventually footsteps came down the stairs and Saffron entered the room, her neat little frame in a white linen shirt, green checked capri pants and pumps. Alex felt herself beginning to relax from the day.

'Hi, good to see you, sweetie.' Saffron kissed her friend warmly on the cheek. 'Have you got a drink? How's the Spanish scrubber?'

'Oh Gawd, Saff.' Alex put her head in her hands. 'It's so vile! I've chucked all the bedding into the skip. The nasty little creep who was giving her one even pulled out some cash to pay her! In front of me! Can you imagine?'

Saffron looked suitably shocked as she bustled about putting on her pinny and preparing the French beans to cook. She placed a bowl of crisps in front of Alex. Max, already informed about the day's outrage and suspecting shrieked outpourings of grief, scooped up a handful and escaped the room for his study.

'You have to admire the woman's business acumen,' Saffron said, tying her wavy blonde hair into a ponytail on top of her head. 'With you away so much, she didn't let the grass grow under her feet, did she?'

'Little slapper,' Alex replied through a mouthful of crisps, realising how hungry she was. 'And now I've got to get a new mattress or I'll never see Todd. Not that we have time to see each other anyway. And my neighbour downstairs is getting nasty about the leak in my shower. But I just don't have time to get someone in to sort it. I *can't* take a day off, and I've got a pile of stuff to get to the cleaners or I'll have nothing to wear in Toronto. Oh, and the sodding washing machine is on the blink, again, and then there's the little matter of work. Bloody Gavin can't make Toronto, so rather than spending the time I should be to consolidate all the information from the last few days and preparing for the launch, I've got to put together a huge presentation which is critical – it's *critical*, Saff. If I get this wrong, it's going to affect how we are perceived in Canada and then—'

Saff put her hand on Alex's arm. 'Hey! Calm down, love. Stressing isn't going to help.'

'But it's *all* stress. There's just no time to do anything, even to buy milk, for heaven's sake. And I haven't managed to see Mum for ages. And now she's threatening to—' Alex was cut off by her mobile buzzing in her bag. 'Hello?'

'Alex? It's Letitia, dear. From next door to your mother.'

Alex could feel her anxiety rising.

'Sorry to bother you, dear, but it's your mother. I think she fell off her ladder. Anyway, I'm here at the hospital with her.'

'Oh, bloody hell. Oh no, is she all right?'

'Don't fret. It's not too serious but they think it's her arm. The thing is, she won't be able to go home tonight. They said something about having to reset it and I'm afraid I'm off on a cruise to the fjords tomorrow first thing or I'd gladly help.'

'Oh, thank you, Letitia. Please don't worry. You've done more than enough. I'll be right there.' Finding out exactly where her mother had been taken to and thanking her again profusely, Alex clicked off her phone and looked across at Saffron's concerned face.

'Is she OK?' she asked cautiously. 'What do the doctors say?'

Alex relayed what Letitia had said, her heart sinking at the implications. 'Oh Saff! What the hell was she doing cutting back the ivy at this time of night? She was bound to fall! I told her I'd do it. I should have been more insistent. Oh God, what am I going to do?' Alex rubbed her eyes, smearing the remaining mascara over her cheeks. 'Who's going to look after her? I can't have her come and stay with me. I mean, how can I? I'm never there …'

'Well, it might not be for long. She might be able to go

home again by the time you go to Canada. At least you'll be there at night and she can watch TV—'

Alex sat bolt upright. 'But there's no bed for her!'

'I've got a camp bed?' Saff tried to look helpful.

Alex stood up. 'Bless you. Can I let you know? Oh, why couldn't she have waited for me?'

Saff looked up at her friend and laughed ruefully. 'Come on, Alex, you know how stubborn she can be. She's always done exactly what she wants. Why don't you have some food before you leave?'

'Thanks, Saff, but I'd better go and see her straight away – much as I'd love your yummy supper. I seem to have had nothing but airline meals and packet soups lately. Soon I won't be able to cope with anything that doesn't come on a plastic tray. All I wanted to do was talk to you.' She suddenly felt very weary.

'What you need,' said Saffron, standing up and rubbing Alex's arm comfortingly, 'is someone to take away your worries, someone to cook you lovely meals and deal with all the boring details of life.'

'But I've got a bloke already,' protested Alex. 'When he's in the country at least.'

'No, no!' replied Saffron. 'I mean, what you need is a *wife*.'