

Everything She Wants

D A NELSON

Sample Chapters

Chapter 1

June 2005 - One Step Further and My Back Will Break

I SUPPOSE the catalyst was the day I made her a cake. It was her sixteenth birthday. I didn't particularly want to make her a cake, she didn't deserve it, but, as her loving mother, I felt duty bound to do something to mark the occasion. If she had just left me alone to get on with it, we would never have rowed and maybe things wouldn't have turned out the way they did.

Maybe I should thank her for it.

I was just finishing off the mixture when she sidled into the kitchen, coy as a kitten. She smiled sweetly at me, gave me a small hug and sighed so contentedly that she set alarm bells jangling in my head. She was never so affectionate unless she wanted something and I wondered what it was this time.

"Mum," she said, twirling a lock of long blond hair with one hand.

"Yes, Alex?" I plopped the cake mixture into a greased tin.

"Can I ask you something?" Her big brown eyes were full of Bambi innocence.

I slid the tins slid into the oven. Half an hour and they'd be ready. "Yes, of course you can, honey." I was a bit preoccupied otherwise I might have been quicker on the uptake. I should have heeded those bells.

“Can you give me some money?”

Ah, here we go.

“Money? What for?”

“School books,” she replied looking demurely at me through her long, mascara-ed eyelashes.

We’d been here before, many, many times. I couldn’t believe she was trying this one on again.

“What’s it really for?” I asked wiping my floury hands with a dishtowel.

“What do you mean?” She was sharp with the questions and there was a hint of anger in her voice, but she kept her cool. Her eyes glinted in the soft morning light.

“Well I’m not fuelling your drugs habit. No way.” I put the towel down and faced her. My hands went instinctively to my hips. We stood there staring at each other for a moment waiting for the other to crack. She reapplied her habitual scowl.

“I don’t do drugs,” she snapped, her lips twisting round the words. “I told you that hundreds of times! It’s to buy books for school, okay?”

She hesitated. I could almost hear the ticking of her mind as she weighed up the situation. She changed tack. Her features softened and, in that little girl lost voice I hate, she continued: “It’s to buy *The Catcher in the Rye*. We’re studying it just now and there’s not enough books to go around. I really need it mum if you want me to pass my exams.”

‘She must think I’m stupid,’ I thought. I folded my arms across my chest. “Fine, then that’s no problem,” I said.

She smiled a little too triumphantly.

“I’ll get it for you. I’m going into town tomorrow anyway. Okay?”

“Oh, there’s no need for that,” she replied too hastily. “No

need at all.” Her voice became placating. “I can get it myself. Don’t want to put you to any bother. I know you’re really busy with your housework and things.” She smiled. Honey dripping from her ruby red lips like venom. “Just give me the money and I’ll get it.” She put her hand out, waiting.

I thought about it for a moment. I couldn’t be bothered arguing with her. “I’ll want to see it,” I warned.

She blinked. “Sure.” The hand was held higher.

I grabbed my purse from the kitchen window ledge - kept there where I could see she wasn’t dipping into it - and opened it. “How much is it?”

“Thirty,” she said.

“Pounds? What do you need £30 for?” Jesus, she was only buying a book. “What are you buying? A jewel encrusted edition? Something with sapphires or emeralds?”

“No,” that sullen voice was back. “I need a few other things as well.”

“What things?” My purse was closed again. I held it protectively against my body.

“Just...stuff,” she shrugged.

“Cigarettes?” I asked. I could always smell them off her, the sharp nastiness clung to her like smog. She had stopped trying to hide it with perfume and mints.

“No.”

“What then?” I held my purse in a death grip. The knuckles on my hand were going white. She was beginning to irritate me.

“Toiletries,” she smiled. “I really need deodorant and shit.” Her big soft eyes were back on, trying to capture me in their pleading beam. I hesitated. She had used this ruse before. She had extracted money from me for (she had assured me) tights

and underwear but had instead bought vodka for a wild party she and her friends had at another girl's house. The girl ended up in hospital getting her stomach pumped. Her parents blamed Alex, claimed she was the ringleader. That painful memory made my mind up.

"Just give me your list and I'll get them next time I'm in ASDA," I gave her a tight smile.

"But I need that stuff now!" she barked. The attempt at soliciting the money out of me through coyness had failed, so she returned to her charming real self: Alex the bitch. She should have known better than to change tactics again.

"Don't you use that tone of voice with me," I warned in a low growl. I placed the purse back on the windowsill, moved my body in between her and it, protecting it from her.

"Why the fuck not? It's the only way I can get through your deaf old lady ears into your thick old lady head," she snarled, thrusting an angry finger at me.

"You little...!" I hissed batting her hand away. "If you think I'm giving you money now, you can forget it."

Her face contorted with the vile nastiness of her nature. "Aw, away and fuck yourself then, you dried up old lesbian! I'm going to ask dad."

She dismissed me with a wave of her hand and a tsk, and stomped out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

You know how when you think about a situation later, you wish you had acted differently? Well, I sort of feel that way about this. I wish I had been calmer, thought more about it before I did what I did, was sneakier – like her. But I wasn't and I couldn't stop myself from storming in after her. I wasn't about to let her get away with that. Not this time. I had had enough of being dismissed in this downright rude and nasty

way. I was her mother and I demanded respect. I had taken enough shit off her over the years and I deserved much better. So I followed her. Closely. Caught up with her in the hallway just as we reached the living room door. She didn't go in, but turned on me, a wildcat with claws out.

"What are you following me for, you bitch?" she hissed. "D'you fancy me? Is that it? You're fucking sick!" She kept her voice low, knowing full well her father was sitting in the living room reading the Sunday papers. She never swore in front of him; he held the real purse strings after all and she didn't want Daddy thinking his little princess was naughty.

"Don't you speak to me like that, I'm your mother!" I snapped. "I deserve BETTER!"

"You deserve nothing!" she taunted. "And what's this 'mother' shite? You've never been a mother to me!" Her voice dripped with malice. "I mean look at you! You're dull, dowdy and you don't even have a career. I can't hold my head up in school. Everyone else's mother is a someone. You're a nobody. You just sponge off dad all the time."

"I sponge? I don't see you bringing any money into this house!" I exploded. "I'll have you know I work really hard to keep this house nice."

"Yeah, right. Tell it to someone who cares. What are you? A common housewife, that's all, with the emphasis on common. There's nothing special about you. Poor dad, imagine having a wife that's such a drudge. At least I can bring a bit of glamour into his life."

She flicked her hair with one hand, stood there, glaring at me, challenging me to do something about it. Flicked the hair again. She was really proud of that hair, spent a lot of time getting it all shiny and bouncy. But, for me, it acted like a mat-

ador's cape to a bull, teasing me, taunting me. I could lie and say that I acted with dignity at that insult. I could say I let the nasty words wash over me. But I didn't. What actually happened was that a thick haze of red mist descended over me, my mind went into overdrive and I lost it. Big time.

"Let's just see..." I said grabbing her by the hair. "...how glamorous you look..." I dragged her back down the hallway. "Bald!"

She fought hard, scratching and twisting, trying to break free, but I gripped her hair tightly. The more she jerked and pulled, the tighter I held on. She squealed as I yanked her backwards down the hall. It was loud enough to rouse John from his newspaper slumber and his frowning face appeared at the living room door.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "What are you doing to our daughter?" He stared at me, open mouthed, as if he couldn't believe his bespeckled eyes.

"Teaching her a lesson!" I snarled. I was still absorbed by the red fury, lost to the intense boiling within.

"She's gone mad, dad!" Alex wailed tripping backwards as I pulled. "She's flipped. She's a looney...ow!" I yanked again.

"Don't you speak!" I growled resuming my mission. I kicked open the kitchen door, lugged her in behind me.

"Let me go! Ow! Dad! Stop her!" Alex twisted, turned, but could not break my grip on her hair. John seemed then to come suddenly to his senses. He waded in between us, grabbed my hand and prised open my fist. He threw me from her in disgust. The force bounced me off the wall, brought me back to my senses. I stared at him then looked down at the few long blond hairs still trapped in my hand.

"What are you doing?" he demanded. "What are you doing?" His lips were tight, white, as he waited for an answer. He

breathed heavily through his nose reminding me of a snorting bull. I looked at him for a moment, not comprehending at first what he'd said. My chest heaved from the effort of controlling my breathing, calming down. The anger slowly subsided and I was drained.

"She pushed me to it," I said weakly. "She finally pushed me to it."

"Pushed you to what? Violence?" He was incredulous. He didn't like violence, was always avoiding any rough stuff at school. Claimed he was too cool to be involved in boyish scuffles. It wasn't until years later that I realised he was just a big scared pansy. "How could you do that to your own daughter?" he asked, scolding me like I was a small child. "What do you think you were doing?" He folded his arms over his chest.

"My daughter..." I spat, "...is just getting a little too big for her boots." I raged. "My daughter thinks her mother is just there to hand out money and when she doesn't get it, she thinks it's okay to shout obscenities at me."

"So, then you think it's okay to grab her by the hair and threaten to cut it off?"

I suddenly felt ashamed of myself. I could feel my face burning with it.

His face told me he was waiting for a damned good explanation. "Answer me!" John snapped making me jump. I didn't like his tone. His eyes narrowed to slits as if he was trying to really see who I was. I roused myself out of my shame to answer.

"I suppose not," I sighed. "But I've had enough of the way she treats me. She's rude, she's nasty and I'm not going to keep putting up with it."

"When is she rude? When is she nasty? I've never seen her

be anything but civil to you,” he asked looking towards Alex who was standing beside the cooker, quietly sniffing and giving him teary-eyed looks. I knew she was putting it on.

“All the time, John. You know she is,” I appealed. He had to believe me. “I spoke to you about it before. She treats me like a skivvy and this house like a hotel to be abused and trashed. I’m sick of it.” It was my turn to fold my arms.

He turned to Alex: “That’s not true is it?”

“No, dad, of course it isn’t,” she cried. Great big tears welled and spilled from her eyes. “Honest. She’s the one that’s nasty, not me. She’s the one that’s always being horrible.”

“Liar,” I hissed.

“No, you’re the liar!” Her face twisted into a snarl. She wiped her eyes with the sleeves of her Prada cardigan and sobbed. “You’re the one that treats me like dirt.” She turned to her dad, all sweetness. “Dad, honest, it’s not me, it’s her. I think she must be going through the menopause or something cos she’s gone a bit loopy. She might have some mental problem, because she’s making all this up.”

He looked from her to me and then back to her.

“Okay, darling,” he said to her, doffing her chin affectionately. He opened his arms, took her in for a hug. “I’ll sort this out.” From the safe folds of his arms she gave me a triumphant look. I glowered at her. Bitch. He released her. “Here,” he said sticking his hands in his trouser pocket and pulling out a wad of tenners. He gave her five and ruffled her hair. “Off you go now, I need to speak to mum.” Joyously, she trotted away. We watched her go in silence before John rounded on me.

“So,” he began.

But he never got to finish. I was furious. I had never raised my voice to him before, but now I was bellowing.

“You’ll sort this out, will you?” I began. My whole body felt hot with the fury within. I could not control my temper. I felt strong. I was invincible.

He smiled benevolently at me. “Susan, look, you’re obviously experiencing some sort of women’s problems right now.” That was his excuse for everything, for any behaviour I displayed that he didn’t like or couldn’t understand. “Let’s book you into the doctor’s and get you sorted out.”

“I don’t need sorted out!” I yelled. “I’m only 35. The only women’s problems I’ve got are a bitch of a daughter and an idiot of a husband.”

“Now, now, let’s not get personal,” he said. “Let’s calm you down and we can talk about it.” He moved closer, his hands making placating downward motions.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I replied. “I don’t want to be near you at all. I’m sick of being a drudge to you two. I’m sick of my life, I’m sick of this house and I’m sick of you.” I yelled. I suddenly didn’t want to be anywhere near him. “Get out of the way. I want by,” I said roughly pushing past him. He stepped back in alarm.

“Where are you going?” he asked, eyes full of disbelief at my outburst.

“Out and I might not ever come back!” I snapped. I made for the stairs and started climbing. I was going for my shoes and coat upstairs. I was getting out of there. I needed some space between me and them.

“Where will you go?” His tone was mocking. The cold quietness of his voice was enough to stop me in my tracks. I turned to look at him. He was leaning against a wall, arms folded. “You’ve got no money, no job and no place to stay.”

Shit. He was right. Worse still, she was right. I did rely on

him for everything. Everything. While he was busy making a career for himself as a lawyer, I'd been content as a sow with staying at home to bring up his child. I had no skills, no career and no way of making money. While he was out building up his skills base, networking and making the contacts, I had stopped in the house thinking that everything would be okay forever, that John would always be there to provide. It never crossed my mind that there might be a time when I would grow tired of him and want to leave. But I couldn't do it right then, I didn't have the means to leave. I hadn't even had the savvy to stash away any emergency money for myself from the household budget. I had nothing. I couldn't believe I had gotten myself into this situation. I needed to think. I needed to get out of that house.

"I'm going to Martha's," I said quietly, turning about and making for the front door. I tried to keep calm as I walked passed him. I kept my head down, couldn't look at him. He'd won again. "I just need to get away from you," I whispered as I pulled our front door open. I skipped outside before he could answer, quickly negotiated my way over our gravel path in my old slippers and walked to my friend's house next door.

Chapter 2

Once Bitten and Twice Shy

I MARRIED John when I was 18 and he was three years older. We were school sweethearts; started going with each other when I was 13 and he 16, joined at the hip during break and lunch times, walked each other home. It makes me want to puke to think about it now, how I gushed over him, sighed over him. I was a naive teenager who had read too many romance novels and I thought he was my Prince Charming. I believed our fledgling relationship was going to be forever, thought I had found 'the one' and was going to live happily ever after in a fairytale house of my own. Cloud Cuckoo Land more like.

He was quite wonderful at the time, I suppose, with his trendy Nick Kamen hairdo and biker's jacket, his cool red electric guitar and French kissing. He was so hot, all the girls fancied him, but it was me he hooked up with. Me: the little mouse at the back of the class, the one that nobody looked at. I was so flattered that he had noticed me, so infatuated with him, so in love, that I couldn't see what a selfish, self-obsessed pig he was, even then.

I could choke my teenage self. I let him treat me like shite. That's the only way to describe it. He wasn't exactly bad to me in the beat-up-to-shut-her-up kind of way. It was more emo-

tional. Sneakier. He never phoned when he said he would. He didn't spend a lot of money taking me out and he bought me cuddly toys for every birthday, Christmas and anniversary and I hate cuddly toys. We went to see the films he wanted to see, the bands he liked, the clubs he loved. He was often disdainful, cold, distant, acted as if I was lucky to be with him, as if I should be grateful. And I let him treat me like that. Me. I did it to myself. I was so afraid he'd chuck me, I let him walk all over me. Jesus, I was such a doormat.

The infatuation didn't end at school. I even followed him to the same university; different course, but same campus. I was that daft about him, that blinkered. I'd have followed him to the ends of the Earth. He was almost leaving as I was starting. He was in his final year, studying law and I was doing English. I played my part well, the dutiful girlfriend, supporting him through his finals, forgoing social nights with classmates to help him cram. I didn't make friends in those first few months because John needed me to help him pass. Finally, finally, John sat his exams and was delighted to get a first class degree. It meant, he said, we could start a good life together, just the two of us. It meant, he said, I didn't have to continue with my course... not if I didn't want to. We could get married and he'd support us on his big lawyer's salary. I wasn't sure.

John was – is – very ambitious. It burns inside him. He's always been desperate to earn money, lots of money, and he never stopped talking about it. He wanted a good lifestyle, the flash car, the fancy holidays, the Full Monty. It was the only thing that mattered to him then and it's probably still the only thing that matters now. When he left university, he applied only to the best law firms in the city and got into the biggest one. We're on our way, he often assured me, we're on our way.

You would have thought I would have seen it then, recognised the obsession, the love of the green stuff, the drive for perfection, but I didn't. I thought he was just being romantic wanting to provide for me, take care of my every whim, my every need. Little did I know that when he proposed as he started his new job at Robson, Alexander and Smyth; it was to gain the respectability of a married, family man; it was to obtain a little wifey to cook and clean for him, to have his dinner ready for him when he got into from work, to play the 'hostess with the most-ess' when he invited the partners round for dinner.

My parents tried to talk me out of it, but not too hard. By then I had my marriage blinkers on, the ones that only allowed me to see the big white dress, the floaty veil, the wedding ring and being Mrs John Summers. I could have stayed at university, got my degree, but John said that now he was working and earning money, we could afford to live on his wages. Don't you want to start a family? He'd ask. Forget the education, you don't need one, he assured me, I'll provide everything you need. I just nodded dumbly. Of course he was right. How could I have been so selfish to want anything more, anything for myself?

I told my parents that this was what I truly wanted, that I was ditching the course, that I didn't want a career of my own. I wanted marriage and babies and all that came with it. I would be happy, I assured them. And I believed it. God, if I had the opportunity to go back in time, I would shoot my young naive self. I would take a big Colt Magnum and pop one right between her eyes. How fucking stupid was I to think that the fairytales sold to us by Hollywood, by Mills & Boon, would come true? Jesus, I was a sponge for all that crap. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

We were married in our local church. The reception was

held at the Hillhouse Hotel round the corner from my parents' house and our entire combined family - all 103 of them - was invited. In the end, only one hundred people turned up - his parents and brother refused to come as they felt I was beneath him - at the church to watch me make the biggest mistake of my life.

Then there was the wedding night. Oh, the feeling of shame as I finally stood naked before my new husband with nothing to cover my cowering body, unable to take my eyes off him as he discarded his suit and underwear, horrified as his dick rose to greet me. It was the most terrifying and stupid-looking thing I'd ever seen. He guided me to the bed, pushed me down, climbed on top of me. Then we did it on top of the covers. Shagged. A few minutes of thrusting, a nipping pain and that was it. I was finally a woman, apparently. A fully-fledged member of the adult world. Someone who had had sex and was all grown up now. The earth certainly did not move that night and neither did the bed. In fact, my wedding night was the first indication of things to come: a crap sex life and John's underwear lying all over the floor.

We moved into our own flat the very next day and began the laborious job of making a baby.

Sex with John was awful. His idea of lovemaking was slipping it in, wagging it about a bit, grunting and then collapsing in a sticky heap at my side. I tried not to do it too often with him, if I could possibly help it. It may have been a pleasure for him, but it certainly wasn't for me. He pestered me daily, so, within two months, I was surprised and scared to find myself in the early stages of pregnancy. I was 19.

It wasn't a joyous time for me. I viewed pregnancy as nothing more than morning sickness and cravings for cheese and

chocolate. I couldn't equate the fact that this growing belly of mine was actually housing a little person. I rued the day I had ever agreed to sacrifice my slim figure for the sake of this huge belly, piles and swollen ankles. I began to dread the thought of being a mother, of being trapped, stuck with it and stuck with John forever. Which, on thinking back, was probably the bastard's plan from the beginning; it was yet another way of controlling me.

I was five days past my due date and desperate to get the baby out. I had had enough of being pregnant and fat and uncomfortable and tired. Then, in the middle of ASDA as I was reaching for a carton of fresh milk, I felt the first pains of labour. Then, the following day, in the labour suite of our local maternity hospital, I welcomed a new person into my life and her name was Alexandra.

Alex was born at 3.07am on a wild and stormy Halloween night in 1988. It was a difficult birth. She took some time to come out, holding off to make her grand entrance as would be the norm. I can remember every agonising hour of her long, never ending birth, but, when I held her in my arms, when I kissed her soft little head, I felt nothing but love for this tufty-haired little angel I'd produced and the torture of the birth was forgotten.

John, who was at the birth filming every moment on his new and expensive video recorder, was over the moon. Here was a youngster to carry on his genes who would become a lawyer like her daddy and take over the world. He had high hopes for her. I had high hopes for her. Pity she turned out to be such a little bitch.

And now here I was, storming out of the house because of her, stomping round to my best friends' house in nothing but

a thin t-shirt, tatty jeans and threadbare slippers. What was worse, it had started to rain, but I was so angry I barely felt the cold of the raindrops as they hit my face.

I shoved open Martha's garden gate, marched up her garden path and pounded on her door.

Martha and I had been friends since nursery. We had lost touch after leaving High School, so it came as a bit of a shock to she was our next-door neighbour when we'd moved into the house ten years before. She provided me with a much-needed lifeline. She was a rock in the storm that was my marriage. She was always there to listen to my worries about Alex and my moans about John. Thank God for Martha.

She was sitting in her kitchen sipping coffee when I knocked on her back door. I could see her ample shape through the frosted glass panel. She waved for me to come in.

"Morning," she said in a what-are-you-doing-here voice. She looked stunned to see me. I never visited her at that time on a Sunday morning, ever.

"Any chance of a cup of tea?" I asked trying to sound casual. I plonked myself down next to her at the table.

"Of course," she replied getting up to make me one. She filled the kettle and switched it on. "What's wrong? You look shattered. Has something happened?"

I sighed. "You could say that. I've had another argument with Alex."

"Oh, she'll get over it. Don't you worry about it. You'll soon be speaking to her again," she assured me.

"That's the point," I said and burst into tears. "I don't want to speak to her again. I don't want to speak to either of them," I sobbed. "I can't stand them." Tears splashed down on to my old cardigan. "They gang up on me. She just bats her eyelashes

at him and he melts. He takes her side every time. She's got him wrapped around her little finger. I mean, that's really unhealthy right? I'm his wife, he's supposed to side with me! I hate them both. Imagine that? I hate my husband and I hate my daughter! What kind of a wife and mother am I?" I fumbled in my jeans' pocket for a paper hanky, found a crumpled ball of toilet paper and used it to blow my nose.

"Normal?" Martha offered. She dunked a teabag in my cup. "Have you tried talking to him?"

I nodded. "And," I continued. "I'm fed up being the one who has to do all the housework. The pair of them just leave everything at their arses. They don't even think about picking up wet towels and dirty cups. When I complain, they just tell me it's my job as I'm a housewife and, check this, I should be glad of having the work to do!"

She nodded, understanding.

I added: "I hate my life. I'm so fed up with it. I feel so stuck. What am I going to do?" I wailed. The tears came thick and fast.

Martha handed me my cup of tea and gave me a quick hug before returning to her seat. She sipped quietly on her coffee and waited for me to compose myself before speaking again.

"What do you want to do?" she asked quietly.

"Leave," I replied miserably. Tears bubbled up again. "But I can't even do that because I don't have any money, I don't have any skills and I can't get a job. I'm a nobody, a nothing." I turned my teary face to her. "What am I going to do Martha?" I said again.

She leant over and took my hand. "You'll be fine," she said reassuringly. "You just have to stick with it a little while longer. If you're really serious about leaving, why not just go?"

I shook my head. "I can't, not without money."

"Then," she advised. "The first thing you need to do is get some money, get a job. If I were you, at the very least, I'd be thinking about looking for some part-time work to get you back into the swing of things. Have you thought about what you might like to do?"

I had no idea. My mind was completely blank. All I was aware of was the feel of the hot tears streaming down my cheeks, snot threatening to erupt from my nose and a hot cup of tea that was burning a hole in my hand. I put the cup down and dove into a pocket of my jeans for that hanky. I wiped my eyes and blew my nose. I shrugged.

"Any suggestions?" I asked. "John wouldn't like me going out to work. He wants me where he can control me."

"Well don't tell him. How would he ever know? He's out all day 'til God knows when, isn't he?" she said. I nodded. "Then he'll not know."

"You know you can just move in here, if you want. Jack won't mind. He likes you," she said putting her hand on mine.

I shook my head. "No," I said, "I want to stop relying on other people and do something for myself. There must be something I can do, right?"

She nodded enthusiastically.

"Right then," I said suddenly full of determination.

"Let me get the local paper," she said with a smile. "I'm sure it'll have jobs and things in it. You never know, your perfect job might be in there!" She got up and waddled into the quiet interior of her house. I say waddled because that's the only way you can describe the way Martha walked. She wasn't obese, but she was plump and permanently on a diet. This week, she was trying out Weight Watchers. Martha had always been on

the tubby side, even as a four-year-old at nursery, but since marrying and having her two boys, the weight had just piled on. She didn't seem to mind that much though. She was always telling me her husband, Jack, loved her the way she was, extra weight and all, so why should she? She was only dieting for health reasons, she assured me. I envied her. John was always saying I needed to lose some weight, lose the chubbiness of my belly yet I was still the same size I had been at school. I sipped my tea thoughtfully. He never ever complimented me on how I looked. Not once.

Martha returned to the kitchen clutching the paper in one hand.

"Where are my manners?" she gasped. "Would you like a biscuit?"

I nodded.

"I've got these new biscuits," she said excitedly. "Special low-fat ones. They are really nice." She slung the bread bin open and fished out half a packet of 95% fat free chocolate biscuits, the open wrapper curled round her hand as she slapped them down on the table in front of me. "Help yourself."

She laid the newspaper out on the table. "Now let's have a look." Flick, flick. "Pass us a couple of biscuits will you?"

"I thought you were on a diet?"

She looked all wide-eyed and innocent. "I can have these," she said. "They're practically fat free. Look! It says 95% fat free! I'm allowed at least two, maybe even three." Grabbing the packet, she greedily flipped a biscuit out on to her hand.

"And 5% fat," I reminded her.

She shrugged and took a large bite, the crumbs fell on to the pages of the open newspaper. She casually flicked them off and studied the page intently.

“Oh look,” she said. “Graham’s are having a sale. Might go down and have a look. Fancy coming with me?” She looked at me then must have remembered the real purpose of the search. “Sorry.” She returned to the pages, a determined look set in her face.

As Martha looked through the newspaper, I felt a sense of dread creeping over my body. Who was I kidding? Who would take on someone like me whose only job had been to be a wife and mother? I had never worked. I had just cooked and cleaned and wiped up after my darling husband and delightful daughter all my life. I wondered briefly if maybe I should take up cleaning for a living. I was good at it, I knew that. It was about the only thing I was good at.

“Have you got any typing skills?” said Martha.

“Why?”

“Well, have you?”

“No.”

“Oh.” She turned a page. Scanned the ads. “Oh, here’s one that’s right up your street.”

“What?” I was interested.

“Small business looking for part-time receptionist,” she read. “Oh, no. It’s not for you.”

“What? Let me see. Why not?” I craned to get a look at the advert. She covered the ad with her hand, not wanting me to see, then must have thought better of it.

She sighed, rolled her eyes. “It’s a sauna,” she said showing me the ad. It was for a seedy little place in the town centre. “Don’t think that’s very you.” She smiled. “Can’t see you as a madam.” I shook my head in agreement.

Martha went on turning pages reading out vacancies, but I was either under-qualified or the job wasn’t up to much. I

began to despair. She must have seen my face.

“Cheer up,” she said, patting my hand affectionately. “We’ll get you something.” She folded the paper and threw it on the table. “This paper’s rubbish anyway. We’ll get one of the nationals. I think their jobs pages are in on a Friday. We’ll get a paper then. No, hold on.” A pause. Her hand went to her chin as she thought. She frowned. “I think we might just still have last week’s. I’ll just have a quick look.” She got up quickly and trotted to her overflowing kitchen bin sulking in a corner near the back door. Pulling off the lid, she dove into the rank smelling rubbish inside.

“Martha, you don’t have to go through your bin, I’ll get the paper on Friday,” I assured her. “I can wait ‘til then.”

“No, no, it’s near the top. I’m sure of it. I only threw it in yesterday.” Her dark head was bent over the yawning mouth of the bin. She dug in, her head was almost touching the unctuous peak of the rubbish. It made me feel nauseous to watch.

“Once I find the paper, we’ll have a look at the jobs’ section. They’ve always got a big jobs’ section in that one. It’ll be fine. There are lots of jobs for people like you out there. I’m sure we’ll find one.”

“Martha, seriously, you don’t have to go through the bin.”

“No trouble,” she said, her voice muffled by plastic. Shrugging, I picked up the discarded newspaper on the table and began to absently turn the pages. It was a local weekly newspaper full of the latest court news, motoring offences and gardening pages. Flick, flick. Wedding pics, bonny baby competition, the local campaign to save old trees. Flick, flick, flick. Very little grabbed my attention as I scanned the pages looking for something - anything - that could lead me to a job, give me a bit of hope. I passed the centre pages and was almost on the job

vacancies again when a small ad caught my eye:

Wanted:

Female Vocalist for 80s Tribute Band.

Must be able to sing.

If you've got the moves and you've got what it takes, call
Marti on....

"Martha look at this!" I said, waving the paper in the air.

"Where? What?" She looked up from the bin, a soggy paper bag full of potato peelings leaked out of one hand. She dropped it in disgust and brushed the dirt from her hands. I held the newspaper up with both hands and nodded to the ad.

"There!"

She squinted over. "I can't make that out from here. Getting old, think I need glasses. Hold on a minute." She read, mouthing the words silently as she went.

"Yeah? And?" She looked at me, confused. Hadn't she read the ad? My finger was right on it.

"It's exactly what I need," I said, suddenly feeling very brave. "I'm definitely going to go for it. It sounds like fun."

"Eh? You're what?" She looked at the ad again. "Female vocalist wanted..." She murmured. "Are you sure?"

"I'm going to audition." "It says in the small print you have to be able to sing," she said bursting my bubble.

"I can sing."

"You can't. You're like a cat in heat. Wailing and screeching. You're rubbish."

"Martha, I was the lead in the school choir. Don't you remember? And who was Calamity Jane in the school musical?" My hands were on my hips. "Eh?"

She grinned: "That's right!" Realisation dawned. "How could anyone forget that..."

"It's not me that can't sing," I said. "If I remember rightly it was you that Mr Watters said sounded like a cat in heat." Mr Watters had been our school music teacher, a creepy little man who was always trying to entice girls into his cupboard. Eugh.

"Eugh, I hated that man! Don't remind me," she giggled. "Well," she said. "If that's what you want to do, then go for it."

"You think it's daft, don't you?"

"No, I think it's great. You go for it."

"I will," I said. "I most definitely will." My life suddenly looked a bit brighter. I was going to do something for me for a change.

And I did. I phoned Marti right there and then. He was setting up a Wham! tribute band called Wham! Fantastic needed a 'Shirley' to go with their 'Pepsi', who was a girl called Louise. The George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley parts were to be played by Marti and his best friend, Antony. They were auditioning in the town hall on Saturday night.

"Bring your own backing CD," Marti instructed me. "And do you have blonde hair? Shirley had blond hair."

"Oh yes, of course..." I lied touching my light brown hair. I made a mental note to pop down to the chemist to pick up a box of Nice & Easy. I may not be blonde now, I told myself, but I soon will be.

"Okay, see you then." He rang off.

I didn't know what I was doing. I didn't know if it was the right thing for me but for the first time in years, I suddenly felt excited, alive. I was doing something different, something secret. I was going to audition for a part and go on stage and wow people. Being a performer was a secret dream I'd buried

years ago. My early marriage and the birth of my daughter 16 years ago had put the kybosh on that. What am I saying? If I had had any sort of gumption when I was younger; if I had wanted it badly enough; if I hadn't listened to everyone else telling me I couldn't do it; hadn't listened to my own inner demon telling me I wasn't good enough; I would have gone for it. Been a somebody. I would have tried to have been an actor or a singer. Maybe earn lots of money, be famous. Who knows? I didn't really think about what I was doing. All I could see was the promise of something different, something interesting happening in my boring little house-wifey life. I persuaded Martha to search the internet for Wham! backing tracks and burn them onto a CD. I spent the next few days secretly practising.

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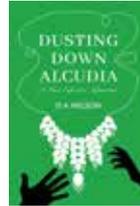
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