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What She Wants

Written by Cathy Kelly

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CATHY KELLY

What She Wants

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To Francis and Lucy,
with much love.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

People always want to know if you put real people in books. And the answer, for most writers, is no. But I've found that readers come up to me later and say 'you know that TV reporter woman in the last book, the vindictive, horrible cow with the platinum hair and the lisp? Well, we all know she's meant to be so and so . . .'

This is the sort of comment that makes me go pale with fear. There's no point babbling that you didn't mean it to sound like any particular person. Nobody will believe you. You live in fear of meeting a TV reporter with platinum hair, a lisp and a strong right hook. Which is why I decided to write a book where I could make up things left, right and centre. Just in case anyone in a village in Kerry got upset with the carry-on in the village in my book, I invented my own village.

The other problem with writing fiction is that you do a teeny bit of research and then go off and invent things merrily. This is a problem when the people who've given you the benefit of their experience actually read your book and say, shocked, 'something like that would never happen!'

So apologies to all my friends in Sony Music Ireland in case there's a bit that makes them go pale. I'm sorry, but I just made lots of things up! And thanks to Hugh Murray and to Angela for the detective work.

Writing books involves lots of people and I'm lucky in that I work with some of the nicest book people ever. Thanks to my dear friend and agent Ali Gunn and all at Curtis Brown, especially Carol Jackson, Diana Mackay and Doug

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Finally, a huge thank you so much to the people who read my books. And to all the lovely people who write nice messages on my web site. You have no idea how cheering it is to log on and find people have said kind things. Hope you enjoy this one.

WHAT
SHE WANTS

PROLOGUE

As yet another noisy Cork and Kerry tour bus crunched gears over the hump-backed bridge, belching out diesel fumes, Mary-Kate Donlan closed the door of her chemist shop and locked it. If any Redlion inhabitant wanted either lipstick or flu remedies in their lunch break, they could go without. Ever since her assistant Otis had been on holiday, all she'd managed for her lunch for the past few weeks was a bit of a sandwich munched between customers and she was fed up with it. Today she'd arranged to meet her niece, Delphine, for a leisurely lunch and a chat.

Wrapping her coat around her, she hurried down the village to the Widow Maguire's, a pretty stone pub with window boxes, traditional music sessions twice a week and the best pub food for miles. She ran across the main street, a slim middle-aged woman with plain bobbed hair and not a speck of make-up on her shrewd, inquisitive face. She hurried past 'Lucille's: Fashions For All Occasions' with just a brief glance in the window. Lucille's fashions were always a little on the eccentric side. This week, the window sported plenty of knobbly knitwear in jewel colours, along with one magnificent cruise wear rig out that would probably look fine in the South of France but was a little skimpy for Kerry in October.

She slowed down when she spotted Emmet from the convenience shop ahead of her. A crotchety old bandit with a fondness for porter, Emmet would talk the hind legs off a donkey and made for a very irritating luncheon companion on account of his tendency to wax lyrical about the rare

ould times as he sank his lunchtime two pints. When Emmet had nipped into the pub, Mary-Kate speeded up again. He'd have met some other poor soul by the time she got there, so she was safe.

'Hello Lara,' she greeted a tall red-haired woman in a stylish trouser suit who was just climbing out of the sleek silver Mercedes she'd parked outside the pub.

'Hi,' said Lara warmly. 'How's business?'

'Mad. The place is full of hypochondriacs. I should have bought shares in a drug company.'

They both laughed. 'How are things going for you?' Mary-Kate asked.

'Marvellous,' Lara said. 'Just sold the old O'Brien place.'

'Shanrock Castle?' asked Mary-Kate, impressed. A crumbling castle set in fifty acres of weed-infested parkland, only someone very rich could have afforded to buy it because they'd need to spend two fortunes renovating it. 'Another rock star I suppose?' The district surrounding Redlion boasted four rock stars, at least six novelists and one eccentric classical composer. The rock stars all lived sedate lives while the crazy parties took place at the classical composer's home. Helicopters bearing Hollywood producers were always landing on his helipad, trying to get him to write music for their blockbusters.

'No, an actress this time. I can't name names but she's one of those who keeps her Oscar in the toilet.'

Mary-Kate grinned. 'They all say that. I'm meeting Delphine for a sandwich. Do you want to join us?'

Lara said yes just as a battered beetle pulled up and a voluptuous red-head in a purple velvet coat emerged.

'Hi, girls,' Delphine Ryan greeted her aunt, Mary-Kate, with a kiss and hugged her old school friend. 'I haven't set eyes on you for ages, Lara. What's the gossip?'

In the Widows, they discussed everything from the price of property to the appalling state of the roads.

'There's a pot hole on the Blackglen road the size of a swimming pool and I spend my life avoiding it,' Lara

complained. 'If I destroy a wheel on the Merc going into it, I'm going to sue the council.'

'I love the Blackglen Road,' sighed Delphine. 'There's a beautiful old period house out there that Eugene and I would have loved to buy, but it was way beyond our price range. It was fabulous, lovely old fireplaces and a big, sprawling garden with a bit of wood at the back.'

'You mean Kilnagoshell House, the old B & B,' Lara said. 'I sold it six months ago. A woman from Dublin bought it, a widow actually. Virginia Connell is her name and she's lovely. Lonely too, I daresay. You should call out and see her, Mary-Kate.'

'If she doesn't want to meet people, that's her business,' Mary-Kate said wisely. 'It would be wrong to intrude. When she needs people, we'll be here.'

Lara finished her sandwich.

'Must fly, girls. I've got to value the sweetest little cottage on the Killarney Road this afternoon.'

'Not old Gearóid's place?' inquired Mary-Kate. 'Are they selling it or what?'

'Or what, I think,' Lara said. 'Apparently the house will belong to Gearóid's nephew from Britain once they've got probate. God love him,' Lara added with a shudder. 'Gearóid left it in a terrible state. Then, I've got a viewing at the Richardsons' farmhouse. It's a pity they're leaving the village, they're nice people.'

'I should go too,' Delphine said, getting to her feet. 'I've a facial peel, two manicures and a bikini waxing this afternoon. Bye Mary-Kate.' She kissed her aunt goodbye fondly.

'I am going to finish my coffee in peace,' Mary-Kate smiled up at them, her grey eyes warm. 'Age must have its compensations. Take care, girls.'

The two younger women walked outside.

'It's a lovely day, isn't it?' said Lara as they stood for a moment enjoying the pale October sun. 'When the sun shines, Redlion is magical. I think the Richardsons are mad

for leaving. I don't know why anyone would ever want to sell up and leave.'

'I know what you mean,' Delphine said, gazing fondly up the winding main street where pastel-coloured houses appeared to doze lazily in the sunlight. 'It's got a healing, comforting sense to it or does that sound crazy?'

'Not at all,' Lara said ruefully. 'I was on ten cups of coffee, one Prozac and at least half a bottle of wine a day when I lived in Dublin. Since I came home, I've discovered the calm side of myself.'

'Lara Stanley calm!' teased Delphine. 'That'll be the day.'

Lara grinned. 'Calmer, then,' she said. 'But it is down to this place. It is special. You know, when I left my job in Dublin, all my colleagues thought I was mad burying myself back in the country. "Dullsville" they called it. And I told them there's nothing dull about Redlion.'

'We could do with a bit of dull,' Delphine pointed out. 'Too much happens round here. There's going to be another one of those political think tanks in the hotel next week and the place will be swarming with media and politicians desperate to get their faces in the paper. And Mrs Rock Star up the road was in having her nails done yesterday and she told me they're having a huge party for the album launch in November.'

'All go as usual,' Lara said. 'So much for the quiet life in the country. Still, I don't want to tell the people in the city what it's really like here or else they'd all up sticks and move down.'

Delphine laughed. 'And we want to keep Redlion a secret, don't we?'

CHAPTER ONE

Hope Parker let the shopping bags sit in a heap at her feet as she stood in front of the cookery books section. Her eyes flicked past *Perfect Cakes*, *The Definitive Chinese Cookbook*, *Catering for Parties* and *Easy Meals*. A recipe book full of easy meals was not what she was looking for. They were all she ever cooked in the first place. No, she wanted a comprehensive and simple cooking book, something big, fat and informative and full of explanations of what a bain marie really was and precisely what you did with yeast and did you have to have an airing cupboard handy when you cooked with it? That was all she wanted: a book that would finally explain how to cook something that didn't involve chicken pieces and a can of ready-to-go tomato sauce.

Her gaze moved past a massive advanced French cooking manual and she leaned closer to the shelves, trying to ignore the bookshop's lunchtime rush. Then she spotted it, a fat tome with bright gold writing on the spine: *Cooking for Cowards: Become the Queen of Your Kitchen.*

Queen of her kitchen? Yes, that was exactly what Hope wanted. No more ready-made lasagne and frozen solid stuffed chicken dinners in tinfoil. But lots of home-cooked meals that would have Matt beaming from ear to ear, no longer able to tease that he never put on weight because she couldn't cook.

Hope pulled it free from the other books and stared at the cover, hoping there was no mention of the word 'advanced'. There wasn't. Instead, there was a picture of an ordinary

looking woman standing smiling behind a veritable feast of glistening, delicious food.

Hope flicked inside and found an introduction that was funny, easy to understand, and made no mention of buying complicated utensils before you started. She couldn't afford to buy lots of new pots and pans and strange things for chopping up herbs.

'Cooking really is easy,' cooed the introduction. 'If you're one of those people who've never had the chance to learn, then let me show you how, the easy way.'

There was no implication that you had to be a twenty-something newly-married to be buying this book, no implication that thirty-seven-year-old women should be ashamed of themselves to be purchasing a cookery bible that included a section on 'how to buy meat'.

Hope never bought meat from the butchers'. She never knew what to ask for or even what you'd do with rack of lamb if you got it. She bought her meat ready packed from the supermarket where nobody could look down on you for not knowing what a gigot was.

'There's no need to be scared of buying meat,' continued the introduction, as if the writer had read Hope's mind. 'It's easy once you know how.'

Sold. Hope collected her shopping, paid for the book and hurried up to Jolly's department store, already lost in the fantasy of being a superb cook. Imagine the dinner parties they could have: Matt wouldn't have to entertain important advertising clients on his expense account in Bath's elegant restaurants any more. Instead, he could bring them home, and she, dressed in something elegant but sexy, would waft out of the kitchen with the scent of crème brulée clinging to her while jaded businessmen gobbled up melt-in-the-mouth things in delicately flavoured gravy, asking her why she'd decided to work in a building society instead of starting up her own restaurant?

And Toby and Millie would love it. Well, when they were older, they would. They'd think that home-made chutney

and made-from-scratch mayonnaise were the norm and would smugly tell their schoolmates that their mother was the 'best cook in the world, so there!' Hope remembered this type of culinary boasting from her own schooldays. But she and her sister, Sam, had always stayed out of the 'whose mother is the best cook' arguments, knowing that whatever could be said about their aunt Ruth, that she was an excellent cook wasn't one of them. Hope wondered, as she often did, if her mother had been any good at cooking? Aunt Ruth had never talked about things like that. Maybe Mum had been a wonderful cook. It might even be genetic: all Hope had to do was move beyond instant chicken sauces to discover that she was the next Escoffier.

In Jolly's, she got sidetracked in the women's department. She couldn't resist stopping a moment to finger the pretty floral skirt, running her fingers wistfully over the soft cotton with the delicate sprigged pattern of roses. In the middle of all the new season's dark wintry clothes, the rail of prettily patterned skirts had stood out like a wildflower meadow in a landscape of muddy ploughed fields.

Feeling the plastic grocery bags threatening to cut off the circulation to her left hand, Hope unhooked them from her wrist before indulging in a proper examination of the garment. The background colour was the pale blue of delicate Wedgwood with tiny lilac flowers mingling with tiny raspberry pink ones. Hope sighed wistfully. This wasn't a skirt, it was a lifestyle. A lifestyle where the wearer lived in a pretty cottage with lovely, well-behaved children, cats, maybe a rabbit or two, and an adoring husband who appreciated her. This woman sewed her own cushion covers, knew how to dry lavender and could bottle fruits and vegetables instead of buying them from the supermarket. She didn't need a safety pin to hold the top of her skirt together and she never raised her voice at the children in the morning when an entire carton of milk was spilled all over the said children's clothes, necessitating a complete change. No. This woman wore floral perfumes that came in old-fashioned

bottles, never got angry with her children and wafted around with a basket as she bought organic vegetables that still had bits of earth clinging to them. People would say things like 'Isn't she lovely? Wonderful mother, fantastic cook, have you tried her apple crumble? And she still manages to work . . .'

Yeah right. And pigs might fly. Hope patted the skirt one last time and picked up her shopping. She wasn't Mrs Floral Skirt and she never would be. She was Mrs Tracksuit Bottom, whose two children were quite accustomed to her roaring 'Stop that right now or I'll kill you!' She never wafted anywhere – difficult when you had a spare tyre and stocky legs – and she never talked to the neighbours long enough for them to have an opinion of her. Apart from the woman two doors up who let her dog do its business in Hope's garden, resulting in an un-neighbourly stand-off one morning. And as for sewing cushion covers she still hadn't managed to sew the button back on her work skirt and it had been held up with a safety pin for months. Although the good part of that was that the safety pin was of the big nappy variety and was more comfy than the constricting button had been. Thinking of work, she'd be terribly late back if she didn't get a move on.

She shook her head as if to rid it of the remnants of the idyllic floral skirt fantasy and, collecting up her shopping, hurried into the men's department and over to the ties. It took ages to find one she thought Matt would like: an expensive buttermilk yellow silk with a discreet pattern. Hope held the tie up against every shirt on the display; it looked lovely against the blue shirts and went particularly well with an azure striped one. She groaned in indecision.

Matt didn't go in for blue shirts much. The grey tie was more versatile, definitely, and cheaper, but Matt loved expensive things. He'd adored that ugly key ring his boss had given him one Christmas, purely because of the designer logo stamped into the leather. She held both ties up and squinted at them, dithering as usual.

OK, the yellow it had to be. So, it cost more than the coat she was wearing, but what the hell.

The woman behind the counter daintily placed the tie in a box. Perfectly coifed, she had lovely cared-for nails, Hope noticed, and her lipstick looked faultlessly applied; as if she'd just that minute rushed out from primping in the ladies'. Hope was conscious of the fact that her own windswept fair hair was dragged back in a pony tail and her morning lipstick a thing of distant memory.

Sales assistants invariably made her feel like an unkempt road warrior. She remembered a time when she herself was always beautifully groomed, those far off days before the children, when giving herself a French manicure had been a prerequisite on Sunday evenings. These days, she spent Sunday evenings sweating over the ironing board, worrying about the week ahead and trying to match socks from the enormous laundry pile.

'Is it a present?' inquired the sales woman, her tone implying that there was no way someone like Hope would be coughing up for such an expensive tie otherwise.

'Yes,' said Hope, stifling a wicked urge to say, no, it was for her, she dressed up in men's clothes at the weekends and, actually, was looking for a partner to go with her on a Harley-Davidson-Lesbian Day Out on Sunday.

Instead, she arranged her face into a polite expression. Being honest, there was no way she'd pay that much money for a tie otherwise. Even if as a fortieth birthday present, it was still ridiculously expensive. The only consolation was that Matt would love it. It would go with the very sophisticated new suit he'd just bought and with his image, also highly sophisticated. The only unsophisticated part of the Matt Parker experience was Hope herself. Was that the problem? she thought with a pang of unease.

Matt hadn't been himself lately. Usually he was one of life's optimists, happy, upbeat. But for the past few months, he'd been listless and moody around the house, only content if they were doing something; filling their time off with

endless activities. He didn't seem happy to sit and blob around on those rare occasions when the children weren't murdering each other. Edgy, that was it. Matt was edgy, and in her dark, terrified moments, Hope was scared that it was something to do with their marriage. Or her.

'Shall I gift-wrap it?'

'No, I like wrapping things myself,' Hope confessed. Anyway, getting the shop to wrap things was always a waste of time, she'd discovered, as she could never resist trying to open a bit of the wrapping paper when she got home so she could admire the gift. Invariably, the paper got ripped when she was trying to shove whatever it was back in, so why bother?

She added the tie to her selection of plastic bags and left the shop hurriedly.

Hope rounded the corner at Union Street and collided with a gaggle of tourists oohing and ahhing over the city's elegant sandstone Georgian buildings. It was a beautiful place to live but after five years there, Hope was guiltily aware that she took Bath's beauty rather for granted. For the first six months, she'd walked around with her neck craned, but now, she raced along like all the other residents, almost immune to the city and constantly cursing the tourists who straggled across the streets like wayward schoolchildren. She pushed open the glass door into Witherspoon's Building Society, conscious of the fact that it was now twenty to three and she should have been back at half past two.

Mr Campbell, manager and assiduous time-keeper, was also conscious of the time.

'You're ten minutes late, Mrs Parker,' he said mildly.

Hope gave him a flustered look, which wasn't hard after her dash down Union Street. 'I'm so sorry, Mr Campbell,' she said breathily. 'It's my husband's fortieth birthday and I was buying him a present . . .'

'Never mind,' Mr Campbell said soothingly. 'Don't let it happen in future.'

She rushed into the staff room, stowed her shopping in her locker, wriggled out of her navy woollen coat and hurried back to her counter.

'How can you get away with being late and not get the face eaten off you by that tyrant?' demanded Yvonne. Yvonne had worked at Witherspoon's for five years, the same length of time as Hope, and complained she was still treated like a delinquent probationary by the manager.

'Because I have an innocent face,' replied Hope, managing to smile all the while at Mr Campbell, 'and you look like a minx.'

Yvonne was placated, as Hope knew she could be. Yvonne liked the idea of looking minxy. And she was so good humoured that she never took offence; not like Betsey, Hope's other good friend. Betsey took offence at everything and would have demanded to know what Hope had meant by calling her a minx.

Hope knew that she'd never look like a minx in a million years. Minxes did not have fawn-coloured curly hair with lots of wispy tendrils that you could do absolutely nothing with, nor did they have rounded comforting faces with large, almost surprised hazel eyes, and small delicate mouths like shy girls from 18th century French paintings.

Matt had once told her that he'd fallen in love with her 'other worldliness'. 'As if you've got lost from a historical mini-series and have stepped out of your gown to appear in the twenty-first century,' he'd said lovingly. Matt was given to saying wildly romantic, unusual things. He was wasted in advertising, she thought fondly.

All five counters were frantically busy for the next half an hour, with huge groups of time-pressed tourists arriving to change their traveller's cheques into hard currency, all frantic to get some cash so they could buy huge quantities of Bath Abbey tea towels, T-shirts with the Abbey printed on them and decorated mugs before they were due back on the coach.

Finally, there was a brief lull in custom. Hope sat back

in her chair, feeling drained and wondered how she'd last till her four o'clock tea break.

'What did you buy for Matt?' asked Yvonne, sneaking a forbidden packet of toffees across to Hope. Eating was forbidden behind the counter but Hope reckoned her blood sugar needed a top-up.

'A tie, a bottle of that wine he likes and some aftershave,' she said as she surreptitiously unwrapped a toffee.

'That's nice,' mumbled Yvonne, her mouth full.

They chewed in silence for a while and Hope began to mentally plan her evening, the highlight of which was to be Matt's special birthday dinner. Just the two of them, assuming that Millie didn't kick up a fuss and refuse to go to bed. She was only four but she already ruled the Parker household with a chubby little iron hand in a velvet glove. Two-year-old Toby was such a contrast to his older sister. He was so quiet that Hope worried about him being at the day nursery every day. She knew Millie was well able to stand up to anyone who'd look sideways at her but would she stand up for Toby? You heard so much about children bullying other kids and Hope would kill any child who'd hurt her beloved Toby. With his pale, sweet face and watchful eyes, he reminded her of herself as a child. She prayed he'd grow up to be stronger and more forceful, like his father.

'Presents for men are so difficult,' sighed Yvonne. 'I love the idea of those women who say things like "I'm wearing your present." You know she's wearing some basque or suspenders and stockings and that's his present. I might try that with Freddie.'

'Lovely,' said Hope automatically, a bit embarrassed to be getting so much detail about Yvonne's sex life. Yvonne was twenty-nine, Welsh, and very open about everything, in direct contrast to Hope. Hope liked to keep her personal life personal, although it was difficult when you worked with someone as inquisitive as Yvonne, who was quite capable of asking questions like what would Hope do if Matt ever had an affair or had Hope ever used a Dutch cap.

'Er, no,' Hope had said, going pink, on that particular occasion. Aunt Ruth had not brought her up to be chatty about sex and things like that. When she'd had her first period, Aunt Ruth had said nothing but had given her a book on girls growing up. Well, she'd actually shoved it into Hope's hand and gone off abruptly to her bridge class. The subject had never been referred to again. Hope was fascinated when she read those 'how to keep your sex life alive' articles in women's magazines, although she'd never have dreamed of trying any of it out with Matt.

'You should give Matt that sort of present tonight,' Yvonne nudged her.

'What sort of present?'

Yvonne lowered her voice because Mr Campbell had come out of his office and was standing near the photocopier. 'Wear something sexy and tell Matt it's the final bit of his present.'

'Honestly, Yvonne,' whispered Hope, 'you've a one-track mind.'

'Yeah, one track and it's a dirt track,' giggled Yvonne, flicking back a bit of jet-black poker-straight hair.

Three customers arrived all at once and Hope managed to put Yvonne's suggestion out of her mind. It wasn't that she was contemplating wearing sexy underwear and surprising Matt. She was uncomfortably aware of the fact that Matt would probably be much happier with a new tie and a decent bottle of wine.

Two hours later, she'd braved the traffic going out of the city towards Bristol and was turning into Maltings Lane. One of the more modern streets in Bath, it was a winding road of pretty houses built in the fifties with honey-coloured Cotswold stone. Because the houses were small and reasonably priced, the street was full of young, professional couples with small children, two cars and no time for doing their handkerchief-sized gardens.

When they'd moved in five years ago, Hope had had great

plans for becoming a gardening expert and had bought a gardening encyclopaedia along with a book dedicated to creating a haven from a small suburban plot. These books were currently jammed into the bookcase on the landing, alongside the home decorating book she'd got in a jumble sale. Hope rarely even looked at their patch with its overgrown sliver of lawn and weed-encrusted rockery where four stunted conifers sat huddled together in tight misery and refused to grow taller than six inches. Hope didn't look at the garden tonight either: she was too late even for her usual guilt-laden 'I wish I had time to do something with the garden this weekend'.

Marta would be furious if she picked the kids up after six fifteen. Marta ran Your Little Treasures, the nursery where Toby and Millie spent every week day. The nursery was so well-run and well-staffed that Hope couldn't afford to voice the opinion that Marta herself was a bad-tempered bitch when it came to dealing with her charges' parents. There was such fierce competition for places in YLT that she daren't risk antagonizing her. If Hope's children left the nursery, there would be thirty families queuing up to fill their places. 'Marta is definitely short for martinet,' joked Matt every time Hope came home on the verge of tears because of a dressing down from Marta for being late. Matt didn't understand how Hope hated those confrontations.

The nursery closed at six fifteen and any parent who arrived a second later was treated to a lecture of the 'if you think I'm going to be taken advantage of, you've got another think coming' variety.

Hope couldn't imagine a single person who'd dare take advantage of Marta. Pity.

She unpacked the shopping from the Metro's boot. Next door's cat sat plaintively on Hope's doorstep, sheltering from the icy late September wind and generally giving the impression that he was a candidate for an animal shelter despite being so fat that he no longer fitted through his cat flap and had to be let in through the windows. Hope dragged the

shopping to the door, hoping that a few hours in the locker at work hadn't made the milk go off.

'You can't come in, Fatso,' Hope told the cat, trying to open the door and insinuate herself inside without letting him in. She managed it, dumped the shopping on the kitchen floor and looked at her watch.

Six o'clock on the nail. She wasn't going to be late. Relieved, she shoved the milk into the fridge and raced out of the house.

She hurried round the corner to the nursery which was, as usual, surrounded by double-parked cars, weary parents and cross toddlers. Hope had found it was easier to walk there instead of spending ten minutes trying to park.

'Hello,' she said with false cheeriness to Marta, who stood like a rottweiler at the door, grimly working out whom to bite and whom to suck up to. 'Cool isn't it?'

'It is nearly October,' Marta snapped, gypsy earrings rattling furiously.

Hope grinned inanely and then hated herself for it. If only she had the guts to tell Marta where she could stuff her sarcastic remarks. Not for the first time, Hope indulged in her favourite daydream: where she and Matt had won the lottery, thereby allowing her to give up work and devote herself to the children full time. In her fantasy dream world, being a full time mum included help from a cleaning lady, an ironing lady and someone to trail round the supermarket doing the grocery shopping. It also meant being able to tell Marta to take a running jump because Hope wouldn't need the nursery any more. She'd look after her children herself, thank you very much. She'd be able to spend hours every day with them, doing finger painting, making up stories and doing things with cooking chocolate and Rice Krispies when the children could help stir the mixture without her shuddering at the thought of cleaning bits of cereal and slivers of chocolate off the kitchen floor for hours afterwards. She'd get to serve wonderful home-cooked food instead of making do with convenience stuff, she'd learn

needlecraft and the garden would be a riot of beautifully tended plants. Bliss.

In the main section of the nursery, a bright cheery room decorated in warm colours and with plenty of toddler-sized furniture, Millie and Toby were waiting for her, clad in their padded coats and looking like baby Eskimos. Dark-haired Millie, as impatient as her father, had an outraged expression on her rosy-cheeked face. Her brown eyes flashed at the indignity of being made to wait in a restricting coat when she could have been in the play corner wreaking havoc with the bouncy cubes. Toby, pale like his mother, stood quietly with his hat in his hand. When he spotted Hope, a great smile opened up his chubby little face.

'Mummy, got a star,' he said delightedly.

'No you didn't,' said Millie indignantly. Even at four, she had a perfect command of the English language. 'I got a star.'

Toby's face fell.

'Millie,' said her mother reprovingly. 'Be nice to your little brother.'

'He's a baby,' sniffed Millie, wrinkling up her snub nose.

'He's your brother,' Hope said. 'You have to look after him, not be unkind to him.'

Millie took Toby's fat little hand in hers and looked up at her mother expecting praise.

Despite herself, Hope grinned. Millie was as bright as a button.

She said goodbye to Marta, who was hovering with intent outside the door, jangling her keys like a warder.

Holding hands, the family walked slowly home: Millie chattering away happily, Toby silent. It was the same every evening. Toby was very quiet for about half an hour, then, as if he'd been frozen and finally thawed out in the warmth of his own, safe home, he began to talk and laugh, playing with his favourite toy, currently a violently purple plastic train with endless carriages that were always getting lost

under the furniture. It worried Hope. She was afraid that he hated the nursery, yet she was just as afraid of asking him in case he clung to her and begged her not to send him every morning.

One of the women at work had gone through two horrific months of her small daughter doing just that, sobbing her little heart out every day, begging her mother to 'stay, Mummy, stay, please!' until she was hiccuping with anguish.

The mothers with young children had all sat in silent guilt when they heard that story in the canteen.

'I hate leaving my son,' a single mother from accounting had said tonelessly.

'Men just don't feel it the same way,' added an investment advisor who was also a mother-of-three.

They had all nodded miserably, united in agreement.

After that, Hope had spent weeks anxiously scanning Toby's face every morning for signs that he was about to cry. If he did, she knew she'd have told the building society to stuff their job and told Matt they'd have to manage the mortgage some other way, because she couldn't bear to go out to work when her darling little boy was sobbing his little heart out for her. But Toby never cried. He went off every morning, snug in his anorak, big eyes wide when Hope gave him a tight hug goodbye with Marta watching over them.

'He's just a quiet little boy,' Clare, one of the teachers, had reassured her when Hope had voiced her fears, 'but he enjoys himself, honestly, Hope, he does. He loves playing with the Plasticine and he loves story time. We all know he's a shy little fellow so we really look after him, don't worry. Millie is totally different, isn't she?'

Yes, Hope had agreed, Millie was totally different. Boisterous and confident compared to her little brother. They reminded Hope of herself and Sam when they'd been kids: Hope had been the quiet, placating sister, while Sam, three years older, had been strong, opinionated and sure of herself.

Tonight, Millie wasn't inside the hall door before she

was off into the playroom to collect her dolls, bossing them around, telling them to drink their milk and no being naughty or there'd be trouble. She sounded a lot like Marta bossing the parents around. Hope got down on her knees to undo Toby's coat.

'Did you have a nice day, sweetie?' she asked softly, helping him wriggle out before pulling him close for a big cuddle. Toby nodded his head. Hope planted a kiss on his soft, fair head, breathing in the lovely toddler scent of him. He smelled of classroom, baby shampoo and fabric conditioner.

'Mummy loves you, Toby, do you know that? Loads and loads of love. Bigger than the sea.'

He smiled at her and patted her cheek with one fat little hand.

'Mummy has to make a special birthday dinner for Daddy but I think we have to play first, don't you?'

Toby nodded again.

'Shall we have a story? What one would you like me to read? You pick.'

The three of them sat on the big oatmeal sofa, cuddled up companionably, as Hope read Toby's favourite story about *The Bear With The Magical Paw*. Millie always started by saying it was a baby's story, not for big girls like herself, but by the end of the first page she was engrossed, chewing her bottom lip anxiously and listening to the bear's adventures. Hope followed the magical bear with *The Little Mermaid*, which was Millie's favourite. She slept in Disney *Little Mermaid* pyjamas and her bedroom was a shrine to Mermaid merchandising.

After twenty minutes when she knew she should have been starting Matt's birthday dinner, Hope finished the story and began to make dinner for the kids. They were fed tea at the nursery at around half four but Hope never considered a few sandwiches enough for them. Children needed hot food in her book. As the children played, Hope prepared chicken breasts and vegetables, thinking that if she was Mrs Floral Skirt, she'd be giving them organic carrot purée made

from her own carrots with delicious home-made lasagne or something equally made-from-scratch.

Mind you, Millie hated home-made food and was passionate about fish fingers and tinned spaghetti shaped like cartoon characters so there wouldn't have been any hope of her eating anything organic.

Hope thought proudly of her new cookbook still in its plastic bag in the hall. Soon, she'd be making fabulous meals that everyone would love. She undid the cling film covering the steaks. The instructions looked simple enough but steak was so difficult, so easy to ruin and cook until it tasted like old leather. She'd have loved it if they were going out to dinner instead but Matt's colleague and best friend, Dan, was organizing a birthday dinner on Thursday, in three days' time, and that was going to be his party. The agency had netted a huge new account and it was going to be a joint celebration. Hope knew it would be childish to say that she'd prefer a private birthday dinner with just the two of them. After all, Matt was a much more social animal than she was and he loved the idea of a big bash where he could charm them all and get told he was the cleverest ad man ever. Hope always felt a bit left out at these fabulous advertising parties. Even though, as a working mother with two small children, she was the Holy Grail for advertisers, they weren't nearly as interested in her when she was physically present as they were when she was represented as the target market on a graph in the office.

She'd better buy a dress for the party, she reminded herself. Adam, Matt's boss, had a new glamorous wife, Jasmine (Matt had, in an unguarded moment, described her as 'better than any of the women on *Baywatch*'), so Hope planned to doll herself up to the nines for the occasion.

Thinking of the party to come, she dished up dinner for the children and brought it and a cup of tea for herself to the table.

'Dinner! Toby and Millie,' she called.

The dinner routine involved Toby and Millie sitting

opposite each other at the small kitchen table so that Millie couldn't reach Toby's mug of milk and spill it. Their mother sat at the end, refereeing. Millie, as usual, played with her food and demanded fish fingers in between sending bits of carrot skidding across the table. Toby loved his food and ate quickly, his Winnie the Pooh plastic fork scooping up bits of cut-up chicken rapidly. He drank his milk and ate his entire dinner while Millie bounced Barbie backwards and forwards in front of her plate, singing tunelessly and ignoring her meal.

'Millie!' remonstrated Hope as Barbie kicked a bit of chicken onto the floor. 'Eat up or I'm going to have to feed you.'

She whisked Barbie from Millie's hand and the little girl immediately started to roar. More bits of chicken hit the deck.

'Millie! That's so naughty,' said Hope, trying to rein in her temper and wishing she didn't feel so tired and cross. So much for quality time with the kids.

At this point, Millie wriggled off her chair and pushed herself away from the table, jerking it and spilling her mother's cup of tea.

'Millie!' shouted Hope as scalding tea landed on her uniform skirt, which she knew she should have changed as soon as she got home.

'I always know I'm in the right house when I hear screaming as soon as I get home,' said Matt caustically, appearing at the kitchen door looking immaculate and out of place in the small kitchen which was always untidy.

Hope ground her teeth. This wasn't the homecoming she had planned for his birthday. Candlelight, the scent of a succulent dinner and herself perfumed and in grape velvet had been the plan. Instead, the scene was chaos and herself a frazzled, frizzled mess scented only with perspiration from running round the shops at lunchtime. Children and romantic, grown-up dinners were mutually exclusive, there was no doubt about it.

Millie stopped wailing instantly and ran to her father, throwing her rounded baby arms around his knees and burying her face in his grey wool trousers.

'Daddy,' she cooed delightedly, as if she hadn't just been flinging her dinner around the room like a mischievous elf moments before.

He picked her up and cuddled her, the two dark heads close together, one clustered with long curls, the other a short crop with spreading grey at the sides. Matt was tall, rangy and lean, with the sort of dark, deep set eyes that set female pulses racing and a solid, firm jaw that had stubborn written all over it. The scattering of discreet grey in his new, very short haircut suited him, transforming his handsome good looks into something more mature and sexier. Even after seven years together, the sight of him all dressed up with his eyes crinkling into a smile and that strong mouth curving upwards slowly, could set Hope's heart racing. The terrible thing was, she didn't think that his pulse still raced when he saw her.

'Are you in trouble with Mummy?' Matt asked.

Millie managed a strangled sob. 'Yes,' she said sadly.

'She wouldn't eat her dinner, she was throwing it everywhere and she's just spilled my tea,' Hope said, knowing she sounded shrewish but unable to help it.

'Never mind,' Matt said easily without even looking at his wife. 'It's only a bit of tea, you can wash it.'

Still cuddling Millie, he ruffled Toby's hair and walked into the living room, his big body cradling Millie easily. Toby clambered off his seat and ran after him. In seconds, the sounds of giggling and laughter could be heard.

Hope looked glumly down at her cream uniform blouse which was now stained with splashes of tea. One corner had escaped from her skirt and hung out untidily. Very chic. Ignoring the tea things, she went upstairs and stripped off her uniform. She'd have to sponge the skirt because she only had two and the hem was down on the other one. In her part of the wardrobe, she found the grape velvet two-piece

and pulled it on. She brushed her hair, put on her pearl earrings and spritzed herself with eau de cologne, all without looking in the mirror. It was only to apply her lipstick that she sat at the small dressing table and adjusted the oval mirror so she could see herself.

She was old fashioned looking, she knew. Not the showily beautiful and spirited leading lady of romantic novels: instead, she was the quiet, sober Austen heroine with expressive, anxious grey eyes. Empire line dresses would have suited her perfectly because she could have shown off her generous bosom and hidden the slightly thick waist and sturdy legs. She looked her best in soft, muted colours that complemented the thick-lashed, eloquent eyes. Her grape outfit fitted the bill, while the dark navy and maroon of her uniform clothes made her look dull and middle-aged.

Now she put lipstick on and pinned her hair up. Piled up, it showed off her slender neck. Finished, she touched the small silver and enamel pill box on the dressing table for luck. It had been her mother's and touching it for luck was as much a part of Hope's day as brushing her teeth after meals. She didn't remember her mother so the box with its orchid illustration was special, the only thing she'd got left really. Sam had a matching box only hers had a picture of a pansy on it.

The pillboxes were among the only things they had of their mother's. She and their father had been killed when the girls were small, when they'd been driving home from a night out and their car had been hit by a drunk driver. Their father had been killed outright but their mother had lived long enough to be taken to hospital and died soon after. Not that Sam or Hope remembered much about it and Aunt Ruth, left to bring them up in her austere house in Windsor, had been very keen on 'not dwelling on things' and had disposed of most of their parents' personal belongings. Consequently, they had very few mementoes of Camille and Sandy Smith. Except that Millie was named for her grandmother. Dear naughty little Millie.