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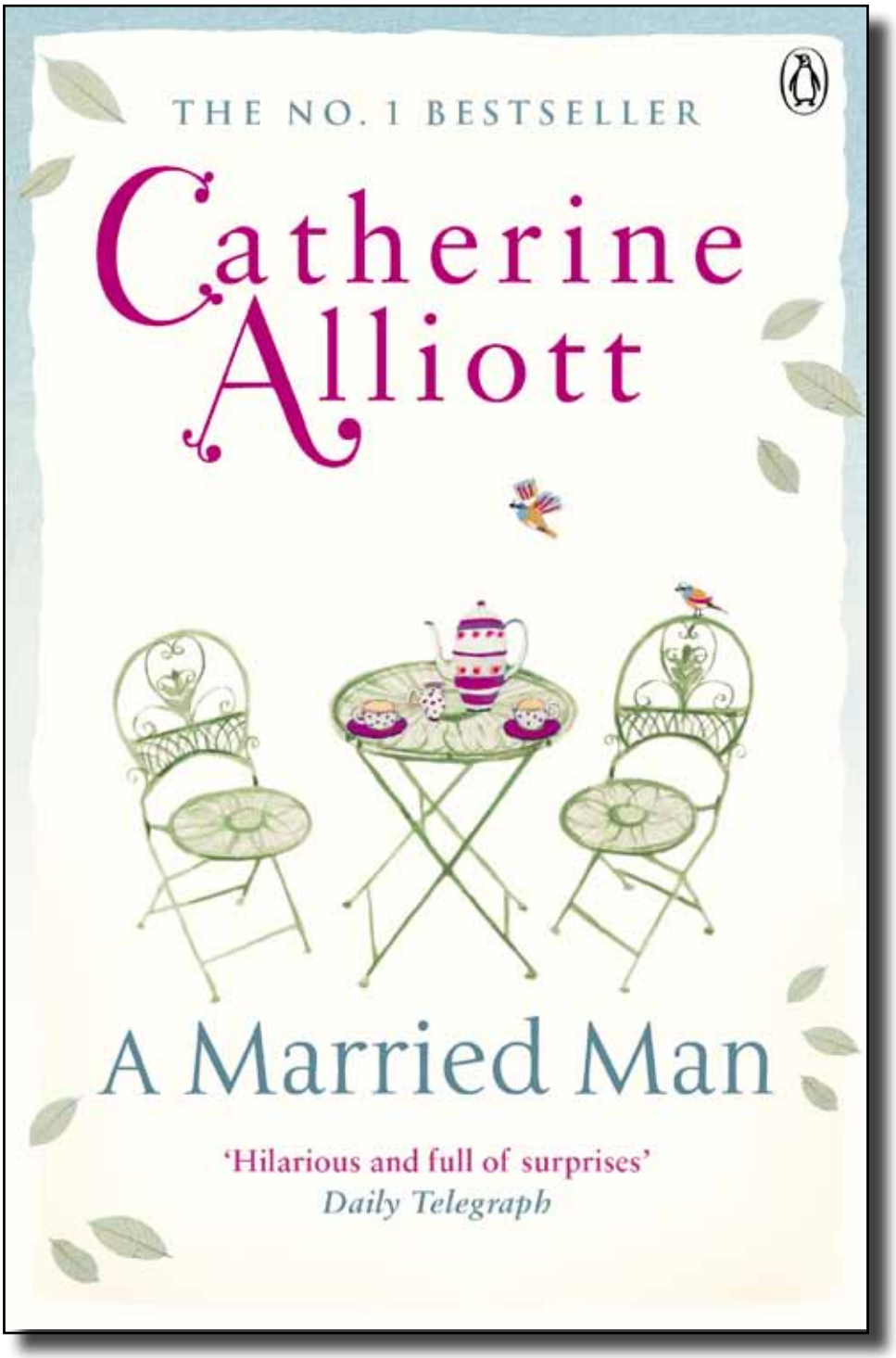
Written by Catherine Alliott

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A Married Man

by

Catherine Alliott

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Chapter One

'She'll have you for breakfast,' observed Jess tartly, rubbing a bit of grime off a Spode jug and setting it down on the trestle table in front of us.

'Who will?' I broke from my contemplation of the assorted bric-a-brac and antiques before us to glance up defensively.

'Your mother-in-law, of course. Talk about strolling back into the lion's den. You didn't actually say you'd go, did you?'

'Of course I did,' I said hotly. 'Christ, Jess, if someone offered you two sets of school fees and a converted barn over your head in a picturesque, rural idyll, don't tell me you'd pass it up! Don't tell me you wouldn't leap at it too, and anyway, she's my *ex*-mother-in-law – that makes all the difference.'

'Rubbish,' she scoffed as she arranged a fistful of silver spoons on our faded velvet tablecloth. 'Not in her eyes. As far as she's concerned you'll always be the mother of her grandchildren and that, my dear Lucy, is entirely the point. That is precisely *why* you've been offered such a mouthwatering package down in Netherby-sur-la-ancestral-pile with all its crumbling turrets and sod-off acres. It has absolutely nothing to do with your wellbeing or your welfare, and certainly nothing to do with your undoubted charms.' She beamed past me as a customer loomed.

'Yes, madam, it *is* Royal Worcester and you're quite right, there's just a teeny bit of damage to the spout, but otherwise it's in wonderful condition for such a rare piece, don't you think?'

She bestowed a radiant smile on Madam who, swaddled in ethnic knits on this flaming cold June day and with all the hallmarks of a seasoned Portobello Road aficionado, was peering doubtfully over her spectacles. She ran a practised eye over the rest of the collectibles on our stall, sniffed, and put the teapot down. She looked far from convinced.

'No,' she snapped. 'I think it's in rather ropy condition actually. And I also think that all these tags you've put on everything are very misleading. Who are you to tell me that's a very decorative piece of early Meissen? Surely I should be the judge of whether it's decorative or not, and I fail to see why that bit of old lace is so "absurdly pretty" or why that rusty old oil lamp so "quintessentially important in the moulding of eighteenth-century France".'

'It's to help some of our less discerning customers,' purred Jess obsequiously. 'To point them in the right direction, lead them, antiquarily speaking, to the right century, right country even, so they don't feel foolish asking. Clearly you don't need any pointers, but golly,' she rolled her eyes expressively, 'you should see some of the types we get round here.'

I smiled down into my plastic mug of hot chocolate, lacing my cold fingers around it and reflecting that Jess's labels had indeed got more and more outrageous as the weeks had gone by. We'd temporarily taken over the antique stall from my mother, Maisie, who'd had a stall in the

Portobello Road since the beginning of time, and certainly since I was a little girl. In the last couple of weeks, though, her chronic arthritis had almost forced her to give it up, so I'd stepped into the breach to keep it going until she was better, roping my oldest friend Jess in with me. For Jess it made a welcome diversion from changing her small son's nappy at the weekend, and for me – well, antiques were my passion, so I was happy. Happy just soaking up the atmosphere of this famous street, gazing at the stalls crammed haphazardly along it; silver next to clocks and watches, old farm implements next to yellowing books, starched Victorian christening gowns billowing in the breeze beside pop memorabilia, and of course, my mother's own eclectic offerings which included anything from French café ashtrays, to exquisite porcelain, to faded sepia postcards. I'd even added a few choice pieces of my own which I'd priced ridiculously high and watched like a hawk, hoping secretly that they wouldn't sell, but knowing I needed the money.

I needn't have worried. As we'd sat there, three Saturdays in a row now, surrounded by what we thought were the most delicious and interesting bits of other people's domestic history, we'd sold very little. Even more galling was having to look on incredulously whilst Fat Ronnie at the next-door stall – pedlar of crap, both verbal and antique, and with a special interest in flatulence – his own or other people's – sold shedfuls.

'Orright, gels?' he'd yelled over last week as he popped yet another sensationally ugly Toby Jug into a plastic bag, and handed it to its proud new owner. 'Need any help over there? Blimey, you won't sell much wiv that heap of rubbish!'

He chuckled and fanned theatrically behind his backside to let us know that he'd broken wind for the millionth time that day. 'Surprised you've got any customers at all!'

'Surprised you've got any trousers,' Jess had muttered, but then with characteristic zeal, had whirled into action.

'It's his labels,' she hissed, swinging round to me, 'that's all. His stuff's rubbish, we know that, but it's the way he sells it. That's where we're going wrong, Lucy. You can't just bung it all down on a trestle table and hope for the best. It's all in the marketing!'

'I'm not sure you really market bric-a-brac, do you?' I said doubtfully. 'I mean, surely –'

'Of course you bloody market it, and don't call it bric-a-brac for heaven's sake. Some of this stuff is priceless!'

I stared doubtfully at the array before us, but she was off, frenziedly slapping *beautifully restored* onto a horribly cracked chamber pot and *breathtakingly pretty* onto one of our major mistakes, a hideous piece of Coalport bought from another stallholder after a liquid Saturday lunch. I have to say, the bits of tartan ribbon she tied them on with did improve the look of our offerings and we didn't do too badly that week, but not so today.

Today, tartan ribbon notwithstanding, business was disastrous, and as Fat Ronnie leered across, hands deep in pockets, jingling his change around his privates, we gave in.

'Come on,' muttered Jess, 'let's pack it in.'

'Business a bit slow is it, gels?' he called. 'Can I offer you a loan?' He jingled some more.

'No thanks,' said Jess, eyeing his crotch with distaste. 'Not when we know where it's been.'

He chuckled. 'Ah well, all the more for me then.' Suddenly he frowned, sniffed the air. 'Dear God, who's dropped one? That you, Lucy?'

'Shut up, Ronnie,' I said wearily, getting up to wrap some brass candlesticks in newspaper.

'Well, someone let one go.' He sighed, shook his head. 'I don't know, you girls with your educated accents and your silk shirts and your violin lessons, and you can still belt them out like that. Frightening.' He shuddered.

'How did we do?' I asked, ignoring him as Jess shook the little velvet bag of money onto the table.

'Twenty-two pounds and . . . six pence.'

'That's our worst yet.'

'I know.' She sighed, pouring it all back in again. 'Oh well,' she said grudgingly, 'I suppose at least you'll be taken away from all this. But I still think you're selling your soul.'

'Oh, don't be so melodramatic!' I snapped. 'What option have I got? I can't afford to send Ben to a good school – and he hates the one he's at – and I can't stay in that tiny little flat any longer, either. Even if I could afford it, which I can't, the three of us are bursting at the seams, and I certainly can't move back in with Maisie and Lucas and cramp their style for ever. And anyway, Jess, what could be nicer than living in the country?' I demanded. 'The children walking across the fields to school, ponies to ride,' I said wistfully, 'streams to dam, daises to, um, you know . . .'

'Chain,' she said drily, 'prior to rattling them. Come on, Lucy, you're a city girl through and through and you know it. You'll miss all of this, for heaven's sake!' She swung her arm around at the bustling street full of traders and

tourists, alive with cheerful banter and laughter and haggling and eating on the hoof. 'You'll miss the buzz. I mean, I'm willing to accept that fresh air is wonderful for the cheeks but it doesn't do much for the brain – you'll stagnate down there. Christ, you don't know one end of a cow from another. And you said yourself when you married Ned that the one thing you'd never do was go and live near his ghastly parents – and now look at you. He's not even here any more, and down you go.'

'Jess, I have to cut my cloth,' I warned tersely.

'Yes, to go and live on your parents-in-law's estate, *totally* at their mercy, *completely* beholden to them, and absolutely at their beck and call. There you'll be with Lady Horse-face lording it over you, Lord Tit-face pinching your bum at every conceivable opportunity, the tragic Lavinia drinking herself to a standstill, Pinkie-pie or whatever she's called, gleefully bonking stable boys in haylofts, drippy Hector dithering ineffectually around trying to convince his father he's got what it takes to take over All This one day, and all the time, surrounded by the memory of your dead husband who'll stalk in and out of the plot like Banquo's ghost!' Her normally pale face was pink and her eyes shone. I blinked at her in silence.

'Sorry,' she said abruptly, averting her eyes. 'I mean – that last bit. But you know what they're like, Lucy,' she urged. 'God, at least you've faced up to it, coped with it, and brilliantly too, but four years have gone by and they haven't even started. Haven't even begun to accept he's dead. That house is like a shrine to Ned – everywhere you go there are photos of him, his childhood fossil collection still sits in the hall, cricket bats he once owned are

stuck up on the walls, even paintings he did as a *child*, for heaven's sake, are pinned up in the kitchen. His room is untouched up in that Godforsaken turret, and the way they *talk* about him! *Con*stantly, as if he's still there, sitting at the table with them, and not in a nice, relaxed way like dropping his name into the conversation, but long and hard, for hours, like they've been taught to do in *ther*apy or something. There's just no getting away from him. I'm surprised they haven't got him embalmed in the cellar.' She stopped when she saw my face.

'OK,' she muttered hastily, hoisting a sackful of china onto her back and picking up one end of the table we'd speedily collapsed, 'that was tasteless, I agree. But you must admit, Luce, it's going to set you back about three years, and you were doing so well. You've got those four mornings a week in your beloved porcelain department at Christie's, you've got this stand on a Saturday –'

'This stand,' I said witheringly, swinging another sack onto my shoulder and picking up the other end of the table. She swept on regardless.

'The kids are doing well, and *you're* so much better. God, Luce, you're finally out of the loop.' Like a couple of paper-hangers, we picked up our table and plunged into the heaving, drizzling depths of the Portobello Road, dodging through the crowds, loaded down with goodies.

'I mean, OK, the money's tight,' she yelled back at me through the noise, 'but give it a couple more years and you'll be fine, you'll be through it. But to give up on London, on your flat, and go down there, to be *swamped* by that wretched family again . . .'

'The money's not tight, Jess.' I stopped suddenly in the

street, jolting her to a standstill, 'It's bloody non-existent! I get paid a pittance by Christie's for busting a gut –'

'But you love it!'

'Yes, *and* I can keep on doing it.'

She gaped. 'From Oxfordshire?'

''Course I can! God, people do commute from there, you know, it's not entirely the back of beyond. And I'm going to change it to two full days which will suit me much better,' I said confidently. 'And anyway,' I sighed, picking up the table and moving on again, 'I told you, even if I wanted to stay in that flat, I can't. I can't afford it, even the council tax is crippling.'

'So why don't Lord and Lady Po-face offer to pay it for you?' she demanded. 'Or – or why don't they offer to set you up somewhere else, in London? Why does it have to be down there with them?'

'Because Ben starts prep school soon and they've offered to pay the fees,' I began patiently. 'And because he needs somewhere that can cope with dyslexia.'

'And because they want him to go to the Right One. The school of their choice, not Highfield Road where he is now –'

'Where he's bullied and they sniff glue –'

'But somewhere much more traditional, somewhere where they can make a *man* of him, mould him into a nice little Grenadier Guard like his grandfather. They want control, Luce, control of you for a start – God, word might even have got back that you've had a few hot dates, well they'll want to knock that *right* on the head for starters – but more importantly, control of the children. They want to monitor them, choose their friends, organize their social

lives – of *course* they want you down there in their tastefully converted barn in their back garden!'

'Oh, don't be absurd,' I said hotly. 'You're so cynical, Jess. It's the whole class thing with you, isn't it? The shooting and the striding round in breeches, that's what you hate, and that's just small-minded, prejudicial and snobbish. That's like taking against ethnic minorities because they smell of curry.'

She snorted with derision at this, but didn't instantly come back at me.

'And OK,' I went on, encouraged by her silence, 'Ned's mother can be,' I hesitated, 'a bit tricky at times . . .'

'Tricky!' she scoffed. 'Needs smothering with a pillow, you once said.'

'But you know recently,' I hurried on, 'well, Rose and I have sort of,' I licked my lips, 'bonded.'

'What!'

'And even if we hadn't,' I went on defiantly, 'there's simply no way I'd look this gift horse in the mouth, complete with financial security for me and *total* security for my children. You don't know what it's like, Jess, eking out a flipping widow's pension. I've been beside myself with worry. God, this is like manna from heaven! When I got Rose's letter I cried, if you must know, wept, I was so bloody relieved. So just back off and stop taking the wind out of my sails, OK?'

She made a face but looked slightly contrite. We walked on in silence.

'*And* you'll have the mad aunts next door to contend with,' she reminded me, at length.

I smiled. 'I *love* the mad aunts.'

She sighed as we threaded our way precariously down another heaving backstreet. 'Yes, well, I suppose they will be something of a diversion, and at least they've got the measure of Rose. Hmmm . . .' she said thoughtfully, 'perhaps *they* could smother her.'

I stopped and made her face me again. 'Thanks, Jess, this is really, really helping.'

She opened her mouth and pretended to look astonished, but then her eyes slid away. 'Sorry,' she mumbled, scuffing her toe. 'It's only 'cos I care. And I'll miss you. Selfish really. But I can't help feeling . . .' she puckered her brow and wrestled with herself for honesty, 'well, that there's nothing *down* there for you.'

'No man, you mean,' I said darkly as we picked up our load and dodged through the crowds again.

'Well, you must admit, it's a social wasteland where they live. I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but don't they even own the bloody village and everyone in it?'

'Used to,' I muttered.

'What?'

'Used to,' I yelled wearily above the noise. 'Only half of it now.'

'You see? Half a flaming village! Stuffed full of aged old retainers who still get beri-beri and cholera and who Rose no doubt visits graciously with rabbits and poultices in her basket. Probably dispenses Maundy money too, as she mops those wrinkled, fevered old brows. God, you'll be lucky if you run into anyone under eighty. You can bet your life anyone younger fled to Milton Keynes long ago.'

I gritted my teeth and trudged on, ignoring her.

'I suppose you might meet the odd blacksmith or two,'

she conceded grudgingly. 'All red-hot irons and rippling biceps, but you'll never meet anyone cerebral, whereas here – hey!' She broke off suddenly. 'Whatever happened to that nice solicitor chappie you were seeing?'

'Oh God no, not him. Too full of Chablis and self-belief.'

'Well OK, that guy you mentioned last week, Charles or something. Fantasy man in the office?'

'Charlie.' I coloured instantly, glad she couldn't see. Crikey, had I said in the office? Perhaps I had.

'Ah, you see! Charlie. Well, you won't see him, will you?'

'I might. Apparently he's got a place near Oxford,' I said, unable to resist it.

She halted suddenly, yanking the table and obliging me to stop behind her.

'Right,' she said slowly, watching me carefully. 'And did you know that when Rose asked you?'

'Asked me what?' I said, pathetically playing for time.

'Asked you to go and live down there, for heaven's sake!'

'Well, I . . .' I hesitated. Oh God, I knew I shouldn't have mentioned Charlie. Why had I mentioned him?

'Forget Charlie,' I said quickly, aware that I was still flushing. 'The truth is, Jess, I don't even know him, and even if I did, he'd be out of the frame, out of the equation.'

'Why?'

'Because . . . he's out of my league.'

'Bollocks,' she scoffed. 'No one's out of your league, Lucy, you're flaming gorgeous! It's just you got married so young no one else ever got the chance to tell you, to stare

at you, flirt with you. You were snapped up by Ned at university in about ten seconds.'

'Nonsense.' I gazed past, beyond her.

'Oh yes, quite right, nonsense. Waist-length blond hair, blue eyes and a voluptuous figure to die for, *very* unattractive. *Very* wince-making. I'm surprised you can look at yourself in the mirror in the morning. Do me a favour – out of your league? You're just so unused to men looking at you, you don't know they're doing it.' She peered at me from under her dark fringe. 'God, you're *still* red. Purple! Who is this guy, anyway?'

'I told you, Jess,' I snapped, 'he's no one. Just leave me alone and live your own life, can't you? Why have I got such bossy friends?' I made to move on, but she stuck firmly to the pavement. Stared.

'So what's wrong with him then?'

'There's nothing *wrong* with him.'

'Oh yes there is. You're being really cagey, and I know you, Luce.' She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. 'He's married, isn't he?'

'Of course he's not married!' I blustered. 'Would I mess around with a married man?'

'You bet your sweet life you would, and you know why?'

I stared down, bit the inside of my cheek.

'Bit older, no doubt, bit wiser, so security in that, but also, *also*, security in the fact that he's not *quite* available, so no real emotional output. At the end of the day, you don't have to commit yourself, don't really have to take the plunge. Ooh, yes, ideal.' She rubbed her hands together gleefully. 'Perfect!'

'Just get off my case, Jess,' I said angrily. 'I told you,

there's nothing in it. I have a minor crush on him, OK? A harmless, pathetic, long-distance crush, like sitting in the hairdresser's and gazing wantonly at Hugh Grant's picture in *Hello!*. He's just someone who makes my heart beat faster when I walk past him in the stree – office,' I said quickly. 'That's all.'

'Well, it bloody better be,' she said darkly. 'You know how I feel about married men. It's a sacred institution, Luce, and don't you forget it.'

'I'm hardly likely to with you ramming your perfect marriage permanently down my throat, am I?'

Suddenly we stared at each other, aghast.

I swallowed. 'Why are we fighting?'

'I don't know.' Jess scratched her head sheepishly. 'My fault, I think. Anyway,' she shrugged, 'you know as well as I do my marriage isn't perfect. Half the problem is that Jamie would love to be your man in the office, love to have women gaze open-mouthed at his chiselled features as they stand beside him at the photocopier, but because they don't, he just stares at their tits instead.'

'All men look, Jess,' I said generously, knowing she was magnanimously knocking her own life now in the hand of friendship. 'You've just got to accept that. And you know jolly well he doesn't touch,' I added staunchly.

Jess sighed, and I knew she was wondering what might have been. Bright as a button and armed with a First from Newcastle and a fistful of job offers, Jess had cruised seamlessly into a merchant bank. A few years later she'd been on the brink of partnership, seemingly with the world, and a host of arrogant City men at her feet, when – oops! – she was pregnant. Unfazed, she'd swiftly married

the perpetrator – who happily she was in love with – and then smartly lined up a nanny, determined she'd be back at work nine months later in her size ten Armani suit and her Miu Miu shoes. But then a bizarre thing happened. When the baby was born, Mother Nature roared in too, and amidst many tears and much heart-searching, Jess had been unable to do it. At the *moment critique*, on that fatal Monday morning, she'd clutched her baby to her breast, sacked the nanny, slammed the front door on the world, and with tears streaming down her face and still in her cheesy dressing gown, had gone back to bed with her son. It had shocked everyone, particularly Jamie, who was understandably alarmed at this sudden loss of her income. Nevertheless, he'd taken it on the chin and, somewhat bemused, had gone off to work, only that much harder, and that much later, it seemed, now that he was the sole breadwinner and had a wife and child to support.

Jess, though, having lived the life, was unable to look at his long hours rationally and dispassionately. She was plagued with doubt as to her lovely, twinkly-eyed journalist husband's whereabouts, and the bizarre phone calls she claimed she was receiving.

'It was some horse of a girl last night,' she seethed as we trudged on, 'asking for Jamie's mobile number. Still got her bloody bridle on as far as I could tell, but spat the bit out to whinny – "Air hellair, Jess, Spunky Bunky here. Arm, listen, Jamie's got a bit of a prob with a deadline and if I catch him, I might j-a-rst be able to help, OK?" I felt like saying the only "prob" he'd have would be pulling the carving knife out of his shoulder blades when he finally walked through the front door at midnight.'

'Journalists keep odd hours,' I soothed, 'and with the strangest people. You knew that when you married him.'

'I suppose,' she said listlessly. 'It's just – well, it was a level playing field then. If he said, "I'm off to Bognor for a conference next week," I could trump it with, "Well, I'm off to New York to do a deal." Now all I do is put my hands on my hips and bellow, "Oh *are* you indeed!" Then when he comes back, I rifle through his pockets when he's asleep, looking for a hotel bill with "breakfast in bed for two" stamped on it.'

As we finally turned the corner into my parents' road, more or less dragging our heavy load now, she sighed. 'All I'm saying, Luce, is don't forget this Charlie character has a wife, that's all.'

I dropped the table with a bang, hopefully on her foot. She swung round. 'Could we please get this into perspective, Jess! I told you, he doesn't even know I exist, for crying out loud, that's how close I am to wrecking his marriage. Forget it, OK? God, I wish I'd never told you.' I tore my hair briefly, hopelessly. '*Why* did I tell you?'

'Because,' she said as we picked up the table and lobbed it expertly over the small wall and into my parents' tiny front garden, 'until you tell your friends your dreams, they lack an important dimension.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Yeah, if they're not out there, they're not real,' she said, smiling wisely. 'Surely you know that?'

I was about to protest but she swiftly leaned forward and gave me a quick, conciliatory peck on the cheek. 'Bye, got to get back to the animals.'

'You're not coming in?' I gestured to the front door.

'Better not, better get Jamie and Henry some lunch. Golly,' she boggled, 'wouldn't it be nice if they really *were* animals. In a pit, and I could just toss them a bun occasionally.' She grinned. 'Give my love to Maisie and Lucas and – listen, sorry if I banged on a bit.'

'Forget it. You were just flexing your argumentative muscles because you don't get to use them at work any more. Luckily I still sharpen my wits four mornings a week.' I was rather pleased with this little sally. I hadn't expected it to sail out of my mouth quite so confidently.

She laughed and turned off down the street, giving me a brief, backward wave. I waved back, then puffed on up the steps with the two sacks of loot, shoulder barging my way through the bright blue front door at the top.

My parents' house was a classic case of buying well. Amazingly well as it turned out. Forty years ago, five years after he'd come over from Poland to study at Oxford, Lucas, my dad, had snapped up number 36 Burlington Villas – a rather crooked, skinny townhouse in a grotty area full of rolling dustbins and billowing litter – for pretty much next to nothing. Even then, it was more than he could afford on his choirmaster's salary, but needing a house for his wife and small children, he'd taken the plunge and got by renting out the top floor. Now, of course, the entire area had Up And Come, and in estate agent's parlance, number 36 was an 'elegant terraced house in a much-sought-after area'. Aside from painting the outside a joyful colour every year – apple green at present – Maisie made little effort to keep up with the media whizz-kids on one side and the dot.com millionaires on the other, with their shiny front doors and

burgeoning window boxes, as the dazzling array of dandelions in her own front garden bore testament. But if she made no effort on the outside, she made even less within.

Shut your eyes and push, was the only way to squeeze down the dark, narrow 'hall of death' as my brother called it, stacked floor to ceiling with Lucas's books and Maisie's accumulated antique clutter. Battling on through the darkness, arms outstretched, praying for safe arrival somewhere, anywhere, one eventually stumbled left into a sitting room. This was a narrow, overly long room, since the one concession Lucas and Maisie had made to modern living had been to turn two rooms into one and knock the partition wall down – together, in their dressing gowns, one Saturday morning after breakfast, amidst gales of laughter from us children. All it meant, in effect, was that yet more clutter could bowl joyously through, as ancient chandeliers, Georgian commodes and Art Deco girls holding balls of light aloft, jostled for space with three-legged Victorian balloon-back chairs, enamel pitchers, bundles of knives and forks, and ancient mixing bowls. Any conceivable floor or table space was taken up with these assorted curios, and only the top of the piano, it seemed, was sacrosanct. Here, in splendid isolation, lay a large ginger tom cat, whose one compromise was to share his instrument with another instrument, Maisie's precious violin.

A violinist by profession – and a damn good one as Lucas would point out gruffly to anyone who cared to listen – my mother could, on occasion, still be persuaded to get the old fiddle down and play. Then, without much

prompting, Lucas would happily reminisce . . . about dashing out of the school chapel where he'd taught as a young man, past rows of small boys in cassocks, up Birdcage Walk, arriving at St Martin-in-the-Fields just in time to hear her play a lunchtime recital, marvelling at her exquisite bowing action, her wonderful, straight long legs.

Fifty years on and here she was, despite her arthritis, on all fours in the sitting room, amidst the clutter, with her youngest grandson on her back. A light flex had been slung around her neck for reins, and an old lampshade was on her head, since clearly, this neddy wore a hat. Her long legs were still good, with not a knot to be seen, but the bright copper hair was now a faded gold. The Celtic blue eyes which she turned on me now were a little misty, but still huge, and still with the power to break portentous news. These were the eyes that, four years ago, without her having to utter a word, had informed me that my husband was dead. These days, her fatal equipment was more used to telling me that Woolworths had closed down in the High Street, or that the fish she'd bought for lunch was off, but the force was still with them.

Max, my youngest son, squealed with delight as I came in now, and Maisie sat up on her haunches to let him slide off her back.

'You're back early, love – no luck? Not got any pennies for me then, my beawty,' she wheedled, aping Fagin, hunching her shoulders and rubbing her hands together. 'How was business?'

'Terrible,' I groaned, chucking the velvet bag of money on the floor and collapsing into an armchair. I pulled Max with me, who grabbed my handbag and proceeded to dis-

embowel it, searching for sweeties with all the thoroughness of the Drugs Squad.

'Here, Smarties,' I delved in and handed them to him. I rubbed my eyes. 'No, it was just a really, really bad day, Maisie. Probably the weather. But thanks for having them for me. I enjoyed it. Were they OK? Where's Ben?'

'Gone to the new Howard Hodgkin exhibition at the South Bank with Lucas,' she said. 'But Max didn't want to go, did you, love?'

'Too cold,' he said, sucking a Smartie. 'An' I seen a picture before,' he informed me importantly.

' 'Course you have, my darling,' I said, giving him a cuddle. 'Seen one picture you've seen them all, haven't you?' I looked over his head at Maisie. 'Howard Hodgkin, eh?' I grinned. I loved the way my dad, at seventy odd, still had his finger on the artistic pulse and not only that, but took his eight-year-old grandson along to feel the beat with him.

'Cup of tea, darling? There's one in the pot.' Maisie got to her feet and brushed herself down, smoothing the old blue painter's smock she wore on pretty much a daily basis, and slipping on her beaded, Bohemian mules.

I looked at her fondly. No prizes for guessing where I got my love of second-hand clothes, my crushed velvet waistcoats, my fringed scarves and my embroidered peasant shirts. I wore them pretty much on a daily basis too, although, in order not to look too much like a sixties' reject, tended to team it all with black jeans and high suede boots.

'Please,' I said gratefully, hauling myself to my feet, and following her into the kitchen. I noticed, with a pang, that

she trod slowly and tentatively, holding onto the bannisters as she went, and causing me to hang around behind in order not to rush her.

As we reached the kitchen, the back door flew open, and in came Ben, at a run, breathless and pink-cheeked. He was followed by his grandfather; tall, slightly bowed, and as usual sporting his rather dashing felt hat.

'Mum! Guess what? We went to the National because the other one was shut – and we saw loads of fat naked ladies! Didn't we, Lucas?'

'We did, my love, although sadly not in the flesh. No actual WI contingents peering at the pictures in the altogether, starkers but for handbags and spectacles.' Lucas winked at me and dropped a National Gallery catalogue onto the table as he sank into a chair with a sigh. 'Ahh, cup of tea,' he murmured, his Polish accent still faintly discernible. 'Lovely.'

'And some of them had huge, *huge* bottoms.' Ben seized the catalogue and riffled through to show me. 'Really white and flabby, Mum, and bosoms as droopy as yours – look! And it was really fashionable then. Just think, you'd have been cool, Mum, in the old days.'

'Excellent news, my love. Born just a couple of centuries too late then, eh?'

'Important the lad doesn't grow up just having skinny women as role models, don't you think?' Lucas murmured.

'No danger of that,' I said darkly. 'Ooh, thanks Maisie.' I smiled as she set a cup of tea in front of me. 'I'll drink this and then we'll be out of your way.'

'No rush, love, stay as long as you like. You're not in our way.'

'I know, but still . . .'

I was all too aware of how exhausting small children could be, particularly as my parents were not young. Having had two children in quick succession in their twenties, brought them up, sent them out into the world and then settled back, child free to enjoy their forties, they must have been somewhat aghast when I'd appeared when Maisie was forty-five. If they were, I never knew it. It never showed. To me they were the most loving, laidback parents and the envy of all my friends as I was growing up. So relaxed were they, in fact, that when my brother, aged about ten, had referred to them by their Christian names as a joke, Maisie and Lucas hadn't even noticed. It had stuck, long before I was born.

Seventy-five-year-olds, though, in my opinion, need to see their grandchildren for a few hours a week, in short, sharp blasts. Then, after we'd gone, and after a quiet lunch, Maisie might tune up her violin and Lucas would accompany her on the piano; in the evening, they'd leave it to the CD player to do the work, dozing in chairs and letting the Mozart wash over them. Together, and in peace, which was entirely how it should be.

'Come on, you two.' I crouched down and began bundling Max into a jumper. 'Back to the flat. But only for a few more days, and then my darlings, we're away!'

'Oh.' Maisie swung around and clapped a hand to her head. 'That reminds me. Rose rang.'

'Oh yes?' I looked up.

'Says she's expecting you on Thursday?'

'That's right.'

'And then something about a nanny.'

'A *nanny*?' I sat back on my heels and abandoned Max with one arm up his jumper. 'What? What about a nanny?'

'Oh, just something about how she thought it would be much nicer if you took your evening meal up there with them, rather than sitting all alone in the barn,' said Maisie vaguely. 'Said she couldn't possibly have all the family sitting around at supper and not you, so she's organized a girl – a lovely girl, she said – to come and babysit the boys.' She paused. Frowned over at her husband. 'That was it, wasn't it, Lucas?'

Lucas slowly raised his brown eyes from the newspaper he'd picked up. They met mine. 'Yes love,' he said softly, 'that was it. That was about the size of it. Evening meals to be taken up at the house.'

His gaze was steady, looking to hold mine, but I slid my eyes away. Down towards my tea. I took a hasty gulp. It was colder than one would wish.