

Chapter 1

"You shouldn't keep getting at me, dad. In fact, you ought to be grateful!" Tina protested, with a pout of her brightly painted mouth.

James almost choked over his toast. "Grateful?" he gasped. "How on earth do you work that out?"

"At least I'm not taking drugs and stuff. And you're always saying I should take an interest in things ..."

"Ye gods!" An outraged James turned to George for support. "The girl wants me to be grateful to her for making my life hell!" he spluttered. "Can you believe that?"

George smiled but decided to say nothing. It was never a good idea to get involved in James and Tina's arguments, especially over breakfast.

"I mean - I'm chief constable and I'm supposed to be *grateful* for having an anarchist daughter," James continued, determined to involve George. "I suppose I should be even more grateful she hasn't tried to blow up the police station or set fire to the magistrates' court."

"Oh, that's a bit of an exaggeration," George said without thinking, then regretted opening her mouth when Tina uttered a hoot of outrage.

"What do you mean, a *bit* of an exaggeration?" she protested, while James glared at George for her disloyalty. "It's a *total* exaggeration! Anyone would think I was a terrorist the way you two go on, just because I care about the state of the planet...!"

"Yes, all right, all right," muttered James, turning away from George. "You've made your point ... Oh, for God's sake, you *dirty* little madam!" he roared, as Tina raised the milk carton to her lips and began drinking from it. "We might still want to use that for our coffee!"

"I'm taking a political stand," Tina said, putting down the carton and wiping her dripping mouth. "If we're going to have all this packaging in the house, then we should make full use of it and stop using cups and plates from now on."

"What are you going to do then? Eat off the floor?" asked James derisively.

"No. From tomorrow I'm going to eat my cereal straight out of the packet..."

"And pour the milk into the packet too? I think not, child; it's my cereal as well. You can buy your own if you want to go making a mess of it like that..."

"Oh yes! Buy more packaging and add to the pile of rubbish already covering the earth. Don't you *care*, dad? Don't you realise there's already a patch of waste floating in the Pacific Ocean, roughly twice the size of America and if we don't..."

"Yes, yes, all right," James interrupted, with a dismissive wave of his toast. "Let's just drop the Rainbow Warrior stuff over breakfast, shall we? And *put that phone away* while we're at the table. Show some manners. You can ring your friends later...!"

"I'm not ringing my friends. I'm taking photographs of all this packaging, as evidence of the destruction this house is causing to the environment," Tina told him, serenely.

"Actually, seeing that phone reminds me," James said, widening the argument. "How's your school work coming along?"

"Oh, not that again..."

"Yes, that again. You've been back two weeks and I haven't seen you so much as pick up a pen, or open a book. You're too busy playing on that damned phone, for one thing..."

"How do you know what I do in the evenings?" Tina demanded. "You're never here. Tell him George! Tell him I'm always working really hard..."

"Don't bring George into this," James snapped, after a sidelong, warning look at his wife. "Actually, now I think of it, where's your school bag? I haven't set eyes on it since last May."

"My what?"

"*School ... bag*," James repeated, with sarcastic emphasis. "You know – that thing you use to carry around books and pens – does that sound familiar? They're the old fashioned things you use when you want to do some school work, if you can remember what work means."

"My bag's at school, in my locker," squeaked Tina indignantly.

"What good is it there?"

"Well, it won't get damaged there, will it?"

James choked again. "For God's sake child, it's not a Ming vase!" His gaze flitted impatiently round the kitchen. "I mean, I know it's a bit chaotic in this house at the moment, but your bag's in no actual danger of being lost or destroyed here, as far as I know."

A nervous chuckle from George earned her indignant glares from both James and Tina.

"Basically, you're bringing no work home and not taking any to school with you," James continued, pursuing his advantage, "and please don't tell me that the school haven't given you any homework yet! That won't wash any more, not after two weeks."

Tina's eyes shifted vaguely. "All my work's on computer."

"Oh very convenient!" James could hardly conceal a snort of satisfaction. "I suppose I'm just being old fashioned, expecting you to work with pen and paper like the rest of society...!"

"Yes, you are!" Tina retorted. "We don't use pens and paper any more. It's all adding to the rubbish covering the planet... that's what I'm talking about..."

"Oh, my God..." James groaned. "Don't start on that again!"

"As it happens, this packaging protest is part of my homework project," Tina persisted. "In fact, we've been told by the teacher that we *mustn't* use pen and paper for it, because that will help save the planet."

"Help me here George!" James almost begged. "Tell me, does Tina actually do any work in the evenings at all? I can see she doesn't help with the housework ..."

"Housework's not down to me!" squawked Tina. "Anyway, I do my own clothes washing – *and* keep my room tidy, like you told me to..."

"...so I'm assuming she spends all evening painting her face and poking at that ridiculous phone she insisted I buy her," James continued regardless. "The phone that I had to buy *her* for my *own* wedding present," he added, with another glare at his daughter.

"Oh, don't ask her," Tina snapped, without giving George a chance to speak. "She wouldn't have a clue what my homework's about. As it happens, I do use my phone a lot but it's all part of the research I have to do for my homework. No, it's true," she added, as James screwed up his face in exasperation. "And I've been busy lately. Look." She held up a finger with a piece of sticking plaster on the tip. "I've been trying to tell you, but you never listen to me. I've been hurt."

James gazed at her plastered finger sourly. "I suppose you're going to tell me you've worn that finger out texting your friends. You poor thing!"

"No, it was caused by too much packaging. I've been trying to tell you it's dangerous to human beings as well as the planet and what's happened to my finger is the evidence..."

"Oh, God." James shook his head in despair and rose from the table. "Look Tina, I haven't got time for this nonsense..."

"Oh yes, run away when you start to lose the argument! You don't seem to care that your own daughter got badly cut, trying to get a new dongle out of its packaging..."

"A new *what?*" spluttered James, almost falling back into his chair.

"Well, sometimes my friends call them dongles, just for a laugh...you know..."

"No, I don't know. What the hell's a *dongle?*" James gasped, turning with bewilderment to George.

"I think she means one of those USB pen drives, you know...." George suggested tentatively.

"Oh, I see. Why didn't she say so?" he demanded, as if George was to blame for the confusion. He turned back irritably to Tina. "Why did you need one of those – those drives, anyway?"

"I was going to save my homework on it but I cut my finger. Doesn't that mean anything to you, dad? Don't you even *care* that I got hurt trying to do my homework?"

"Oh, my God." James was starting to look haggard, as he often did when he got involved in arguments with Tina. "Why in God's name did I start all this...when will I learn...?"

"My injury was caused by unnecessary packaging," Tina continued ruthlessly. "There was this really thick plastic shell round the dongle thing. It's ridiculous. I couldn't get it open. Imagine if I was an old person with arthritic fingers. How do they manage? I had to use a Stanley knife to open it, in the end. The knife slipped and I cut my finger..."

"*Eh?* What the *hell* were you doing with my Stanley knife?" James thundered. He turned accusingly to George. "Did you let Tina use my Stanley knife, after everything I said? You know perfectly well I keep my tools hidden away!"

"You leave her alone, you big bully. I never touched your stupid tools. I bought my own Stanley knife."

"You what? Who sold it to you?" James roared. "Which shop did you buy it from?"

"I'm not telling you. Anyway, it's not illegal for me to buy a knife, is it?"

"It could be. Where's that knife now? Is it in the house?"

"In my school bag."

"In your... Oh my *God*, Tina! If you were to get stopped and searched in the street and you were found carrying that – that – *weapon* in your bag, then what...!"

"They're not going to find it, are they? I keep my bag at school, so that's all right. Nothing to worry about."

"Ye Gods! How *does* that girl's mind work?" groaned James, picking up his mug of coffee and, with a despairing shake of the head, taking a comforting gulp.

"Anyway, that made me decide to start my big anti packaging campaign," Tina continued, "I'm going to be an activist and bring all this to public attention, involve the press and media and all that..."

James choked on his coffee and spewed a generous mouthful across the table "Campaign?" he yelled, coughing. "What blasted campaign?"

"Didn't I tell you?" asked Tina innocently. "My plan is to fill the stores up with their own rubbish, dump it on them, as a form of direct action..."

"WHAT?!" James howled.

"Why not? They forced it on us, they can have it back. Me and some of my friends are going to turn up at the supermarkets with bin bags full of plastic, cardboard and paper - and just empty them out in the stores, making a real mess..."

"Oh no you're *not*!!"

"We are! I'm calling it a 'dump and run'. Should get a lot of publicity, especially when I tell the Brougham Post. Yes - I know you're the Chief Constable, dad," she added, as a wild-eyed James tried hard to interrupt her, "but I've still got a right to make my protest and I'm going to and you can't stop me because we're not living in a police state. This is a democracy, freedom of speech and all that. I'm exercising my right to freedom of speech."

When Tina had finished talking, words seemed to fail James and his anguished face turned an alarming shade of pink. George was afraid he might burst into tears or start head-butting the table, but instead he dropped his head into his hands, with an almost explosive sigh.

"Where did I go wrong with you, Tina?" he moaned at last, sounding like a man on his deathbed. "What terrible thing did I do to deserve this? This is worse than criminal damage. This - this really *is* like terrorism, Tina! Oh, what am I going to do with you...?"

"Oh, it's hardly terrorism, James," George felt bound to point out. "It's only a civic protest."

"That's right George, you tell him!" an encouraged Tina cried, clapping her hands with approval. "Are you going to join in my protest too?"

"George, *please*, you aren't helping!" James swung round on her, his flushed face tense with fury. "I *really* could do with a bit of support," added, in a fierce whisper, "instead of being undermined every time you open your mouth!"

"What?"

"Perhaps if you spent just a *little* more time keeping the house clean and tidy, instead of encouraging that girl's insane ideas...!"

"Leave her alone, you big bully!" Tina hooted, while George sat, silently aghast at this direct attack on her housekeeping. "You can't tell George what to do. She's not your slave. And I'm going to carry on with my anti packaging campaign, whatever you say!"

"Oh no you're not. This stops right now. Not another word about it." James, his composure now restored, spoke with calm authority as he rose to his feet and started pulling on his tunic jacket. "This is my house and you'll abide by my rules. You've obviously got far too much free time if you can dream up criminal campaigns like this. So unless I see you using that school bag of yours for its proper purpose and doing some real work, I'm going to take you out of that school, I'm going to stop your pocket money and you can start earning your living and saving up for a place of your own. And the same applies if you even mention this – this *campaign* again. Have you got that?" He glanced reproachfully at George before swilling down the rest of his coffee with a final gulp. "Right. Now, you want a lift to school, you'd better be ready to leave now. No? I thought not. Well, in that case, you can make your own way. I'll be back late again tonight," he added, turning hastily to George and giving her a rushed, almost impatient kiss. "I've got another area meeting. Don't bother cooking dinner for me."

"But you hardly ever come back for dinner," George started to object, but James had dashed out of the door without another word or glance, leaving George with that lonely, deflated feeling she had often experienced when James left for work in the mornings. She knew it would be the last she saw of him until bed time.

"Look at that!" Tina howled. "He's just gone off and left me, without a lift. He doesn't care if I get run over or attacked on the way to school, or anything! He just doesn't *care*!"

"I'll run you into school," George promised her wearily. "Don't worry."

"Oh thanks. That's really good of you, George. Actually, come to think of it, I don't really need a lift. I can ring Mani and see if her dad will take me in."

"I see. You're ashamed of being seen in my car."

"Oh, it's not that. It's a very nice car," Tina said, an involuntary grimace flickering across her face. "But I just don't want to bother you, that's all. You've done enough for me already, sticking up for me with dad and all that, and I do appreciate it, you know."

This answer surprised and encouraged George. It was the first time the girl had acknowledged the almost superhuman efforts she was making to stay friends with her. Perhaps everything was working out well after all, in spite of James's increasing grumpiness.

"Look I'm sorry Tina, I know I should do more work round the house," she blurted out, still smarting from James' criticism. "I know this kitchen's a mess. It's just that I'm not used to housework and I'm a bit involved in my art at the moment..."

"Oh don't worry about that. The house is fine," Tina assured her. "Don't listen to Dad. He's a sexist pig. Let him put on a pinny and do his own housework if he's that keen on it. You do a lot more for me than Dad does."

"Oh, thank you Tina," replied George, feeling quite bucked.

"And actually, I want you to do something else for me," Tina added, and George felt deflated again. She should have known better. Tina was a teenager and was only grateful when she wanted something. "It's much more important than silly housework. You're going off to your Crone Club meeting this morning, aren't you?"

"Yes." George felt a sudden warm flutter in her stomach at the thought of seeing her friends and visiting Bambi's beautiful house again. "It's our first meeting for six weeks, since before I married your dad. We'll have lots of catching up to do. I'm sure Mary's done lots of charity work and Alison's written her book by now. Mind you, I think Bambi said Alison's still away on holiday..."

"And what about the twins?" asked Tina, with a smile.

"Ah yes, the twins. They'll be there." George's exhilaration faded a little at the thought of the twins. She hoped they wouldn't ask too many questions about her sex life. "I'll pass on your regards to everyone," she promised hastily. "I'm sure they'll want to hear how you've been doing."

"Well, I was hoping you could tell them about my packaging campaign, get them on my side, perhaps get them to help out," Tina suggested. "You see, it's very important to me, even if dad thinks I'm being a criminal. And I'm sure your friends will agree with me, after all, they're the right sort of age for this sort of thing, aren't they?"

"The right sort of age for being criminals, you mean?"

"No. I mean, you always said your generation were worried about saving the planet and all that. And I helped you all before, didn't I – when we got that horrible old people's home closed down. So I was wondering, can you get the others involved in my 'dump and run'? I can't do anything about it myself, thanks to dad. In fact, he'd probably throw me out of the house if I even start talking about it..."

"Look, your dad won't really take you away from school, I won't let him." James's warning had disturbed George almost as much as his jibe about her housekeeping. It sounded horribly reminiscent of Cass's tyrannical father, forty years ago, who had threatened to throw his daughter out of the house if she didn't marry the man he had chosen for her. Why were men – even the best of them – such despots much of the time?

"I'll tell the other crones about your idea," George promised, determined to support Tina. "I'm sure they'll be very keen on it." She looked up at the kitchen clock. It was nearly nine o'clock; still more than an hour before the meeting.

"Look, talking of cars, are you sure you don't want a lift?" she asked, suddenly aware that Tina should be at school and that driving her there would fill the time nicely. "You're going to be late and I don't want your dad on my case about that too."

"Oh, there's no hurry," Tina assured her, taking another leisurely sip of coffee. "I've got a free period first thing. Anyway, I said I didn't want to put you to any trouble George, not when you're already doing so much for me. I really appreciate it."

"Oh, it's not that much trouble," replied George with a complacent smile. She'd now had three compliments from Tina in one morning. She was doing well! "In fact, it's a pleasure, sharing your idea with the crones," she added indulgently. "And I'll try and do a bit of tidying up today, when I get back..."

"Look, I told you, the house is fine," Tina assured her, then she appeared to hesitate. "George darling, as you've mentioned school, there's one more thing. I wonder if you could do me just one more big, big favour?"

George sighed. "Go on, what is it now?"

"I was going to mention it to dad this morning, but he just bit my head off as usual. The thing is, you see, it's Parents' Evening tonight."

"Parents' Evening? The term's only just started."

"It's for the new Year 12s - to make sure we've all settled into our new courses. And I was wondering, could you go to it?"

"You want me to go to the *Parents Evening*? But I'm not your parent. I'm not even your guardian."

"Dad's too busy - he's already said he'll be back late. He couldn't go if he wanted. Anyway, it's not really an important meeting. You just go and get told about the new course and pick up some paperwork and boring stuff like that and then tell me about it afterwards."

"What do you mean, tell you about it afterwards? Won't you be there?"

Tina looked a little shifty. "I can't. I've got to be somewhere else..."

"Tina," began George, in a warning voice.

"It's true!" Tina insisted. "I'm not supposed to be at the Parent's Evening. None of my friends will be there. Anyway, it'll be a short visit. You'll only be seeing my form tutor. He's also my English teacher. I've booked you a slot."

"A slot?"

"Just five minutes, at a quarter to four."

"A quarter to *four*?" repeated George, her bafflement increasing. "Aren't you still in lessons at that time?"

"Of course not," Tina replied, with equal puzzlement. "But anyway, you can see now why dad couldn't go. He's always working at that time. But five minutes is all it will take. There'll be no hanging around, as long as you're not late for the appointment. It'll be a quick chat, you take all the bump with you and that's it."

"Hmm. Maybe..."

George hesitated. It was obvious that Parents' Evenings had become more informal since the long-winded, almost ceremonial affairs of her school days, just as school uniform had been abolished, to judge from the stylish, casual clothes that Tina wore every day. George decided there was no harm in visiting Tina's school; it sounded quite a friendly, relaxed sort of place. Besides, it was only a five minute appointment and nothing could go seriously wrong in five minutes.

"All right, I'll go," George agreed at last. "But if it's just a matter of collecting bump, I don't know why they can't just give it to you during school hours."

"Oh, they're afraid we students might lose it, you see. So they give it to the parents to look after. Thanks George," said Tina, blowing her a kiss and rushing into the hallway to grab her coat. "You're a real pal. Don't forget will you? Quarter to four at Brougham High. And don't be late."

Once Tina had left, George stared round the untidy kitchen, with its scattered half-empty carrier bags, bits of food strewn over work surfaces and floor, heaps of unsorted clothes and the empty wine bottles accumulating next to the overflowing waste bin. James was right; it was a dreadful mess and she ought to make more effort to keep it clean. She sighed, picked up a couple of the breakfast dishes from the table and took them to the dishwasher. On opening it, she noticed, with another sigh, that the machine was still full of clean items from the previous cycle. Oh bother; she didn't want to empty it now; she would do it after she got back from Bambi's house. She carried the dirty dishes and coffee mugs to the sink, which, to her dismay, was still full of the dirty pans, plates and cutlery from the last meal. She piled the dishes on top of them, then added the other breakfast items, all of which started to make quite a high stack in the small sink. Satisfied with her clearing up efforts, she decided to have one more coffee.

What time should she leave for the Crone Club meeting? She glanced at the kitchen clock again as she turned on the kettle. Still barely quarter past nine. People usually started gathering at Bambi's at around ten thirty. Of course, she could always turn up early. That was a nice idea. Bambi wouldn't mind and Cass would love to see her. It was the sort of companionship she had been missing all these weeks.

It would take less than twenty minutes to get to Bambi's house, so she had time to enjoy her coffee in peace. She looked down with satisfaction at her faded blue jeans, which always went well with the green kaftan style top she was wearing and the purple scarf she planned to put on. These were the sort of clothes she liked to wear and she saw no reason to change into anything different. She didn't want her old friends thinking she'd gone all snobbish on them, just because she'd married a local police top brass. Nodding to herself with approval, she started pouring hot water into her cup, when her wandering thoughts were interrupted by a ring at the front door.

Assuming it must be Tina, George made her way down the hallway, muttering under her breath, wondering what it was the silly girl had forgotten this time. She yanked the door open, a sarcastic reproach on her lips, when, instead of a petulant Tina, she saw a well dressed, smartly made-up woman beaming at her on the doorstep. The beam faded slightly at the sight of George in her jeans and kaftan top.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," the woman said, with gruff good humour. "You haven't had time to dress properly, my dear. Oh, I *am* an oaf. I'll come back later."

"Oh no, no, that's all right," George assured her. "I'm going out very soon. Can I help you?"

"Oh well, actually, I'm hoping we can help each other, Mrs. Hartley," the woman replied, the beam returning to her face. "It *is* Mrs. Hartley, isn't it?" she added, doubt clouding her face, as if suspecting that the casually dressed George was the house keeper.

"Oh no, it's ... I - I mean..." George did a mental double-take, before remembering her new married name. "Yes, that's me," she said at last. "I'm - I'm Mrs. Hartley ..."

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, my dear. I'm Mrs. Risley," the woman said, holding out a hand, which George took rather uncertainly. "I'm from number four. I thought I'd give you a chance to settle in before coming round to welcome you to Charnwood Green."

"Oh, thank you." George was about to ask her in, when she realised that that the woman was already wiping her feet on the doormat.

"As I said, I thought I'd give you a week or two to settle in," Mrs. Risley said, as she started to remove her shoes, "but I'm sure by now you're grateful for a bit of girly company and the chance to escape the housework. We have a bit of fun sometimes, don't we?" she added roguishly, taking a pair of slippers from a large Luis Vuitton handbag, "especially when hubby's not around."

"Oh, please, you don't have to do that." George was afraid that the slippers meant the visitor intended to make a long stay and she was anxious to get to her crone meeting. Apart from that, she was deeply embarrassed about the messy state the house was in. She hadn't been expecting visitors and really didn't want any.

"Oh, you don't have to be polite," Mrs. Risley assured her, easing the slippers onto her feet. "Poor Helen was the same. She always begged me not to bother taking off my shoes, but I could tell she was always glad that I did. Dear Helen was so house-proud, even when she became ill. Helen was James's first husband," she added, as if George wasn't expected to know.

"Yes, yes I know about Helen. And by the way, it's George."

"George? Oh I see *your* name's George. Oh well, in that case, call me Christine," she said, putting her shoes into her handbag. "No need to be too formal. Dear Helen and I were old friends."

She stood and stared at George, a smile of confident expectation on her face. George felt her will-power wilting under the force of the woman's self-assurance. She knew she would have no choice but to invite her through. Her mind worked rapidly; she could hardly escort the woman into the dining room, or one of the living rooms. They were the untidiest, most neglected rooms in the house and still littered with boxes of unsorted junk from her parents' house. At least the kitchen was usable, if rather messy.

"Well look, come into the kitchen for a bit," George muttered, wishing she'd had a chance to do a bit of cleaning. "I'm afraid the place is in a bit of a muddle," she explained timidly, as she turned and led the way. "I've been rather busy - unpacking and all that. You know how it is, in a new house." When Christine didn't answer, George turned round and noticed the woman was walking slowly and staring down with wonder at the fluff speckled hall carpet, which hadn't been vacuumed for a fortnight.

"I'm afraid the vacuum cleaner's broken," George added hastily, then noticed that the stale smell of the kitchen bin was already evident, even though they were still half way down the hall. She didn't dare look at Christine's face as they entered the acrid squalor of the kitchen itself. George rushed to the dishwasher with a cheerful shout to distract her guest's attention:

"Right! I've got clean mugs in here!" She yanked the door open. "What can I get you Christine? Tea? Coffee?"

"Eh? Oh, just a cup of tea please dear," Christine said, staring in bewilderment around the chaotic, dingy kitchen. Inevitably her gaze fixed on the wine bottles, then the pile of unwashed crockery rising like a bizarre modern sculpture out of the sink. In some mortification, George snatched a mug out of the dishwasher and slammed the door shut with nervous force. The shock upset the pile at the sink and several dishes and plates cascaded onto the floor with a tremendous crash.

"Sorry, sorry," George gasped, as Christine gave a squeal of shock. "Never mind - I'll sort that out later." She almost pushed a startled Christine towards the kitchen table, grateful that it was at least clear of breakfast clutter. "Please sit down. Would you like sugar in your tea - and milk?"

"Er - just milk, thank you," Christine said feebly, placing her expensive handbag, after some hesitation, onto a clean part of the floor. She examined the stool with detailed care before sitting on it rather gingerly.

"The kettle's just boiled," George assured her, putting a tea bag into a large mug and pouring hot water over it. She took the mug over to Christine, and then noticed that the kitchen table was still stained and puddled with the coffee, sugar and cereal remains of breakfast. With a muttered apology, George grabbed a grubby tea towel from a nearby rail with her spare hand and wiped it savagely round the table top, scattering the sugar and cereals all over the floor.

"That's better, isn't it?" she asked, replacing the now filthy tea towel on the rail and then putting the mug of tea down in front of Christine, who stared down in some misgiving at the floating tea bag.

"Oh, spoon!" George exclaimed. "Sorry!" She dashed over to the dishwasher again and yanked out a tea spoon. "You said that we might be able to do something for each other," she said, handing Christine the spoon, wishing that the woman would just drink her tea and leave. She didn't predict a close friendship developing out of this visit, somehow.

"Yes, that's right. As I was saying, when I came in," Christine said, trying to recover her earlier confidence, while toying anxiously with the tea bag, "I always like to be the first to welcome new housewives to our little neighbourhood and give them a chance to get out; maybe come to our Bridge mornings, or do the occasional round of golf – something to escape the burden of endless housework..." She stared round at the messy kitchen again, then looked anxiously at the steaming tea bag, balanced precariously on her spoon. "Where's your waste bin, dear?" she asked, almost pathetically.

"Don't worry about that. I haven't got round to putting a new bag in it yet," George told her, determined not to draw Christine's attention to the disgusting, overflowing bin. "Just dump it on the table. It won't stain. It's Formica."

"Oh, dear. Are you sure?" Christine hesitated, plonked the dripping tea bag onto the table, then stared at it guiltily, like a domesticated dog examining its own mess. "Do you have any milk?" she asked faintly.

"Oh of course, I forgot," George said, dashing to the sink to retrieve the milk carton, nearly tripping over the pile of broken plates in her haste. She staggered with the carton to the table, screwed off the top and then noticed Tina's bright red lipstick stain around the rim.

"Oh dear. Oh sorry, it's gone sour," she gasped, snatching the carton away again and pouring the milk down the drain. "Do you mind your tea black?" She

turned to Christine with an apologetic smile, but the look of disgust in her visitor's face showed that she had seen the lipstick stain too.

"Do you know, my dear," Christine said, in an almost resigned tone. "It's later than I realised. I think perhaps it's time I went. I'll leave you in – um – I'll leave you in peace."

"Well, if you're sure," George replied, trying to keep the relief out of her voice.

"I think so, dear." Christine bent down, opened her handbag and took out her shoes. Then to George's astonishment she removed her slippers, brushed the soles rather obviously with her hand, and then replaced them in her handbag, before putting her shoes on. George felt her face flush at this subtle but calculated insult.

"I'll leave you to get on with – whatever it is you do here," Christine said coolly, rising from the stool and clumping towards the kitchen door in her shoes, while George glared at her in growing resentment. "You say you're going out and I'm sure that even you – that you'll want to dress properly first."

"Oh, no. I'm going dressed as I am," George told her boldly.

"Oh, I see," replied Christine, her voice heavy with disdain. "Of course."

"No actually, on second thoughts, I might have some even dirtier clothes somewhere that I might wear instead," George added, with defiance. "And of course I'll roll around in a compost heap too, to make sure I'm really filthy, then empty a dustbin over myself..."

"Oh, naturally," Christine, said in a haughty tone that implied she wasn't in the least surprised. "Well, I won't ask what sort of places you go to ..."

"I'm going to a much bigger house that you'll ever be invited to," George retorted with triumph. "It belongs to the owner of the *Aphrodite* group," she added, referring to Bambi's upmarket beauty salon chain. "She's a very dear friend of mine as it happens."

"Oh really?" Christine asked with something like a sneer, as if she didn't believe a word. "And are you going there in that – tin box outside?"

"*Tin box?*" retorted George, stung by this insult to her car. "You mean my classic, highly sought after, 1970s Citroen? Yes, but I'll need to smear dog shit all over it before I drive it round the crescent, naturally. And I'll scatter some more shit around the streets as I go. I'll even aim some at your house. It could do with some redecoration. It's the one with the horrible fake stucco work on the front, isn't it? It's really tasteless, you know."

“Right. *Thank* you,” Christine said with ironic brightness, as she turned to leave. “I’ll leave you to your own mess, then, my dear. Good bye. Oh, poor Helen,” she added, as she walked into the hallway. “The woman must be turning in her grave.”

“You’ll be in your own grave sooner than you expect, if you don’t bugger off right now,” George cried after her, in a voice that was shrill with rage. “You know where the front door is; you barged your way in easily enough. You’re obviously used to breaking into places. Oh – and try not steal anything as you go,” she shouted after a departing Christine, seeing no reason not to intensify her insults. “This is a policeman’s house you know, and we like to keep the criminal classes out if we can!”

Snotty, stuck-up bitch, George thought. She’d obviously come round for a nose. Well, at least she was never likely to come round again. George began picking up the broken breakfast plates from the floor, content that she had had the last word. Then she giggled at the thought of how much more embarrassing it would have been if Christine had asked to use the toilet. Now, that would have really given her something to turn her snooty little nose up about!