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Opening Extract from...

Going Too Far

Written by Catherine Alliott

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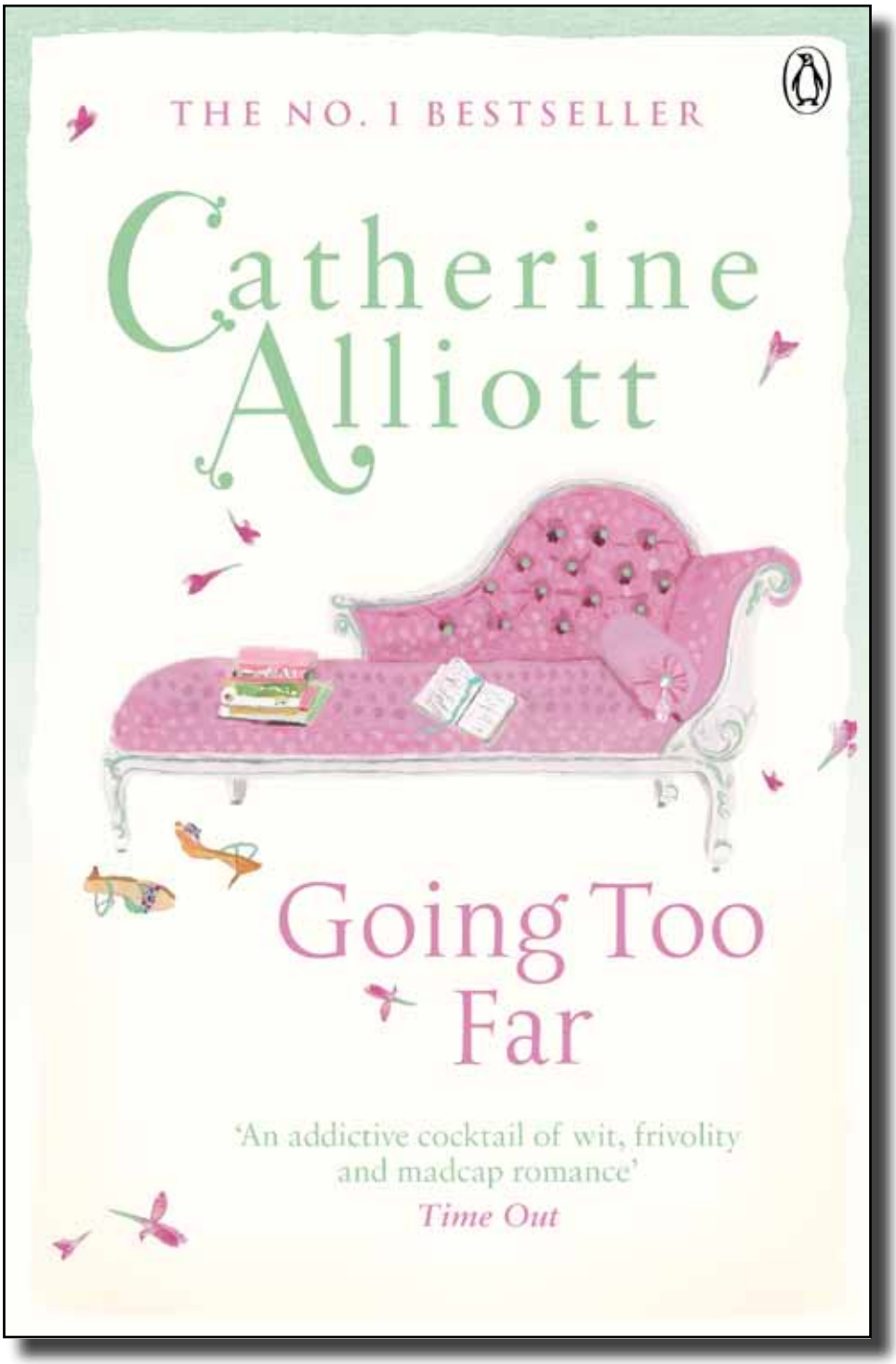

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Going Too Far

by

Catherine Alliott

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Chapter Two

The next morning I opened my eyes and lay in bed, listening to the birds singing outside my window and watching as a shaft of sunlight fell in a small bright square on my duvet cover. I stretched out a hand to check if Nick was beside me. He wasn't, of course, been up for hours no doubt, but I always liked to check.

I languished there for a while, thinking back to the events of the previous day. I smiled. So I'd mucked up the prizegiving, so what? What did a piffling little thing like a prizegiving matter when I had the most unpredictably sexy husband in the world? When was the last time Daphne Heggerty was seduced by her old man in a secluded copse down by the river bank, eh?

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and grinned to myself as I wandered down to the kitchen in search of calories. The sunlight was streaming in through the kitchen windows. I pushed open the back door, stuck my head out and was immediately ambushed by the sweet Cornish air. I inhaled deeply, held it a moment, then let it out with a contented sigh. Ahhh . . . pure nectar. You don't get air like that in London, you know, not much carbon monoxide in that little lungful. Someone really ought to bottle it and send it up to the poor old townies to waft over their cornflakes. I stuck my chest out and took another bracing snort, but it was a snort too far; my

twenty-a-day lungs objected wildly to this sudden onslaught of purity and I had a major coughing fit. Gasping and wheezing, I reached hastily for my cigarettes on the Welsh dresser, desperate for my more usual morning fix.

With fumbling fingers I lit the first of many over the gas ring and predictably singed my fringe at the same time. When I'd pulled all the burned bits out and sworn sufficiently, I tugged my T-shirt-cum-nightie down over my bottom and settled down on the back doorstep, determined to enrich at least one of my senses. It wasn't difficult. I might have comprehensively fouled up the smell of the morning air with burnt hair and low-to-middle-tar tobacco, but nothing could foul up the perfect pastoral scene that greeted my eyes. As I rested my chin on my knees and gazed out at the patchwork of fields and woods in the distance, I blew smoke rings in the hazy blue air and counted my seemingly endless blessings.

You're a lucky girl, Polly Penhalligan, I told myself sternly, a very lucky girl indeed, and don't you forget it – just look at this place! The sweeping, majestic lawn, the meadow beyond dotted with sheep and spring lambs, and even further away – I squinted my rather myopic eyes – the glassy Helford River shimmering in the distance. Magic. And here you sit, on this well-worn manor-house step, mistress of all you survey. I frowned and tapped some ash on to the grass. Well, no, all right, perhaps not the river, perhaps I wasn't mistress of that – I had a feeling, English laws being what they were, that that probably belonged to everyone – but, certainly, this particular *view* of it was mine, wasn't it?

I leaned back on the door frame happily, then frowned

again. Try not to be too smug, Polly; it's not very attractive. But then again, I mused, plucking at a daisy, it was so terribly hard *not* to be smug. And it wasn't as if I didn't appreciate it all – God no, on the contrary, it still made my eyes boggle just to think about it. I let them boggle quietly for a moment as I sat and quietly savoured the joys of being Mrs Nicholas Penhalligan.

I smiled. It had, let's face it, been pretty convenient of me to fall in love with a man who owned quite a sizeable chunk of Cornwall, hadn't it? Not that I'd have minded if he'd been a pauper or anything, an estate agent even – Lord no, I'd have had him anyway; he was my idea of heaven with or without the lucrative trappings, but it did somewhat *cushion* life, didn't it? It was, shall we say, a nice little bonus, to get not only a handsome (very), intelligent (screamingly), sensitive (sometimes), loving (at unpredictable moments like yesterday) husband, but also Trewarren House and a thousand acres of Cornish countryside thrown into the matrimonial contract just for good measure.

Ah yes, the countryside. I sighed and stretched my legs out into the dewy grass, aware that there was no holding back the smugness now. It really was such bliss. How could I ever have been happy in London? God, the noise, the traffic, the pollution, the crime! Whereas down here, well, none of that, and all the good things were just so – well, so *abundant*, weren't they? Look at that grass, for instance – I tugged at a clump with my toes – have you ever seen such luxuriant growth? My eye snagged suddenly on my bare legs, and I frowned and tucked them up beneath me. Well, yes, OK, there was some pretty luxuriant growth on those too, and perhaps they were a trifle fatter than they'd

been in the past, but what did it matter? I wasn't about to pour them into ten-denier tights and excruciatingly uncomfortable four-inch heels and totter off to work for my living, was I? No, I was simply going to squeeze them into my oldest jeans and take a leisurely stroll around the farm. When I felt up to it, of course, in an hour or so perhaps. No rush.

I rested my head lazily against the door frame, feeling the sun on my face. Yes, in an hour or so I'd probably amble off and check out the cow sheds, pass the time of day with the farm hands, chew on a straw, lean on a gate, that kind of thing – nothing too taxing for a Monday. Then I might pick a few flowers for the house and ask Mrs Bradshaw, my daily, to arrange them attractively in a crystal vase, and then when Pippa arrived I'd pretend I'd done them myself and – Christ! I sat bolt upright with a jolt. Pippa! I'd almost forgotten she was coming – what time had she said? Mid-morning? I turned round and craned my neck to see the kitchen clock. Ten thirty. Phew, relax, Polly, bags of time. Mid-morning was about one o'clock in ad-man speak; she wouldn't be here for ages.

I shook my head and sighed. Poor Pippa, it would be lovely to see her again, but what a shame it wasn't a purely social call, what a shame she was down here on business. Couldn't stop long, she'd said, too much to do. Looking for a location, she'd said, to film yet another grotty commercial, no doubt. I plucked a dandelion and frowned, twirling it in my fingers like a parasol. Yes, poor old Pippa, still stuck in the ad racket. When I'd bailed out two years ago to marry Nick, the Penhalligan part of Penhalligan and Waters, Pippa had wrung her hands in dismay, claim-

ing the typing pool would never be quite the same without the other half of the dastardly secretarial duo. She'd stuck it out solo for a bit, but when Nick finally sold his half of the agency to Waters and we decamped down here to his farm on a permanent basis, Pippa had decided that that was definitely the moment to throw in the Tipp-Ex and go.

And off she'd gone, surprisingly – considering her secretarial background of answering the telephone only on the twentieth ring, reading *Harpers & Queen* whilst typing memos and only taking a letter when severely bullied into it – to become really quite something of a high-flier in a film-production company.

She raved about it of course, but then she would. It sounded like bloody hard work to me. Whenever I rang her for a two-hour long-distance gossip she always seemed to be dashing off to a shoot or a meeting or some such other ghastly corporate event. It made her tetchy too – why, I remember once I'd had to drag her out of a meeting to ask her something absolutely crucial – like whether I should pick out the pink or the green in the drawing-room curtains when I recovered the cushions – and she'd been absolutely livid.

'Polly, have you seriously dragged me out of that presentation to ask me about your sodding cushions?' she'd hissed down the phone. Most huffy, and quite unlike her usual do-the-bare-minimum-and-piss-off-on-the-dot-of-five-thirty self.

I bit my lip thoughtfully as I twiddled my toes in the long grass. I did hope she wasn't turning into a career girl or something dreadful. Work really was so terribly overrated. What she needed, of course, was a husband, preferably

a rich one. I'd tackle her about it when she arrived, find out more about this chap she'd been seeing, Josh, or something. She'd gone awfully coy about her love life recently and I suspected it was going downhill fast.

Still, I mused, as I reached up to the shelf by the back door and flicked the biscuit tin down in a practised manner, I really ought to get dressed before she arrived or she'd be under the mistaken impression that all I did as a married woman was sit around in my nightie eating biscuits when nothing, actually, could be further from the truth.

I prized the lid open eagerly and my hand hovered nervously as I braced myself for the biggest decision of the day. I dithered. Hobnob or WI flapjack? I mustn't be greedy, and to have both would be just that. In the end I plumped for one of the larger flapjacks and wondered, as I masticated idly, just how long it actually took to get to one's hips. Were we talking hours? Days? Weeks? Or was it, in fact, almost instantaneous? I glanced down thoughtfully, but not too censoriously, at my increasingly generous hip, bottom and thigh lines. Something really had to be done about all that. Tomorrow. Yes, tomorrow I'd start a new regime. I'd go into Helston and buy some bigger clothes. I sighed. I did what I could with leggings and baggy jumpers of course, I'm nothing if not imaginative, but there was no denying the fact that two years of doing little more than reaching for the biscuit tin was beginning to take its toll on my sartorial style.

Yes, it was two years now since Nick and I had finally, and blissfully, tied the knot in that heavenly little church in Manaccan. Clutching my posy of orange blossom and white lilies I'd floated up the aisle in a sea of raw silk,

followed by a flurry of darling little bridesmaids whom I'd never seen in my life before. In a state of pre-match nerves I'd sobbed to Mummy that I simply must have some tiddly attendants and why the hell didn't I have any handy nephews and nieces we could wheel out like everyone else did, so that finally in desperation I think she'd resorted to Central Casting, or an agency or something. Anyway, they'd all looked divine and the whole thing had gone off tremendously smoothly and everyone said it hadn't mattered a bit that I'd passed out cold on the wedding cake just as Nick and I had been about to cut it. I'd obviously slightly misjudged the amount of champagne needed to steady my nerves and numbed them instead, but, as I said, it hadn't mattered, and Nick had just been thankful he hadn't cut my head off with the bogus regimental sword Mummy had also rustled up for the occasion. The cake had been surreptitiously scraped off the floor straight on to plates, my dress had sponged beautifully and I'd come round in an alcoholic haze, headdress askew, just in time to articulate my goodbyes to a few remaining guests before being whisked away to the most romantic honeymoon imaginable in Antigua.

I helped myself to a Hobnob and settled down to bask in the memory of that idyllic little hotel on the sun-drenched beach, where the only minor inconveniences had been the wrong socket for my hair dryer and the Spanish honeymooners in the next room who'd insisted on shouting '*Arriva! Arriva!*' – rather competitively we thought – through the thin rush-matting walls.

I smiled and crunched my way nostalgically through a few more calories, but as I did so I heard a crunch of an

altogether different kind coming from the other side of the house. My mouth froze in mid flapjack. I listened. Christ! That sounded suspiciously like tyres on gravel. Pippa couldn't be here already, could she?

I jumped up in alarm, ran through the house to the large sash window in the hall at the front and peered out. Sure enough, a very sexy little red Alfa Romeo was cruising to a halt in my front drive. Groovy car, I marvelled enviously, could that really be Pippa's? What on earth were they paying her these days? I watched as the car door swung open and one long, slim, sheerly stockinged leg appeared, followed by another. They straightened to reveal the rest of Pippa's most elegant self, immaculately clad in the most prohibitively expensive-looking drop-dead Chanel suit I've ever seen.

'Pippa!' I squeaked, bursting forth through the open window in a flurry of excitement and chocolate-stained T-shirt. 'You're early! Hang on, I'll come to the front door.'

She waved back, but looked rather dubiously at the craters in the drive that she was apparently required to cross in order to gain access to the house. I shut the window and ran to the door. When I flung it open she was still poised nervously by the car, clutching her quilted handbag and surveying the puddles, a vision in pale pink with black trimming, her shiny blond hair blowing out behind her like a silk fan.

'What's happened to your drive?' she wailed. 'It's like a bloody assault course!'

'We ran out of money,' I shouted. 'Had to put a new roof on the cow shed instead!'

'Well, I'm glad the cows are all right, but what about my heels?'

'Oh, come on, Pippa,' I grinned, rather enjoying her townie predicament. 'Just get a move on and stop making such a fuss!'

'Oh, all right,' she grumbled, nervously picking her way through the mud. 'Come on, Bruce,' she threw back over her shoulder. 'Wake up, for God's sake, we're here!'

A blond head suddenly popped into view above the dashboard in the passenger seat and a pair of bleary blue eyes were rubbed sleepily. Bruce? Who the hell was Bruce? She'd brought a man with her and I wasn't even dressed? I pulled my T-shirt down over my bottom and hid behind the door.

'You didn't say you were bringing anyone!' I hissed, as Pippa finally made it across the threshold.

'Oh, it's only Bruce,' she said airily, hugging me enthusiastically and thrusting a bunch of tulips up my nose. 'He's the location-finder, had to come with me to check out the venues, you see. Gosh, it's good to see you, Polly – come *on*, Bruce!' she yelled back at the car.

Bruce opened his door but appeared to be equally put out by the drive.

'Couldn't you have got a bit closer?' he wailed plaintively. 'I've got my Gucci loafers on!'

'Oh, stop being such a pansy and hurry up. I want you to meet Polly.'

'You're cruel, darling,' muttered the gorgeous, suntanned blond creature who stepped gingerly from the car, 'very cruel. But luckily, Brucey Boy's used to it.'

I instinctively pulled in my tummy muscles and sucked in my cheeks as he tiptoed across clutching a little black bag, but I couldn't help thinking I'd never seen such a fuss over a little bit of mud, especially from a man. Of course, as he reached us, it took less than a nanosecond to realize that Bruce was not your average man, at least, not one of the red-blooded heterosexual variety I'm so fond of.

'Bruce, this is Polly; Polly, Bruce,' announced Pippa as he climbed shakily up the front steps, looking back over his shoulder like someone who's just scaled the north face of the Eiger.

'Terrible drive,' he muttered, taking my hand, 'terrible. But none the less, enchanted, my dear, positively dazzled, by both the house and your good self, and dying to take a peek inside.'

Hoping fervently that he was referring to the house and not my good self I ushered them in.

'Bruce is a professional nosy parker,' explained Pippa as I led them through the vast hall smothered in ancestral portraits. 'He gets away with it by calling himself a location-finder but it's really just an excuse to poke around other people's houses.'

'Oh, but this is divine!' squeaked Bruce, clasping his tiny hands together with joy and twirling round the hall. 'Oh please, no further! Let me linger a moment and savour!'

We lingered and he savoured, prowling excitedly around the portraits, touching frames, peering at signatures.

'Oh yes!' he breathed. 'Yes! Utter magic, utter, utter magic!'

He tore himself away from the pictures and stood back to survey the whole hall, taking in the ancient banisters,

the flagstone floor and the huge chandelier hanging from the heavily corniced ceiling.

'Absolutely sublime,' he pronounced, 'especially, my dear, after the simply hideous places we've seen today.'

He gave a quick shudder of revulsion and raised a plucked eyebrow in my direction.

'I mean, wouldn't you think a picturesque period farmhouse with attractive grounds would be an easy enough brief in rural Cornwall? Wouldn't you?' he enquired urgently.

'Er, yes, I suppose I would.'

'Of course you would! But you'd be wrong. Shall I tell you why?'

I opened my mouth to invite him to do just that, but before I'd drawn breath he'd rushed on indignantly.

'Because just when you think you've found the perfect *grande maison*, the perfect country pile, you look a little closer and discover' – he gasped and clutched his mouth dramatically – '*quelle horreur*! It's got a pylon in the front garden, or there is an assortment of satellite dishes hanging from the roof, or they've got a circular washing line twirling around in the back garden set in rock-solid concrete, I mean, imagine! Imagine the *taste* someone's got to have to *do* that to their house!'

He gazed at me in horror, feigned a swoon, then quickly seized my arm. 'You haven't got a twirly washing line or a satellite dish, have you?' he asked anxiously.

I assured him we hadn't and he recovered enough composure to raise an immaculately manicured finger to his temple and massage it gently. I swear his bottom lip wobbled.

'I'm delighted to hear it, my dear, but of course it doesn't help me in my quest for a suitable house for the Doggy Chocs commercial. I tell you frankly, I'm distressed, most distressed,' he murmured. 'What on earth am I to tell Sam?'

'Who's Sam?' I asked, suppressing a giggle. I'd forgotten people like Bruce existed.

'The director,' explained Pippa.

'Too divine,' purred Bruce, eyes shining. 'Married, of course,' he added petulantly.

He sighed and turned away, resuming his survey of the portraits. Suddenly he gasped and clapped his hands.

'Heavens! What an unbelievably noble nose! Who's that?' He peered at one of the more imposing males in the collection.

'One of my husband's ancestors,' I explained. 'I'm not sure who it is but Nick comes from a long line of big-nosed bigots. You'll meet him later and, er, probably see what I mean.'

I couldn't quite imagine Nick instantly taking Bruce to his heart, so I thought it only fair to warn him of impending rejection.

'Can't wait,' breathed Bruce, 'I *adore* bigots.'

'Big mistake,' muttered Pippa, taking my arm as we went through into the kitchen. 'You should have said he was a sensitive little flower. Bruce is very into macho men, the butcher the better, in fact.'

'Christ. Nick will run a mile,' I murmured.

I filled the kettle while Bruce minced joyfully around the kitchen, exclaiming at all he saw.

'Oh, the beams, the *beams*, and – oh God, is that a range? Is it real?'

I assured him it was.

'And the floor! Proper flagstones, none of your imitation Battersea lark, ooh, aren't you clever to have a house like this and a bigoted husband to go with it?'

I grinned, thinking they'd been my exact same thoughts not a few moments ago.

'Where is the husband, by the way?' asked Pippa, sinking elegantly into the wheel-backed chair by the range and crossing her incredibly slim legs. I tried not to feel envious.

'With the sheep as usual. He knows you're coming, though, so he'll be in soon. It's ages since he set eyes on anyone in a skirt; he'll be delighted to see you but it'll play havoc with his blood pressure.'

I absent-mindedly flicked the biscuit tin down again as I spooned out the Nescafé, and, without thinking, helped myself to a flapjack. Pippa jumped up and was beside me in an instant. She grabbed my arm in a vicelike grip, eyes shining.

'I knew it!' she squealed. 'I just knew it! Didn't I say so in the car, Bruce? She is! You are, aren't you?' she asked urgently. 'Look at you – you can't keep your hands off the biscuit tin, and look at the size of you already! You old dog, why didn't you tell me? How many months are you?'

I stared at her in bewilderment. 'What? What are you talking about?'

'Pregnant! I knew it! Why didn't you tell me on the phone? How many months are you – four? Five? Funny how it shows on the face and neck, isn't it?' she observed,

surveying me critically with narrowed eyes. 'And the legs, of course, but everyone always piles it on there. Can I be godmother?'

'Shut up, Pippa,' I said crossly, snapping the biscuit tin shut. 'What on earth are you banging on about? Of course I'm not pregnant. I'd have told you if I was.'

'You're not?' Pippa stepped back in amazement. 'I could have sworn – are you sure?'

'Of course I'm sure – don't be ridiculous. Don't you think I'd know?'

'But how come you look so – how come your face is all . . .' Pippa trailed off in confusion.

'Fat?'

'Well . . . yes.'

'Oh, thanks very much,' I said tartly. 'You always did have a sublime sense of tact, Pippa, but this is ridiculous!'

'Well, you said it!'

'Because you so obviously meant it!'

'But you must admit, Polly, you have put on quite a bit of weight and you are wearing that baggy maternity thing, and I knew you wanted to get pregnant so I naturally assumed –'

'Well, you assumed wrong,' I snapped, 'and this is a T-shirt, actually. Don't they sell them in London any more?'

'But you've been trying for ages, haven't you?' she persisted. 'Surely you should be – you know, sort of – pregnant by now?'

'Pippa, could we talk about this some other time?' I hissed, jerking my head meaningfully in the direction of Bruce, who was leaning against the dresser inspecting his nails with studied indifference.

'Oh, don't worry about Bruce,' said Pippa, dismissing him airily. 'He likes girl talk.'

'No, don't mind me,' said Bruce, as if it were *his* feelings I was concerned about. 'Treat me as an honorary girlie. I love all the chat, although I must say I could probably skip the pregnancy debate, not having a vested interest, if you know what I mean. Mind if I take a look around the rest of the house?'

'Please do,' I said, relieved to be shot of him. 'Here, take your coffee.' I handed him a mug.

'Thanks. And take no notice of this anorexic stick insect. I think you look lovely, very Rubenesque. Ta-ra!'

He wiggled off in the direction of the dining room, pert little bottom tucked well in, hand stuck out to one side holding an imaginary cigarette. I watched him go, gnashing my teeth at his covetable bottom.

'Rubenesque,' I muttered darkly, splashing milk into mugs, 'marvellous, isn't it? My best friend tells me I'm so fat I could be pregnant and a perfect stranger tells me I look like an overblown tart in a picture. Anything else you'd like to get off your chest while you're down here?' I banged the empty kettle down viciously on the hob.

'Oh, don't be like that, Polly,' said Pippa soothingly. 'I wasn't trying to upset you or anything, I was just excited for you because I knew you wanted to be pregnant.'

'Well, I'm not,' I said shortly. 'So that's that.'

I curled up on the old chintz sofa in the corner, usually occupied by Badger, our black lab, and sulked into my coffee. Pippa slunk furtively over, kicked off her shoes and curled up beside me.

'But . . . there's nothing wrong, is there?' she asked anxiously. 'I mean, you haven't got your tubes crossed or anything like that, have you?'

'No, of course not, it just takes time, that's all. These things don't happen overnight, you know, Pippa!'

'Don't they?' Pippa looked surprised. 'God, I always thought they did. I thought the moment you came off the pill, that was it – wallop, up the duff, in the club, off to the gorgeous gynae and before you knew where you were you had baby sick all down your jumper.'

'That's what I thought too, but it's simply not true. It's just a load of propaganda put about by our mothers who were clearly terrified we were going to get pregnant at the drop of a pair of trousers and flaunt the love child in front of the neighbours, but let me tell you, Pippa, it's much more complicated than that – there's a lot more to it than we've been led to believe.' I nodded sagely.

'Like what?' Pippa looked confused. 'I thought you just sort of . . . did it?'

I shook my head and smiled benignly at her. 'Oh, Pippa, you're woefully misinformed, very much behind the times. In the old days, yes, I'm sure they did just "do it", but these days, what with modern science and everything, well, it's much more technical, much more advanced.' I pursed my lips knowledgeably.

'It is? In what way?'

'Well, first you've got to read all the books, then you've got to take your temperature every morning, then you buy the egg-detecting kit and set up a sort of mini chemistry lab in your bathroom, complete with foaming test tubes and dipsticks and –'

'Egg-detecting kit?' Pippa's eyes were like dinner plates. 'What are you, a hen or something?'

'Pippa, one has to know when one's eggs are being dropped,' I explained patiently.

'Blimey, now you sound like a Wellington bomber. I had no idea it was so complicated.'

'Oh yes,' I went on airily, 'it's really quite intellectually demanding, and there's an awful lot of background reading to do too.' I sighed wearily. 'Terribly time-consuming.'

'Really?'

'Absolutely, it's essential. First you've got to raid the local library for all its infertility manuals just to convince yourself you've got knots in your tubes, fibroids in your whatsits or a husband who's firing blanks, then you've got to get hold of that *Horizon* video about the voyage of the sperm to the egg to realize there's actually only one millisecond a month when you can possibly conceive anyway and that unless you set the alarm clock for three in the morning and get bonking that very second you haven't a snowball's chance in hell of getting the timing right, then –'

'Christ! First the book, then the film –' Pippa's eyes gleamed dangerously. 'Well, at least you've got the T-shirt!' she guffawed noisily into her mug.

I viewed her icily. 'This is an extremely serious and sensitive subject, Pippa. It's no laughing matter, you know.'

'Sorry,' she said, composing herself with difficulty, 'but you know, if I were you, Polly, I'd throw all the books and paraphernalia away and just get down to it. It all sounds a bit ridiculous to me.'

'I can assure you,' I said primly, 'we "get down to it", as

you so charmingly put it, at the slightest opportunity, but, as I said, it's not quite as simple as that.'

'Doesn't it help if you stand on your head? I'm sure I've read that somewhere.'

I sighed. 'Believe me, I'd stand on my head and do cartwheels round the room if I thought it would do any good, but it doesn't.'

She frowned. 'But you're not worried, are you? I mean, you've only been married a couple of years and you're still jolly young.'

'No, I'm not bloody worried and I wouldn't have mentioned it at all if you hadn't brought it up in the first place!' I snapped.

'Sorry.'

'Still,' I mused, 'it would be nice. I must say, I'm looking forward to fridge magnets.'

'Can't you have those without children?'

'Not really. Looks a bit naff if you haven't got the finger paintings to go with them.'

'Oh. Right,' conceded Pippa, 'and, of course, it would give you an interest, give you something to do.'

'What d'you mean?' I said, bridling instantly. 'I've got plenty to do. God, I'm rushed off my feet down here!'

'Really?' Pippa looked surprised.

'Really? Really? Pippa, I never stop. I'm at it all day long!'

'At what?'

'Well,' I blustered, 'being bloody busy, that's what!'

'Yes, but what d'you do?'

'Well, you know, I – well, this house for instance!' I swung my arm round expansively to indicate its size. 'It's *incredibly* time-consuming!'

'But I thought you had a daily, a wench from the village or something?'

'Well, yes, I do, but even so –'

'Even so what?'

'Well, God, Pippa, I practically had to redecorate the whole place when we moved in, you know, it was in a terrible mess!'

'Really? Redecorate?' Pippa looked around at the rustic kitchen with its oak beams, flagstone floor and plain whitewashed walls. 'Looks as if it's been like this since the Middle Ages.'

'Oh, well, yes, the *kitchen* has, sure, but various other rooms had to be *completely* redesigned.'

'Which ones?'

God, she would go on, wouldn't she?

'Which ones?' I echoed, playing for time.

'Yes, come on, I want to see.' Pippa jumped up, seized my arm and pulled me to my feet. 'I want to see what you've done!'

'Well . . .' I faltered, dragging my feet literally and figuratively across the kitchen, 'the, um, the downstairs loo took forever, of course.'

'Really? Show me.'

I led her tentatively down the back passage and pushed open the door. She gasped, as well she might. For the walls of this very small room were painted the retina-searing yellow usually reserved for the tennis balls at Wimbledon or perhaps the armbands of midnight cyclists. On completing the job I'd realized of course that the colour chart had lied through its teeth and Morning Primrose was in fact more of a Morning Chuck-up, and in a panic I'd then

tried to draw the eye away by madly stencilling fruit and flowers around the borders. Unfortunately the purple and green flora and fauna fought furiously with the acidic walls and the blue and red tiled floor. Busy was kind. Frantic was much more like it.

'Blimey,' said Pippa in awe. 'Not afraid to mix your colours, are you?'

'It didn't quite come off, actually,' I admitted. 'I think I was a mite ambitious.'

'Never mind,' said Pippa, blinking, as we turned and wandered back to the kitchen, 'it was worth a try. What else though? You said on the phone you were up to your eyes in decorating.'

'Oh, I was, it took ages to do that, you know.'

Pippa stared at me with wide eyes as she lowered herself into the sofa again. 'So that's it? The downstairs loo?'

'Yes, that's it,' I said tetchily, curling up at the other end. Christ, what did she expect? A reproduction of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? Sicilian murals all up the stairs? Franciscan angels winding their way down the banisters?

She frowned. 'But you work on the farm a lot, don't you?' she persisted. 'I mean, you help with the animals and that kind of thing?'

'Oh, not really,' I said airily. 'You see, Nick does most of it, and of course we have Larry and Mick and Jim.'

'So what do you do then?' She fixed me with a beady eye.

'Oh God, loads,' I said hastily, suddenly smelling danger and realizing what she was up to. 'There's – there's the garden, of course,' I said wildly.

'I thought you said on the phone you didn't know a

phlox from a fuchsia and you were going to get a man in to do it?'

'Ah, well – yes, OK, perhaps I did but – oh I know! Yes, of course, there's my cooking!'

'Cooking! You? Like what?'

'Well, like –'

'Yes?'

'God, don't be so aggressive, Pippa, I'm just trying to think what I do particularly well – oh yes, I know, my baking!' I finished happily.

Pippa eyed me suspiciously, as well she might. 'What, like cakes and things?'

'Er, yes, that's it.'

Not a lie at all, because in fact 'things' described my baking remarkably accurately. My particular 'things' were jam tarts. A circle of frozen pastry with a blob of jam in the middle. I had, of course, meant to master the oven and get down to some *serious* baking at some stage, and I'd even gone so far as to prop Delia up over the Aga and salivate greedily over her suggestions, but somehow, instead of my greed making me reach for the scales and the caster sugar, it seemed to lead inexorably to the biscuit tin again, so Delia was put back on the shelf to collect yet more dust and the rows of plump, golden scones and fluffy Victoria sponges continued to evade me. And Nick too, of course. Because, to be honest, he felt the deprivation much more keenly than me.

In the beginning he'd praised my efforts, keen to encourage me, but, let's face it, there are only so many tarts a man can take – so to speak – and when he came in starving

hungry from the fields, having packed more physical exertion into one day than most men manage in a week, dying for a juicy fat slab of Dundee cake with his tea, I'd come to dread his weak pronouncement of simulated joy – 'Ah! Jam tarts again!' – as his eye lit nervously upon my sticky morsels cringing by the Aga. But of course, as I told myself regularly, there was still plenty of time, and one of these days I was going to get down to some *serious* baking.

'OK, baking,' conceded Pippa warily, only marginally placated. 'All right, but you can't do that all day, can you? And the thing is, Polly, I know it's beautiful down here, but I can't help thinking I'd go out of my mind with boredom after a while, either that or turn to drink. You're not drinking, are you?' Her eyes pinned me to the wall.

'No, of course I'm not drinking, and listen, Pippa, not everyone wants to run around being a high-powered executive, you know. Don't you ever feel the urge to rip off your tights and your Chanel suit and run around the fields barefoot?'

Pippa looked doubtfully at her immaculate pink concoction. 'Not really, and even if I did,' she regarded me penetratingly, 'I'd make damn sure I'd shaved my legs first.'

I flushed. 'Pippa!' I pulled my legs up sharply and sat on them.

'Well, it's true, look at you!' I tugged my T-shirt down desperately as she hoicked it up with a manicured nail. 'There are some things only your best friend can tell you, Polly, so I'm telling you. I suspected as much the last time I came down, but now I'm convinced. You've gone all fat

and complacent because you've got your man, haven't you?'

'Pippa! I have not!' I was pink with indignation now – this was outrageous.

'Well, what's with the hairy legs then?' she persisted. 'And,' she added, peering with naked incredulity at the top of my head, 'bloody hell, look at this, what about these dark roots? You wouldn't have been seen dead walking around London like that in the good old days. Come on, Polly, it's not like you to take your eye off the ball – what's occurring?'

'Don't be silly,' I spluttered. 'I haven't taken my eye off the ball at all, it's just that, well, in the country, people don't worry about things like shaving their legs and touching up their roots. It's all sort of back-to-nature here.'

'Oh, so it's the country's fault, is it? You can't live in the country and shave your legs at the same time, is that it? What utter drivel. The two aren't mutually exclusive, you know, I'm sure the village shop would run to a razor, or even a tube of Immac, and what's all this back-to-nature rubbish? You always struck me as more of a back-to-the-wine-bar type.'

'Oh, OK, OK,' I said, caving in dramatically and reaching for a cigarette. 'So I haven't shaved my legs for a while, OK, Pippa, you win.'

I was getting bored with this lecture and my argumentative powers were flagging.

'No, it's *not* OK!' said Pippa sharply, suddenly thumping the arm of the sofa with her fist.

I jumped in surprise. She glared at me.

'If you must know, I'm really worried about you, Polly!'

My mouth gaped in amazement. She . . . was worried about me? Wasn't I supposed to be the one who was worried about –

'I know exactly what you're doing here,' she snapped, 'you're sitting around on your bum all day, doing bugger all except eating chocolate, watching telly and waiting to get pregnant, aren't you?'

'No, of course not,' I spluttered. 'I'm incredibly busy, and, anyway, since when have you been so keen on the puritanical work ethic?'

'I'm not puritanical, I'm just living my life, which is more than you're doing, and it's a crime. You're a beautiful girl, Polly, you've got it all and you're wasting it. You're piling on the pounds and going to ground down here, now why?'

'If you must know,' I snapped, 'I have to eat as many calories as I possibly can – it's part of my pre-conception diet. If I don't keep my weight up, I won't conceive; it's a well-known fact. Haven't you ever heard of child-bearing hips?' I added wildly.

'Balls,' scoffed Pippa. 'You're eating out of boredom and you know it. You've got nothing to do and no way of occupying your mind. You're bored out of your skull here.'

I felt my fists clenching. 'That's not true!'

'Of course it is, it's written all over you – I've got my man so I don't have to work and I don't care what I look like – it's as clear as day.'

I felt my face flame. We stared at each other.

'Well, if you think I'm so fat and boring, why don't you just go?' I snapped suddenly.

There was a terrible silence. She gazed at me. I watched her face grow pale. Then she got shakily to her feet, gathering up her handbag from the table.

'Right,' she whispered hoarsely, 'I will.'