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**Opening Extract from...**

# The Real Thing

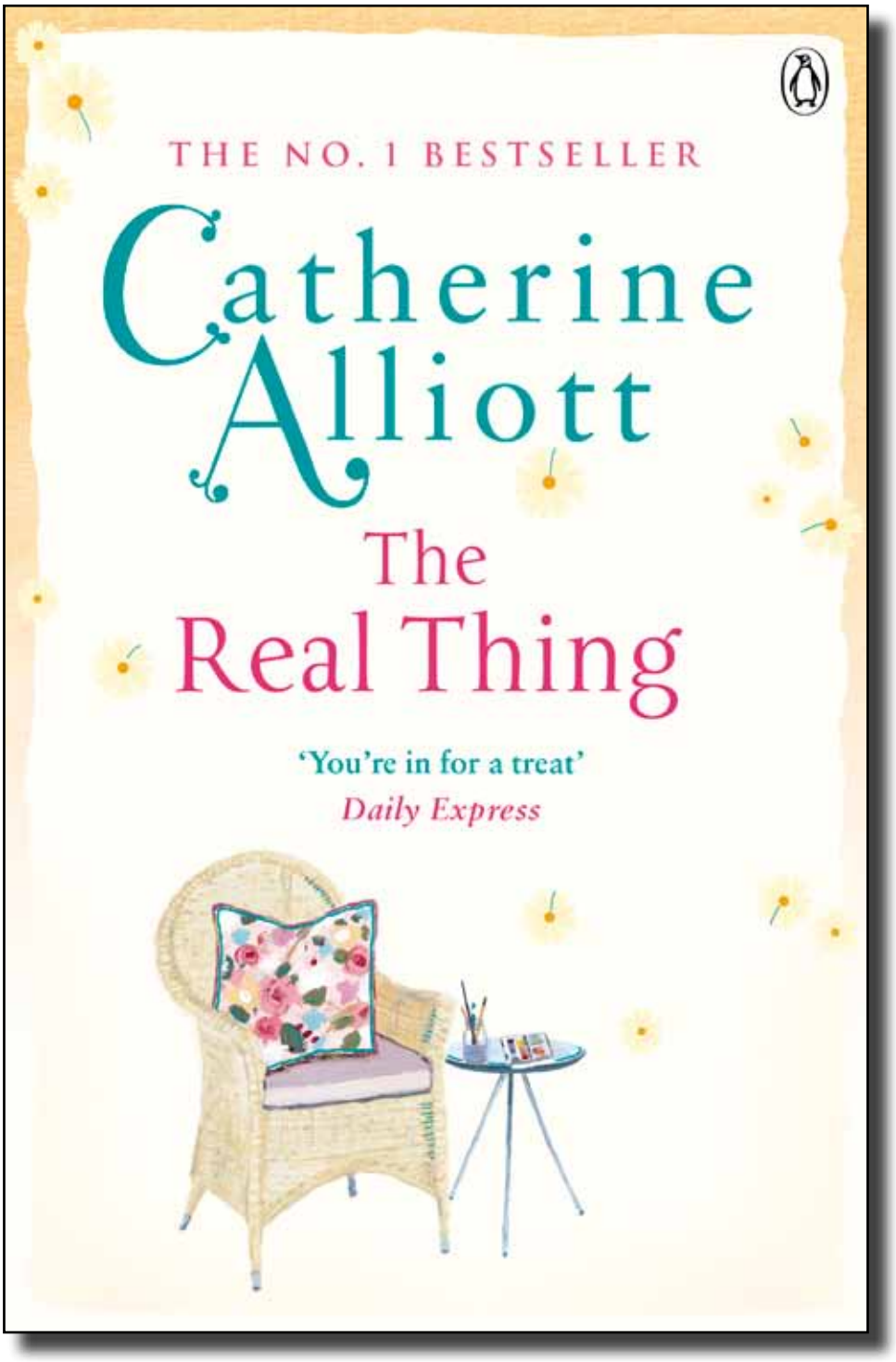
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Published by Penguin Books Ltd

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by

Catherine Alliott

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# Chapter One

I put the receiver down and felt panic rise. It shot through my body like a turbo-charged lift. My eyes glazed, my insides curdled.

'Jesus!' I breathed.

I glanced quickly at the kitchen clock. One o'clock. One o'clock! Only two hours to go.

'What? What's happened?' demanded Laura, bent at right-angles over my kitchen table, her icing bag poised precariously above the dinosaur's left eyeball.

'Spotty Lottie's got cystitis!' I yelped.

Laura's icing bag quivered nervously and she inadvertently gave Tyrannosaurus Rex a squint. 'Spotty Lottie?' she demanded. 'Who's that – a dog?'

'The entertainer, you fool,' I hissed, running my hands through my hair till it stood on end, and rising from the table like a sea monster coming up from the depths. 'For Clemmie's party! The female equivalent of Paul Daniels for four-year-olds has cancelled – says she can't possibly come, because she's welded to the loo seat. Oh God, Laura, what am I going to do?' My hands left my dark curls and began to wring desperately. 'In precisely two hours' time, seventeen four-year-olds will be thundering through that door,' I pointed a quivering finger, 'demanding white rabbits, puppet shows and hideously twisted balloons, and all I'll have to offer them are some Marmite

sandwiches and a few bowls of Hula Hoops. I'll be lynched!'

'Oh, is that all?' My sister calmly flicked back her long blonde hair and resumed her icing. 'For a moment I thought something awful had happened. I mean, you don't *have* to have an entertainer, do you? Just play a few jolly games and give them a piece of soggy cake in a napkin like Mum used to. They're only four, for God's sake.'

'Jolly games? Soggy cake?' I gave a hollow laugh and sank back down on my chair again.

I regarded Laura in her casual yet immaculate navy-blue linen ensemble, which somehow reeked of taking the day off from one's PR agency to help at one's niece's party but not sinking to leggings, thank you very much. I shook my head grimly.

'Oh Laura, how little you know. Four-year-olds today are a different *breed*, they're nothing *like* we used to be at that age. For one thing they know their party rights, and those include –' I ticked them off on my fingers '– one large balloon filled with helium and not puff, one party bag containing at least five items – three of which must be edible and bad for teeth – and either one bouncy castle *or* an entertainer, preferably unseen at any other children's party in the neighbourhood within the last three months.'

Laura frowned. 'Sounds rather Draconian to me.'

'Of course it's Draconian!' I shrieked. 'They're monsters! They're manipulative little devils who know exactly how to – Oh, hello, darling!' I broke off breathlessly as Birthday Girl herself pranced into the kitchen dressed in her prohibitively expensive party frock. She gave us a twirl and we clapped dutifully.

'D'you like your cake?' I beamed. 'Isn't Laura doing it beautifully?'

Clemmie inspected it with an eagle eye. 'Very nice,' she concluded finally as she walked round the table, scrutinizing the dinosaur from all angles. 'I'm glad you're making it, Laura,' she said. 'Even Hugo couldn't eat the one Mummy made last year. Is Edward coming to my party too?'

Laura crouched down to Clemmie's level, beaming at this reference to her latest man. She smoothed her niece's smocked dress. 'No, poppet, he's at work. Why, would you like him to come?'

Clemmie wrinkled her nose. 'Not if he's still sad.'

Laura frowned. 'What d'you mean?'

'Mummy said he was a sad little man to Daddy last night. Didn't you, Mummy?' She turned to me.

'No, no, darling,' I said quickly, flushing horribly. 'That was a man Daddy works with, he's called Edward too.'

I turned to Laura who was looking decidedly hostile. 'Honestly, the things children remember. Mention someone they've never even heard of and they remember his blinking shoe size, say "bugger" once and they remember to say it every day, but try to get them to remember to say "thank you" and it completely slips their tiny minds! No, no, this Edward chappie's a barrister – in David's chambers. It's very sad, he lost his –'

'Leg?' offered my sister icily. 'Mind?'

'Er, no, wife. He's lost his wife.'

'How careless.'

'Quite. Now come on, Clemmie,' I hustled her out quickly, 'run and play in the garden, would you? I've got loads to do in here.'

Clemmie dragged her feet slowly to the back door. 'When will Spotty Lottie be here?'

'Soon, darling, soon,' I said weakly, watching as she scuffed her new shoes in the dirt on the way to the sandpit.

I stood at the sink avoiding Laura's eye, and looked out instead across our side passage to the one next door, and beyond to the one next to that . . . So it went on, passage after passage, all leading to fifty-foot gardens behind our terrace of three-storeyed houses with four bedrooms – number four used either as a study for the childless or a nanny's room for the with-child – complete with knocked-through drawing room on top of knocked-through basement kitchen.

There were subtle differences, of course. Some kitchens had the sink at this end, which meant French doors onto the garden, and some had the sink at the other end (no French doors), and some had even knocked the kitchen wall down altogether and built a conservatory, thus eliminating the side passage entirely.

The occupants of these houses were startlingly similar too, chiefly in their respectability. The men tended to be doctors, barristers, accountants, solicitors, surveyors, bankers and Lloyd's brokers, and the women, the same again, but with more of a smattering of media, publishing and the art-world thrown in for good measure. In other words, all fully paid up members of London's professional classes, and all living cheek by jowl in tarted-up Victorian semis in the tarted-up boroughs of Putney, Fulham, Hammersmith, Wandsworth, Clapham, Balham and, at a pinch, Streatham.

And of course, I mused, as I picked a dried fruit gum off my jeans, there were the other women, too. Women like me who didn't work, whose lives revolved around children. Again, there were subtle differences. Like the way we filled our time when the little darlings were away from us at school, or ballet, or tinies' tennis, or yet another tea party. Some supplemented these gaps from child-rearing with charity work, or gardening, some with decorative art courses and some with the gym. I wiped the sticky mark on my jeans with a dishcloth and then dropped it back into the sink. I as yet hadn't decided what my particular supplement would be.

I gazed across the sunny, wisteria-clad walls, narrowing my eyes against the sun. None of this sameness bothered me; to be honest I found it rather comforting. Safety in numbers, so to speak. I'd even hazard a guess that some of my neighbours had sensitive, unmarried sisters like mine who lived in flats in smarter parts of town like Chelsea and South Ken and who put up a damn good front but secretly longed to acquire a husband and family and with a huge sigh of relief join their less glamorous sisters in these quieter, more restful, suburban parts of town.

I could sense Laura's eyes on my back now, could feel the offence I'd caused. I just knew how she was sitting, too, at my distressed pine table in my Shaker kitchen, one navy trouser leg crossed over the other, a Gucci shoe wagging nervously, one hand at her neck fingering a French scarf beginning with H (I never dared pronounce it for fear of showing my ignorance), her eyebrows raised, her lips pursed, waiting for me to explain, to dig myself out of yet another hole, to apologize.

I sighed. Suddenly I felt tired, old, and, more than anything, bored. Bored with having to placate, to bolster up, to calm down, to gently ease everyone back into position again. Bored with other people's lives. How come I never got soothed and eased myself? Who was it said: 'Never complain, never explain'? I took a deep breath, turned around and gave Laura a dazzling smile.

'Cystitis isn't that serious, is it, Laura?'

Laura blinked, wrong-footed. 'Er, well, I . . .'

'Doesn't it just mean you have to go to the loo all the time?'

'Well, yes, but –'

'Well, she can damn well sit on the loo and do her act there. How dare she cancel at the eleventh hour for something as piddling as bladder control? Good grief, Clemmie's bladder control is practically non-existent and I still send her to school! No, if she's that incontinent we'll have it in the upstairs bathroom. She can sit on the loo and wear one of my long Monsoon skirts draped over her knees – the children will never know. I'm sure we can squeeze seventeen in there, they're only little, after all. We could get at least four in the bath, one in the basin – Holly Bates can go in there, she's not much bigger than a bar of soap anyway, poor child – a couple on the windowsill, and I'll tie balloons and streamers to the loo chain and –'

'Oh, don't be ridiculous, Tess, you can't possibly have the party in the bathroom. Quite apart from anything else it's unhygienic,' snorted my sister. 'What an idea! Just call Clemmie back, sit her down and tell her gently but firmly exactly what the situation is and just why she can't have an entertainer at her party. She'll understand.'

I looked at my sister. For one so smart she'd been successfully deflected from the 'sad Edward' episode without me even trying. So I could soothe and ease with my eyes shut now, could I? How about that. Laura flicked her hair back confidently as if she were just about to walk into a meeting and advise a client on a slight change of strategy and possibly an increase in his budget.

'I'll talk to her if you like,' she said, giving me a bright smile.

I smiled pityingly and patted her hand kindly. 'No, darling, it's OK. It would take me ages to prise your eyeballs off her little fingers. You just be an angel and carry on icing the cake, and meanwhile I'll get on the phone and offer every magician in London double wages and as much booze as they can drink between three o'clock and five, OK?'

I seized the *Yellow Pages* and thumbed through to the Entertainment section.

Laura shook her head. 'You'll never get anyone at this late stage,' she said smugly.

'Watch me, everyone has their price,' I said grimly. 'If necessary, I'll throw in some casual sex. My body's pretty casual at the moment.'

'Ah yes, that's it – just mention the Caesarean scars, the stretch-marks, the varicose veins and the saggy boobs, and we'll have the house surrounded by the entire Magic Circle in no time at all.'

'Thank you, Laura,' I muttered, knowing full well she was letting me know she *hadn't* forgotten. 'Thank you for those kind words. Ah, here we are – Magicians. Let's see . . . Funky Frankie – no, can't have him, Clarissa Williams had

him last week. What ab-ou-t . . . Magic Malcolm? Oh goodness, no. I forgot, we can't have him either.'

'Why not?'

'Hugo had him for a Christmas party. We were down here with some other parents quaffing champagne when the ceiling started vibrating and plaster started coming off. We rushed upstairs and found this poor chap cowering in a corner surrounded by fifteen seven-year-olds stamping rhythmically and shouting, *"Magic Malcolm's got a tiny willy!"* He didn't work for months after that, and Sally Bateman tells me he's still in therapy. I feel frightfully guilty, but what can I do? Ah! Here's one I don't know – Perky Percy.' I picked up the book and ran to the phone in the hall.

Five minutes later I was back, flushed with success and smiling broadly. 'He's coming,' I announced, 'and guess what, with not just one, but *two* white rabbits!'

'I'm not surprised. With a name like Perky Percy he's probably got ferrets down his trousers, too. What did you offer him, if it's not too much of a personal question?'

'Oh, just a socking great wodge of money,' I said airily.

'You realise you've probably just wrecked some other poor child's birthday party, don't you? I dare say he's cancelling right now, complaining of the male equivalent of cystitis.'

'All's fair in the infant party world,' I said briskly, dropping the *Yellow Pages* on the table with a thud. 'Now shift yourself, Laura, I need that seat for Musical Chairs. Oh – and pop up and get a couple more from my bedroom, would you?'

'God, give us a chance – I'm still doing the cake. Anyway,

can't David help out? Where is he, anyway? Why isn't he participating in this joyous event?'

'He's in the garden pretending to prune the roses. Josie's stretched out on the lawn stark naked and he needs an excuse to ogle.'

'Not completely naked, Mummy,' said my son and heir, suddenly appearing at my left elbow. 'She's got something round her middle and up her bottom – look.'

I followed Hugo's ink-stained finger through the French windows – yes, we were lucky enough to have our sink at the *right* end of the kitchen – to where our buxom, bronzed, Australian au pair lay prone amongst the daisies.

'What is that thing anyway?' he asked, staring.

'That thing, my darling, is a thong.'

Hugo was delighted. 'The thing is a thong. A thing-thong! Laura – Josie's got a thing-thong up her bum!'

'Bottom,' corrected Laura. She found my ear. 'How can you let her lie out there like that?' she hissed, peering over my shoulder. 'Look at David, he's going absolutely *apoplectic* with desire. He's pruning that rose like a thing possessed – he'll dig it up in a minute!'

We watched as my usually calm, not to say languid husband, who normally wouldn't be seen dead in the garden unless it was to read Kierkegaard in a Panama hat under the apple tree, launched a frenzied attack on Madame Grégoire, at the same time keeping both eyes firmly on Josie's bronzed backside. Every so often he'd pause to flick a strand of blond, rather Heseltinian hair back from his high – and these days increasingly higher – forehead. He paused again, straightened up to his full six foot four,

flicked another strand of hair away, and this time, adjusted his trousers too.

'Adds a new dimension to the term "prune hard", doesn't it?' I murmured.

Laura giggled and frowned in Hugo's direction, but as we were constantly being reminded by his school reports, Hugo had a low boredom threshold and had already wandered off in search of something more stimulating like Power Ranger News.

'But don't you care?' she persisted. 'I mean, talk about putting temptation in his way! Why did you *hire* someone like that? There must be ugly nannies, surely?'

I sighed. 'I hired her because the agency sent her and I was too desperate to send her back.' I giggled. 'I must say, when I saw her staggeringly long legs – she had to practically limbo dance through the front door – it did occur to me we might have problems with David's blood pressure – not to mention the roses,' I added, watching him lop off yet another of my prize blooms. I banged on the window.

'Hey, David. Stop it!'

David swung round alarmed, immediately got the wrong end of the stick, averted his eyes from the luscious Josie and began attacking Madame Grégoire with renewed vigour. I groaned as he eventually hacked her off at her ankles.

'There goes another fifteen quid at the garden centre! God, sometimes I wish he'd just throw down his secateurs, whip off his trousers, stride over there and get on with it, just so long as he left my roses alone!'

'Tessa!'

'Well, why not? It would let me off the hook for a while, wouldn't it? Think of all that precious sleep I'd catch up on. I mean, that's what concubines were for, wasn't it? To let the poor, worn-out, child-encumbered wife have a lie-in on a Saturday morning . . . Jolly good idea, if you ask me.'

'Tess, you are joking, aren't you?' asked my younger, less child-worn sister anxiously. 'You'd be horrified if anything really did happen, wouldn't you?'

'Well I don't know, Laura,' I mused, shaking my head thoughtfully. 'Sarah Hooper's husband had a fling with the nanny and Sarah said it was wonderful. The poor man was absolutely dripping with guilt and kept the house permanently stuffed with fresh flowers – couldn't even buy petrol by all accounts without adding a cellophaned springtime-selection to the Access card – practically *fought* her to unload the dishwasher, and Sarah said she only had to mention Sainsbury's and he was in there, trolleying around like a lunatic. She said it was absolutely marvellous.'

'Tess, you can't be serious!'

I patted her shoulder and gave a wry smile. 'No, of course I'm not. But . . .' I hesitated. 'Just don't expect too much, that's all.'

'Of what?'

'Oh, you know, marriage, everything.'

I turned and looked back out of the window again. Josie, bored with the sun, had pulled on a T-shirt and was loping back up the garden, her long legs covering it in about three strides. Hopefully she'd make a few sandwiches now, but since she wasn't actually on duty for another half an hour I didn't like to suggest it. She strode past us through the kitchen.

'Hi there,' she drawled to Laura in her relaxed Australian brogue.

'Oh, hello!' chirruped Laura, in her uptight English one.

I smiled. Back in the garden, it seemed to me David had almost heaved a sigh of relief. He dropped his secateurs, picked up his hat, staggered across to the other side of the garden and flopped down in a deckchair, his hand reaching down instinctively for his book, his comfort blanket. He put it on his lap, folded his hands on top of it and tipped the brim of his hat down over his eyes, visibly relaxed. I smiled. Even after seven years he was still quite an attractive sight. Tall, still lean, fair-haired – albeit veering towards grey – and with really rather noble features. He could be Lord Many-Acres sitting there contemplating his land, instead of an overworked barrister contemplating his garden fence. His eyes, pale blue, but flecked with brown like a gull's egg, slowly began to close, worn out by all that ogling, no doubt.

'I wasn't actually planning on marrying Edward,' said Laura, rather hesitantly. 'I mean, it's not that serious.'

I swung round. 'Really? Oh, excellent! That's terrific! I mean –' I quickly tried to temper my enthusiasm. 'Excellent that you're not thinking of marriage yet. Much too early. Plenty of time for all that.'

I turned back to the garden again. I heard Laura scrape her chair back from the table behind me as she came to join me at the window. David's mouth was open now. I couldn't hear him, but ten to one he was snoring.

'Tess, you'd never leave him, would you?' she asked tentatively.

I threw my head back and laughed out loud. 'Leave him? No, of *course* not!' I swung round to face her. 'I'm talking about *marriage*, Laura, not David. God, he's the same as any other husband – tired, jaded, stressed out, getting older, thinking ruefully of his far too guided youth and how he wished he'd misspent it a bit more when he had the chance . . . No, no, they're all the same. Why on earth would I want to leave him? And what would I swap him for – the same again? God, at least we get on. You should see some couples we know, like the Bartletts or the Frazers. Sniping away at each other at dinner parties, constantly at each other's throats . . . At least we like each other; at least we have a laugh. All I'm saying is –' I hesitated. 'Oh, forget it.'

'But do you ever think . . . Do you ever sort of wonder . . .'

'What?' I sighed. Laura, like most unmarried women, constantly wanted to talk about relationships, chew them over, discuss them. What she didn't realize was that most married women were exhausted enough living them, without constantly analysing them too.

'Do you ever wonder if you'd have married him if you hadn't been pregnant?' she blurted out.

Uh-oh. This old chestnut. 'Laura, you've asked me this a million times,' I said wearily. God, she did like to dredge everything up, didn't she? She was like a tabloid newspaper sometimes or, worse, *Titbits*.

'Yes,' I said patiently, 'I'm sure I would. I know I would.'

There was a pause. 'He is a lovely man, you know,' she said softly.

I screeched inwardly and contemplated reaching for the saucepan on the draining board to bash her over the

head with. 'Yes, I *know* he's a lovely man, I wouldn't have married a jerk, would I? Some sad little git with a toupée or something?' Then, realising I'd said 'sad' again and that – oh damn it, Edward didn't have much hair either – I rushed on hurriedly: 'All I'm saying is you can't expect passion to continue on a grand scale for ever, that's all.'

Laura shook her head. 'I don't believe that,' she said firmly. 'I want someone who's going to light my fire every day till I'm ninety.'

I wiped the draining board down with the dishcloth and threw it back in the sink. 'Take my advice and settle for someone who turns your heater on twice a month,' I said drily. 'And if he'll take the children to the park on a Saturday morning too, you're laughing. Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some serious negotiating to do with my daughter on the subject of magicians.' I pushed past her, rolling up my sleeves. 'I tell you, I don't know why they don't just send a posse of mothers to the Bosnian talks, all we do is negotiate peace, I bet I could teach those politicians a thing or two.' And with that I marched off to hold a summit meeting in the sandpit.

Clemmie was busy burying one of Hugo's prized Action Men as deep as she possibly could and patting the sand down neatly so there was no sign of his grave. I made a mental note to retrieve it later. I sat down and began my spiel. Clemmie listened carefully to my terms, her dark, silky head on one side.

'Has he got a rabbit?'

'Two.'

'Funny balloons?'

'Hysterical.'

'Tricks up his sleeves?'

'Possibly even up his trousers.'

She thought for a second. 'OK, but I want a party bag too, all right? Not just the guests, and I want –' she thought wildly for a minute, then got realistic – 'seven things in it.'

I smiled and stuck out my hand. 'Done.'

We shook on it. No flies on Clemmie, I thought proudly as I heaved myself out of the sandpit, she'd be OK. She was no pushover. David, however, was less convinced. He lifted the brim of his hat.

'Perky Percy?' he murmured from his deckchair. 'Sounds a bit suspect to me.'

'David,' I said, exasperated, realizing he'd been feigning sleep for the last ten minutes to get out of party preparations, 'no one in their right mind is going to make a career out of entertaining four-year-olds unless they are indeed a bit suspect. Just keep your back to the wall and you'll be fine, OK?' I glanced at my watch. Two-thirty. Christ! 'And now that you've finished wrecking my roses, perhaps you'd be good enough to sort out the seats for Musical Chairs. There's a hell of a lot to do today, you know. We can't all sit around admiring the scenery!'

David looked surprised. 'All right, all right.' He put his book down and made to get up. 'You only have to ask.'

'Well, I shouldn't *have* to, should I? That's the whole point. It should be perfectly bleeding obvious, shouldn't it!'

I marched back into the kitchen ahead of him, slamming the door shut behind me. It shuddered in its frame. Laura jumped in alarm. I ignored her and pulled open the kitchen drawer, ransacking it for cake candles. Hugo popped his head round the door, saw my face and popped

out again. I ground my teeth as paper napkins, cocktail sticks, etc. fell to the floor.

'Oh God! Why is it I can never *find* anything!' I stared down at the chaotic drawer. 'Well, there just aren't any, are there, so now I'll have to go to the shops. Great. Where's my purse? Where's my blinking *purse?*' I lurched around the kitchen, picking up bundles of newspapers, scattering children's drawings and piles of discarded clothes.

'Jesus!' I shrieked. 'Why is it that in order to get anything done in this house you have to split the bloody atom first?'

Laura slipped silently through the kitchen door to the garden. Through the window I saw her make a face to David. She jerked her head back in my direction and raised her eyes to heaven. David made a resigned face in response, shrugged his shoulders and slowly made his way up the garden path.

I picked my purse out of the fruit bowl on the dresser, wiped a bit of rotten pear off it, and sighed. At what stage in my career, I wondered, had I turned into this mini domestic tyrant? Last year? The year before? Five years ago? I hadn't always been like this, surely? I seemed to remember being a rather sweet, good-natured girl once. I shook my head and made for the back door, just as David was coming through it.

'I blame other people!' I snapped in his face.