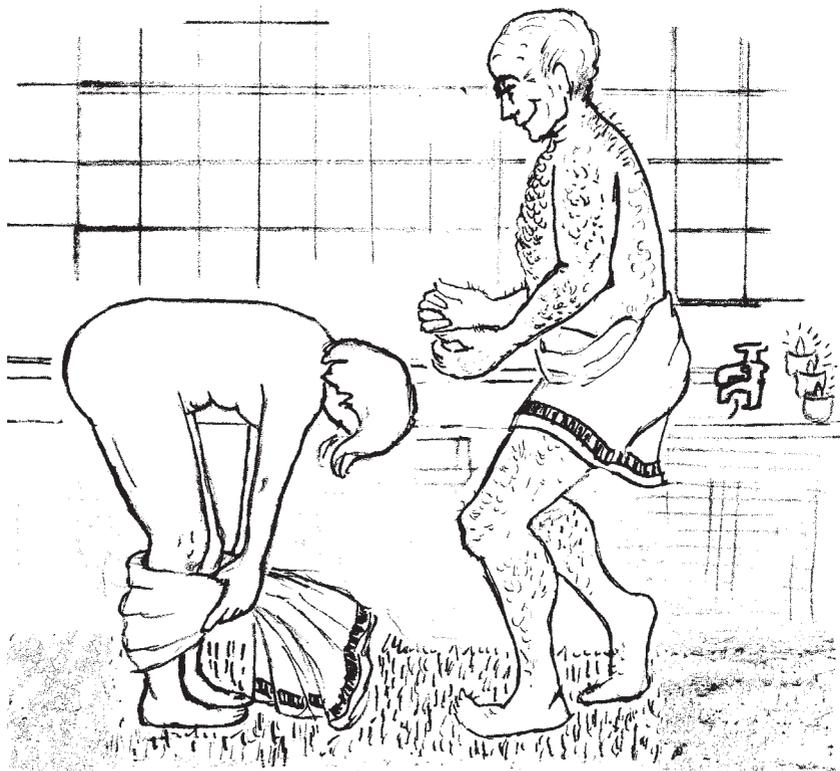


Blazing Embers



by
Angela Ashley

Magpies Nest Publishing

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Chapter one

A granny in search of an orgasm

In my mind's eye, I could see the ecstatic looks on the face of the pretty naked female as her lean, handsome, virile lover makes his erotic manoeuvre down her hot moist body. I can feel him kissing her throat and breasts, licking her belly button, slowly mouthing her body as his lust takes him further and further south to where my imagination is being led. Although the lover's dark curly head disappears from the screen, the girl's expressive face, her sighs and moans, tell me that he's reached his target for tonight. Mm, hot stuff on late night television and very informative too.

Things were not so when I was young, or if they were, I never knew about them. When I went to see our doctor just before I married Roger, he informed me of a certain procedure to ensure a more comfortable wedding night. It was most embarrassing. I just sat there having a man tell me what I should do with my fingers to stretch a membrane I didn't know I had. Except for the name of a messy contraceptive gel, that was the only sex education either of us received. Not exactly exciting stuff. Was that all there was to nuptial bliss?

I smiled at my recollections of our wedding night. There had been no preliminaries and no foreplay. It had been a tiring day and Roger, unable to control himself, went straight in for the kill. It was a single push lasting a few seconds, nothing more. But it was so very powerful — the symbol of our love and desire to be united for ever. Of course, I dare say Roger might have seen it differently, not so much a covenant of love as a lack of control on his part. But, even so, it was a very special ritual and symbolised our wedding day vow that God had joined us together and no one would ever come between us.

"Hello, Alice, I haven't seen you for ages."

Torn from my nostalgic reminiscing of fifty years ago, I looked up to see Tony Bradshaw, a friend of Roger's, smiling at me.

"Hello, Tony," I said, surprised to see him. "I've been around. Where have you been, the Bahamas?"

“Actually, yes, for a whole month. I won a little money and decided to get myself a tan,” he replied beaming, his flashing white teeth contrasting with his golden-brown skin.

“It certainly suits you,” I said, looking at him more closely.

I thought him to be incredibly handsome for a man of his years. Tall, broad-shouldered with an athletic build, he was looking exceedingly healthy; whatever he’d been doing on his holiday, it couldn’t have been just boozing, eating, lying on his back and thinking of England. He was wearing a blue jersey, which brought out the colour of his sparkling azure eyes and his immaculate trousers reflected the sun-bleached white of his hair. Together with his magnificent tan, he looked like he’d just stepped from a millionaire’s yacht in the tropics; I must admit, I wouldn’t have minded being there with him.

“Do you mind if I join you?” he asked, in his soft cultured voice.

“Not at all,” I answered politely, and smiled at all the jealous glances coming my way from the blue-rinse pensioners at the table near by.

While he was sitting down, I took off my blazer and put it on the back of my chair. I was getting hot. Whether it was the heat inside the room or the warmth of Tony’s presence I couldn’t really say. I dropped something out of a pocket and I bent down to pick it up. Tony bent over too and we nearly bumped heads. I laughed nervously like a silly girl. I noticed him glancing down my cleavage; he couldn’t help it really, it was just under his nose. I must admit I was thrilled he wanted to look; after all, I’m no spring chicken.

He beat me to it and coming from under the table, he put the retrieved coin in front of me. “You might need to spend a penny sometime,” he quipped, those luscious lips curling into a smile.

I beamed appropriately at his little joke and shyly slipped the coin into a trouser pocket.

The waitress came with my snack and took Tony’s order for coffee. She hovered over him a while, ostensibly waiting to see if he wanted anything else but, by the way she was looking at Tony, more likely wanting to give him a coded message of her availability for service any time. He gave her one of his charming smiles. “All for now, my dear,” he said, with just a hint of a wink. “I’ll let you know when I’m hungry.” She went away content.

Tony looked at me and raised an appreciative eyebrow. “You know, you look pretty good yourself. What are you doing these days?”

“Not a lot. I still paint. I’ve joined the local artists’ group.” Not wanting to make out I was another Grandma Moses, I added, “I do a bit of voluntary work, the usual household chores and I look after the grandchildren occasionally. You know, that sort of thing.” I thought it all very boring stuff to a man like Tony.

He was quietly gazing at me as though summing me up. I found it rather disconcerting. Had he sussed out my attraction to him? Out of nervousness I blurted out a reminder of my marital status; “Oh, yes, and I do Roger’s typing for him. But of course, you know that already since you’re on the same committees.”

He smiled at me most engagingly. “As a matter of fact, I thought he typed the minutes himself. I didn’t know you were his little slave.”

“He can’t use the computer,” I told him, but feeling I was letting Roger down, I quickly added, “Of course, he probably could if he tried but I don’t mind typing the minutes for him, plus his letters, e-mails, and anything else he needs doing.”

“I’m sure he appreciates it, I know I would,” he said softly, looking at me with such intensity that it was getting acutely embarrassing. I was in danger of blushing — at my age!

I remembered he had a wife called Edith. “Oh, I expect you get your wife doing all sorts of things for you,” I replied, giving a nervous little giggle and wondering why I was feeling and behaving like a silly teenager.

“I’m afraid not. Edith’s left me. One reason for me to spend a bit of money before she takes the lot.”

“I’m so sorry, Tony, I had no idea. Roger hasn’t said anything.”

“Really?” He raised an eyebrow. “Well, it’s nice to know I’m not the centre of gossip, makes a change.” I wasn’t sure whether he was pleased or sorry.

I recalled some of the lurid stories that spread around about Tony and his various women friends. His reputation for having the largest and most creatively used piece of masculine equipment turned many a head and other bits of a woman’s anatomy in that

direction. I wondered if Edith had walked out on him because of another woman. I didn't have to speculate for long.

"My fault actually; she caught me with Susan Briggs in a nice little hotel restaurant. Susan was dressed all sexy and looking like a lonely man's best friend — his faithful bitch. She was goggling at me with her big soulful eyes and pawing at my legs." He gave a bit of a laugh. "When Edith saw us go upstairs to the bedrooms, she suspected the worse."

I was amazed at what he was admitting. "I'm not surprised. You're not telling me that Susan was going upstairs to give you a big lick on the cheek?"

The mention of a faithful bitch had brought up memories from my childhood and of how my sex education relied almost entirely on the activities of our spaniel Flossy. She had co-operated with her Casanova suitor by allowing him to get at her in a most improbable manner — coupling through a hole in the fence! Flossy's yelps brought us hurrying to the scene. We found her bum to bum with her mate on the other side of the fence. It did nothing to improve my sex education. I guess a man would have to have a serious case of stem wilt to get himself into that position. I was smiling at the memory when Tony's voice broke into my thoughts.

"Do you really want me to tell you what we were doing?" he asked, lowering his voice to a sexy whisper.

I looked down and blushed at my erotic thoughts. The truth was I did indeed want to know what they were doing, and if their cries of ecstasy reached beyond the bedroom door.

"So you see, my dear, I'm free and easy," he said airily without waiting for an answer. Coming swiftly to earth again, he sighed deeply. "Though I must admit I was used to having my dear Edith around even if she didn't care for the sort of thing I enjoyed with Susan."

"Presumably you still have Ms Briggs to bring you consolation?"

I couldn't believe this conversation I was having with Tony. I had never talked that way with him before, or with any other friend of Roger's for that matter. What was happening to me?

"Susan was put off seeing me again. Edith hit her with her handbag." He grinned. "Unfortunately, it was more like a leather

shopping bag. Don't know what was in it but it knocked Susan over. I had to take her to the hospital for stitches."

"Good heavens! Poor woman, she got more than she bargained for out of the affair."

"I gave her a bit of compensation, much to Edith's annoyance. I think my wife wanted her to go to court for it."

He didn't say any more on the subject because his coffee arrived. I would be willing to swear that the girl had tucked her skirt up shorter; the split at the side was at a very handy level. When I saw the saucy smile on her face I wondered if Tony had discovered that for himself — accidentally of course. I reproved myself for my naughty thoughts. I put them down to Tony's sexy reputation. No doubt the girl's grin was merely wishful thinking. But it made me wonder if Tony's reputation was based mainly on speculation and unfounded rumour. Then someone passing the table spoke to him. Tony introduced the newcomer and, standing up, politely excused himself while he went over by the door to have a word with his friend in private. The ladies close by were watching them like a bunch of vultures. I heard a Mrs Loud Mouth say, "That's Clara Franklin's husband," and the others smirked and nodded their heads knowingly. No doubt their friend Clara was about to be torn apart, well chewed, swallowed down by tepid coffee and thoroughly digested — to be passed on to others in a most unpalatable form!

I began looking out of the window thinking about Tony's love life and wondering what he was like in bed. Were the stories true? Then I forced myself away from bedroom scenes; they were too disturbing for comfort. But what was happening outside was no better. I found myself watching a young couple in a doorway opposite the café erotically entwined in a bit of love-play. She was wearing a skimpy top and a skirt that was barely above the bikini line and reaching only to her thighs; he was dressed in a vest and the tightest of jeans. The girl's arms were tightly around the young man's neck and he was gripping her buttocks and pulling her up to him. They were kissing mouth to mouth with tongues, and rubbing each other's erotic zones with their bodies. I felt sexually moved and my voyeurism disconcerted me. Tony's voice again broke into my thoughts.

“You see, Alice, everyone’s at it these days. Young folk do it openly but if we oldies did that in public they’d take us off and put us in care!”

I had to laugh with him, but I soon sobered up and diverted my mind. “I’m really sorry about Edith. You’ve been together a long time.”

“That’s true, but you know, she hasn’t been a proper wife to me for many years — if you know what I mean?” But not expecting an answer, he added, “She wasn’t keen on it before she went through the menopause and afterwards, well, she just dried up — in more ways than one.”

I thought how lucky I was to still be on HRT and I began to appreciate my know-it-all Roger a bit more. I recalled his insistence on my seeing a doctor when I started having problems after my last operation. I looked up and saw Tony watching me closely.

“I’m sorry, I think I’ve embarrassed you with all this talk. Perhaps you think like Edith and you’re taking my criticism of her personally.”

“Oh, no, Tony, please don’t think that. Actually, in a way, I’m enjoying this little chat.”

He was looking at me very intently. “Really? Then you’re not offended and we can still be friends?”

I had never been Tony’s friend; he was a friend of Roger, not me. But I’d always found him jolly and pleasant to be near. To be truthful, I thought him very sexy and wished a bit of it would rub off on to Roger. I wondered how old he was. He certainly looked quite youthful but I knew he’d been retired a few years.

“I’m not at all offended, please believe that.” I assured him. “I feel flattered that you’re able to talk to me the way you’re doing.”

“Is that so?” he said with a sexy half-smile. He took hold of my hand. “You know, Alice, I’ve always liked you. You’re smart, intelligent and, if you don’t mind my saying so, quite sexy.”

I was flabbergasted. I was also very flattered. Thrills ran through my whole body but the conversation was going in a dangerous direction — I might end up as Susan’s replacement! With Tony’s hand holding mine, it seemed like a delightful prospect. Swept with a wave of guilt at my sensual longings, my cheeks began to colour more deeply.

"I've done it again, haven't I? I've embarrassed you," he whispered, sounding a little concerned.

I smiled nervously. "Of course not."

"You look incredibly lovely when you blush," he murmured softly.

It was such a corny thing to say, normally I would have laughed in response. But he was looking into my eyes so intently that I felt bewitched by his words. My hand, which he was still holding, was glowing from his touch and I knew my heart was beating much faster in response to my disturbed emotions.

He gave me one of his flashing smiles and said briskly, "But I apologise; put it down to my randy state having just lost both wife and lover."

Before I could recover enough to answer, he gave my hand a little squeeze and let it go. "I must be going now — an appointment with my solicitor. I'd love to see you again, Alice. Lunch perhaps? Or maybe we could go to a tea and dance session at the Vic? You do dance, don't you?"

"I used to but I think I've forgotten how." My feelings of guilt rose to the surface. "But I don't know, Tony, there's Roger to consider."

"Does he consider you? From what I know of him, he's always busy with something or other." How true that was, especially when it came to sex. When Tony saw my embarrassment, he quickly added, "Tell you what, I'll ask him about it when I see him at the next meeting in a couple of days. Anyway, I'll give you a ring."

As the prospect of dancing with Tony sunk in, my nerves started playing a rumba throughout my body. Trying to keep my excitement from showing, I merely smiled in acknowledgement.

Standing up, he said pleasantly, "Cheers, Alice, see you again sometime," and leaving a fiver on the table to cover both our coffees, plus a handsome tip for our obliging waitress, he left the café.

There was no doubt about it, my little encounter with Tony Bradshaw had stirred something in my knickers and I was feeling a potent mixture of guilt and sexual excitement. I turned my mind back to the thoughts I'd been getting earlier that morning and pondered on the coincidence of meeting Tony so soon afterwards.

I suppose it's natural for a geriatric like me to be continually getting pictures in my mind of an hourglass with the sands of time

running out, and to get thoughts of what is and what might have been. I contemplated my fifty years as Roger's faithful, loving wife and of my devotion to our four sons and their ten children. Some would say, it had been a happy and fruitful existence and they would be right, but I knew something had always been missing in my marriage and it was causing me an inner restlessness.

Late night television had opened my eyes to the ecstatic joy that was possible from sexual encounters. Writhing in the pleasure of oral delights was something totally unknown in my experience. And I was being constantly amazed at the full-throttle intercourse that produced shouts of ecstasy from both of the partners, and it set me wondering why it had never been so for me. I began feeling a sense of loss for what I had never known. There was no doubting Roger's orgasmic pleasure from our nuptials; surely it was time for me to experience similar rapturous joys from our union.

I knew my childhood experiences had brought about deep-seated inhibitions. I'd had grinning old men touching my breasts as I walked past them, making me feel sick and totally embarrassed. I'd been humiliated by having a man's hand grip my bottom while bystanders smirked at my cry of shock and shame; and I'd suffered a traumatic incident in the park when I was just a kid. Hardly surprising I came to see touching as being associated with indecent desires and therefore a shameful and squalid activity.

I had problems throughout my teenage years with boyfriends wanting to fondle my body. It always ended with them dropping me in frustration. When I was almost eighteen, I had actually allowed a boy called Dennis to feel my knickers area through the thickness of my clothes, not for my pleasure but to please him. I really liked him and was afraid of losing him. But I lost him anyway because he said that his studies were suffering because of the sexual tension he was under. He left me feeling wretched and ashamed of what I'd allowed him to do.

To make matters worse, the following day, a smirking scruffy man came up to me and asked if I'd enjoyed the night before. I was mortified, especially as I had an inquisitive friend with me.

"What's he talking about?" she asked.

Before I could answer, the revolting, disgusting, Mr Scruffy Peeping Tom grinned and piped up, "I saw you by the river in the

moonlight," and sniggering, went off; no doubt to spy on another unsuspecting couple.

I was only glad that I had not done as Dennis had requested — put my hand inside his trousers. It wasn't entirely for moral reasons that I had declined his generous offer; I thought it a horrible and absolutely disgusting thing to do — most unhygienic!

Thinking about my education, I realised it completely lacked anything to do with sexuality. We were supposed to have sex lessons at school but we didn't get any further than the division of single-celled animal life. We did search the biology books hoping for further enlightenment but all to no avail. Maybe our teachers were afraid of polluting our minds, or were worried we would put theory into practice. But more likely they were too embarrassed to enlighten us on the mysteries of copulation — we might ask questions!

Giving birth was another hush-hush subject not to worry children with, that is, if it could be avoided. After all, the question might well arise as to how the baby had got inside a tummy; never mind how it got out. Watching Flossy give birth to her pups gave me some clues but giving birth to a baby in a similar way was a very scary thought. No, babies were far too big. Having long dismissed the gooseberry bush theory, the doctor's bag lie, and the stork delivery system, most of us came to the logical conclusion that babies, however they got inside a tummy, would have to be cut out.

When I was thirteen and started my periods, I nearly fainted with shock — my pee had turned to blood! Without explanation of what it was all about, I was provided me with protection for my clothing. I had never heard of sanitary towels for such a purpose. Hardly surprising, if they were ever mentioned at all, it was by using their initials! Compact towels, 'a boon to ladies when travelling', was the only advert I ever saw and that was only on the dispenser in the ladies' toilets. I must admit I had no idea what a boon was and, when I was a kid, I never had a spare tuppence to find out. I saw periods as being no different to bitches being on heat, and I was forever fearful the boys would catch me out.

When the Americans came over to help us win the war, grey rubber things like deflated sausage-shape balloons appeared in parks visited by Yanks and their good-time girls. Some boys would blow them up until they burst. I heard one girl say that Yanks put

them on their private parts and we wondered why. It seemed ridiculous anyway; I had once seen a man peeing up a wall and it was with a wrinkled object only a few inches long. It was some time before discovering answers. Even when I was going out with Roger, I thought it was a huge Swiss penknife in his mac pocket that came between us when he was kissing me. But I formed the impression, from hearing adults talking, that whatever the Yanks and their girls did in the park was a morally bad and disgusting thing to do, and that rubbery sausage-like skins had something to do with it.

Returning to the present, I sat pondering my situation. Tony had certainly stirred up my emotions. I had believed that true love and marriage would make clean all that seemed squalid and ugly, yet even in my precious moments with Roger, I carried the burden of deep-seated guilt. I was now truly mixed up, feeling bad about being sexually moved by another man and yet, more than ever, my natural desires were crying out for fulfilment.

Roger too had brought into our relationship a total ignorance of the finer art of making love. His upbringing regarded sex as something not vital, except for producing children and he'd always been satisfied with a minimum amount of contact. After all, he was a busy person. A quickie once a week, fortnight or month was enough to keep his engine from rusting up and nicely ticking over. Our marriage wasn't without its loving moments, but if that were all any woman got out of sexual activity then I just could not comprehend why anyone would pay large sums of money or ruin their lives, and the lives of their families, to get it.

Deeply aroused by my encounter with Tony Bradshaw, I resolved to discuss sexual matters with Roger and let him know how I was feeling about our love life. But I knew it would be difficult to talk to a man who thinks he knows it all and who has fifty years of marriage under his belt and four sons to prove his masculinity.

A familiar female voice interrupted my thinking.

"Hello, Alice, you look deep in thought."

I looked up and saw Jean Smith, the town gossip.

"Quite right, Jean. Thanks for waking me up. I must get back home, lots to do," and ignoring her plea to stay and chat, I rose to my feet and went to pay the bill.

“Cheers, Jean. I’ll see you some other time,” I said as I left the café, while knowing I’d do my best to avoid her.

For the rest of the day, I wrestled with how to approach Roger. All the time I was thinking about sexual matters, Tony Bradshaw kept popping into my mind and I found it very disturbing. At my age, to get fanciful notions about a sun-tanned Casanova is quite ridiculous. I set to work doing Roger’s typing knowing that trying to make sense of his handwriting would need deep concentration.

In the evening, I sat with Roger while mending his work-shirts. They needed the frayed collars turning. He would be happy to go on wearing his old clothes for messing about in until they dropped off his back, but I have some pride even if his is in short supply. The least I can do is to make sure his rags are neatly held together.

As I tried, for the umpteenth time, to get the thread through the needle eye, I casually asked him, “What do you think about all this sex on television?”

Either he didn’t hear me or he was avoiding the question. Since he was doing his usual trick of watching a documentary whilst studiously reading one of his journals, I decided to ask him again but a little louder.

“Roger. Do you think there’s too much sex on television?”

“You don’t have to shout, I’m not the one who needs a hearing aid,” he said testily, looking up to watch an excavation going on in an ancient burial ground.

“Then answer my question.”

“What was it?”

“Sex, what do you think of it?”

“Sex? We’ve been doing it for fifty years; I don’t have to think about it. Isn’t it time we had our drinks?” He went back to reading about the latest in engineering technology.

“It’s only half past nine,” I protested. I tried a different tack. “Unless you want to go to bed early,” I said, in what I hoped to be a sexy voice. I wanted to stir something in his pants even if I couldn’t reach his loftier mind.

“No, there’s an interesting programme on after the news bulletin. But I’ll have my chocolate now,” he muttered; now concentrating on the bits of old bones being carefully examined by experts. “Just look

at that," he said intrigued, "a ritual murder. Spike straight between the legs — fascinating!"

I gave up. His mind was on other things, even if not totally unrelated. Apart from which the horrible killing had put me off. I would have to do something to draw his attention to what we were missing, but how?

Roger may be in his mid-seventies but he's far from being old and decrepit, although dressing like a tramp around the house and garden may suggest otherwise. He's a very active person and always has been. He's continually engaged in improvements to the house and keeping the garden in good nick. He has his clubs and societies and is an officer or member of various committees. He enjoys going to lectures on any engineering subject and helps organise many of them. He plays a mean game of bowls and fills up the rest of his time in his extensive workshop. Between all these activities he makes sure the weekly crossword is completed and his entry form filled out for that prize which constantly eludes him. Hence, the difficulty of my task. But I've always been a very determined woman when things are important to me and I do not give up easily.

Convincing Roger of what was missing in our marriage was going to need cunning as well as tact. Concentrating on physical impact, I decided to try suggestive undies that "temptingly reveal the path to erotic satisfaction" or so I was led to believe from an advertisement. I let the matter brew in my mind overnight.

In the morning, I looked in my building society passbook and decided how much I was prepared to spend on pretty but useless titillating knickers and bras. I went to a specialist shop in town armed with twenty pounds. After a brief look around, I decided to return later with fifty pounds.

While waiting to be served at the building society, I changed my mind. Fifty pounds was a lot of money that would keep me in knickers for years. But the whole point of buying new knickers was to have Roger get me quickly out of them. Determined to succeed at this self-appointed objective, I took out one hundred pounds instead, and with a deep sense of guilt at my extravagance, I returned to the lingerie shop to view their collection of gorgeous lacy tempters.

A smart middle-aged well-corseted lady came along to see if I needed assistance.

"I'm just looking for something pretty for a friend," I cheerfully lied.

She fixed me with her beaming smile. "Was it something in particular? For a special occasion maybe?"

"She's feeling a little depressed," I lied again, adding in a conspiratorial whisper, "She thinks her husband is going astray and she wants to lure him back. I want to help her, you see."

The assistant nodded knowingly. "I quite understand, madam, it's a common problem. What size is your friend?"

"I'm not exactly sure but my clothes fit her very well," I said, pleased with my acting skills.

"Unless you're thinking of something simple like a nightdress, I'll need to take your measurements."

I pointed to a rail in the middle of the shop. "I was thinking of something like those red lacy things hanging up over there."

"Well, let's measure your bust and see what cup you'll need." She suddenly realised the slip. "Ah, that is, what your friend will need, of course."

She had me sussed all right but to spare my blushes and get a good sale, she was content to keep up the pretence. Taking me to a fitting room with a tape-measure at the ready, the dear understanding lady was very thorough taking measurements and I was quite impressed. I usually bought my undies off the shelf from a leading chain store and I wasn't used to such personal attention. We returned to the chamber of erotic delights.

"There are some blue silk sets over here that would really bring out the colour of her eyes," she informed me, smiling sweetly. "That is, if they are just like yours."

"They are very pretty, but I'm not sure." It wasn't really my eyes that I wanted Roger's attention drawing to.

"Do look around, madam, we have a fantastic selection. All the 38c bras have a yellow label. It would be best to try on them on as they do vary a little." She softly whispered, "If you wish to try on the knickers it will have to be over your own. I'm sure you understand. Hygiene and all that."

Smiling, the helpful assistant left me to it. She was now keeping a keen watch on a pair of young teenagers just entering the shop.

I felt very self-conscious looking at wired, low cut, see-through bras, and wispy knickers that barely covered the palm of my hand, but if I wanted my desires to find fulfilment I had to get on with it.

The pair of teenagers with pierced eyebrows, nose, tongue and navel, giggled as I held up a bra. I heard one of them snigger, "Hanging baskets to grow her melons in."

The garment was two sizes too big. I put it back and looked for the yellow labels. Quickly gathering together a handful of garments I headed for an empty cubicle to be out of sight. I also needed to get some idea what these things looked like on — I didn't want Roger to think I'd bought him something fancy for his greenhouse.

I took off my clothes down to my knickers and looked at myself in the mirror. My breasts were all right. They didn't look like the firm round ones I'd seen in sexy TV programmes, but they suited Roger. He didn't care much for pudding-basin breasts anyway; he always said that he liked my dumplings.

I pulled down my knickers just to get a look at what bits I wanted to teasingly cover. My tummy flesh looked like the skin on a rice pudding tipped sideways. I had an operation to get rid of my reproductive units and hitch up my waterworks some years before, and it left my loose stretch marks draping down like a waitress's apron. I was hoping the firm lace would control and hide some of it.

I pulled my knickers up and tried on a thong. With having good buttocks there were no loose bits there, just tight muscles. At the back I would look pretty good but at the front my 'apron' would just flop around.

I tried on high-legs. That was better; even over my knickers I could see they would make my legs look longer, and there was sufficient body on them to cover and tighten-in the worst of my tummy. For sexiness, there was that teasing bit between the legs just asking to be pulled aside. I decided it was the style to suit my plans and discarded the rest.

I tried on the matching bras to each of the knickers. The narrow strap ones cut into my shoulders but they had the better fitting cups. I looked in the mirror and tried to see myself through the eyes of

Roger. I decided he would prefer the ones that would push up my breasts and give a deep cleavage — he's a bit of a breast man. Three were cut low enough to excite him with the exposed maximum, whilst titillating him with the hidden minimum. They had matching knickers in the same colours. I decided to get three sets: red, black, and white. Then I looked at the price tags.

I asked to have the black set put aside and went back to the building society to draw out just enough to enable me to get the red set as well. I thought I would have to wait until pension day to get the white set.

As I entered the shop for a third time, the assistant looked up with a welcoming smile. She carefully wrapped the purchases in pretty paper. "Your friend is going to be very pleased with these, madam." Speaking very softly, she added, "They should keep her husband at home."

Although feeling most embarrassed at our coded messages, I smiled and nodded. She then gave me a little wink and whispered, "If it doesn't work, tell her to put a little itching powder in his pants. No rival woman will want a man that's always got a hand in his crotch."

Mental pictures of some poor sod being tormented silly in his nether regions were not pleasant. For some reason, Tony's smiling sun-tanned face had popped into my mind. Now feeling a mixture of guilt and doubt as well as sensuous excitement, I returned home with my little parcel. By the time I turned into our street, the clouds had lifted and I was beginning to feel younger. I walked up our flower-bordered cobbled drive with a lively step, despite the joints that were getting a little arthritic. Our creeper-covered white house glowed in the summer sunshine. A state of euphoria was creeping over me; would tonight be the night? I wondered.

Roger was busy in the garden trimming the hedges. I made him a cup of tea and we sat down in the gazebo while he had a little rest.

"Did you get what you wanted?" he asked me between slurps of hot tea.

"I bought a few pretty undies. A bit extravagant I suppose. I don't really need any; the ones I've got are perfectly good. I just fancied something pretty." I was rather hoping he would start thinking of lacy knickers and what was inside them.

"Oh, I don't know, you deserve a few little luxuries," he told me with a gentle smile. "I don't mind you spending a few pounds if it cheers you up a bit. Do you need some money? Would a tenner pay for them?" He started digging into a pocket for cash.

"Not quite," I said, thinking how horrified he'd be if he knew the real cost. "Thanks for offering, but I don't want you to buy them. What makes you think I need cheering up?" I felt pleased the conversation was moving in the right direction.

"You always buy something you don't need when you're bored," he replied, looking past me to see which trees needed attention.

So as to be eye to eye, I moved straight in front of him. "There is something I really do need, Roger, and only you can give it to me."

"I say, Alice, look at that bird in the oak tree. Is it a woodpecker?" He was now standing up and looking over my head.

"Where? Oh, I see it. Yes, I think it is." I was getting more frustrated by the second. "Roger, did you hear what I said to you?"

"Now is that a male or a female? What? Oh, yes, there's something you need. Buy it from our joint account." He watched the bird fly off and let his eyes stray over our magnificent old deciduous trees and well-pruned shrubbery. "Ah, nothing like a garden to keep you fit and happy. Now I'd better get back and finish that hedge," he said as he handed me his cup. "I've got a lecture tonight," he reminded me. "Don't be late with the meal, I have to get there early."

Roger went off down the garden, humming to himself while I went inside to get started on the pastry, thinking of the best way to introduce him to the new sexy me.

There was no chance to talk over the meal; he was listening to the news before dashing off to his lecture. I insisted on kissing him before he went out. I sniffed his deodorant and put my nose into his armpits.

"You sexy beast," I said, snuggling up to him.

"Not now, I'm late already," he said impatiently. "I'll see you at half-past ten; you can do your doggy imitation then."

Well, at least he didn't laugh at my little attempt to be seductive. I decided to have a bath later and get ready for him coming back home.

As I lay relaxing in the warm bubbly water, I thought about some of the sexy things I'd seen on television when Roger was out at some

of his late meetings. Occasionally, the programmes were on when Roger was in. At first I would turn to another channel, especially if any of the family happened to be at home with us — it was so embarrassing to see couples engaged in erotic behaviour when my children were present. But after leaving it on when we were alone I got used to it. Roger would be reading anyway.

I was intrigued with the things they did. We only had normal sex; at least, we thought it was normal. He might touch me a bit and I might touch him, but not usually; he liked to get on with it and then get off to sleep. I didn't think we could physically manage a lot of what they did on TV but some methods and positions looked quite possible for a couple of geriatrics to adopt, even if they might prove a bit of a strain on our mildly arthritic joints.

Oral sex was something different. On the TV I'd seen a man's head between a woman's thighs and a woman bobbing her head up and down within her partner's groin area. Well, it could mean only one thing — close ups made sure of that. I wondered what it must taste like. I wondered if it was really hygienic. Suppose couples hadn't washed for ages? I guess you had to be fond of smelly cheese in those circumstances; we only ate hard mature Cheddar, so I wouldn't know.

I suddenly remembered Roger telling me fifty years ago about a picture he'd seen where a man and a woman were licking each other and I had been utterly disgusted. But hygiene was much better these days and perhaps we were missing out on something good. I wondered how I could broach the subject. I'd heard such things were in certain magazines but I doubted I had the courage to go into a shop and buy one.

I wondered what my sons would think of their mother, an old lady, thinking about sex, let alone practising it. When I was a youngster I didn't think middle-aged parents engaged in sex any more; certainly not grandparents — it just wasn't decent. But why wasn't it? Because we have old wrinkled bodies? We are all the same in the dark. It just might be more difficult, that's all. But in spite of my reasoning, the familiar sense of shame at thinking erotic thoughts and desiring sexual satisfaction refused to go away.

I stepped out of the bath and dried myself, trying to ignore the wrinkles. I dusted with a small amount of fine talc and put on just a little perfume. I held up the extravagant black undies, torn between

using them and taking them back. Decision made, swiftly cutting off the labels I put them on. I had to admit the knickers looked a lot better on naked flesh than over my panties. I fastened the bra on the tightest fastening and adjusted the shoulder straps to a comfortable level. I was very pleased with the results. My breasts were rounding up over the low cup giving a deep attractive cleavage. My nipples, showing through the lace, were hardening into stiff peaks as I became sensually alive. I was already imagining doing things to Roger that would set him on fire and both of us sharing in the best sex ever — as seen on TV!

I slipped on my dressing gown just as I heard Roger's car coming up the drive. I could feel the lace against my skin and it was firming my nipples even more. Would Roger notice? I was actually feeling moist down below and, thinking it to be a good sign, my excitement increased as I hurried to the door to greet my darling husband.

"Hi," he said, as he came through the door, "I won't bother with a drink tonight, I had a coffee at the meeting and I don't want to be up half the night."

"How about a nice relaxing bath?" I said with thoughts of what might happen afterwards.

"At this time of night? No, I just want to get to bed."

"Oh, dear, I am sorry."

"Good meeting though; lots there tonight. I saw Sid. You know, Alice, he must be nearly ninety but doesn't look it. Jim was there too, and Les and Bill who used to work for me. I haven't seen any of them for ages. The place has gone to pot since I retired. They say it's all computers now," he added in disgust. He threw off his coat for me to hang up. "Had too much coffee, must get upstairs."

I put his coat on a hanger and hung it in the hall cupboard. "I'd better come too or I might wake you up later on."

"Doubt it, I'm jiggered." He was pulling off his shoes at the foot of the stairs. His nose sniffed the air. "You smell nice, been out?"

But before I had chance to reply he was halfway up the stairs and out of his clear-hearing range. At least, he would see me in my undies as he was getting undressed — that might wake him up. I picked up his shoes and put them in the hall cupboard.

While waiting for Roger to emerge from the bathroom, I sat at my dressing table brushing my hair. I knew that getting a wash and

cleaning his teeth would make him more alert. I was right. Before long, he came briskly into the bedroom and slipped smartly into bed.

I walked over to his side of our king-size bed and slipped off my dressing gown, letting it fall to the floor. The soft glow of the bedside lamp was flattering to my ageing skin and was giving a gentle shine to my silver hair. Surely the total impact of perfume, semi-nakedness and seductive black undies would do something to move him in the right direction? I waited nervously for his reaction but it wasn't forthcoming.

"What do you think?" I said, in what I thought to be a sexy manner.

"About what?" He answered with his eyes closed.

"Open your eyes and see."

Squinting, he opened his eyes. "Can't see properly without my glasses."

"I'm wearing my new undies. Put your glasses on and look."

"Can't it wait until morning? he mumbled grumpily. "Get to bed, you're keeping me awake."

I gave up. Disconsolately, I took off my pretty things and was about to put on my long-sleeved nightdress when I had a sudden thought. He might not want to look at me but he couldn't avoid smelling me. I slipped into bed naked and snuggled up to him.

"What's this? You don't usually come to bed with nothing on." He put an arm around me. "You smell nice too. Where did you go tonight?"

"Nowhere." Trying to be sexy, I rubbed up to him. "I've been waiting for you to come home."

He got the message. "Oh, I see. Don't know if I can make it though."

He slipped off his pyjama bottoms and climbed over my body, pushing my legs apart. It didn't take him long to get a bit of a rise. He pumped away for almost thirty seconds, grunting with the pleasure of it. Finally, he collapsed on top of me, his volcano having erupted and spent. Rolling over to his side of the bed, he was soon fast asleep. I lay quietly weeping, utterly frustrated at my inability to gain the satisfaction I had so ardently sought and completely unable to communicate to Roger my true feelings.

Chapter two

Various encounters

I woke in the morning feeling tired out. I went to the bathroom for a pee and to wash away Roger's spillage from the night before. I hate being smelly in that area, or in any place for that matter. I had a wash all over while I was at it and went back to the bedroom. I wondered whether to get dressed or put my nightdress on and go back to bed for an hour. In the light coming through the curtains I could see my black undies on my dressing table stool and they made me feel depressed. I thought of all the money I'd wasted and that made me feel sick with disgust and self-hatred.

Roger was stirring. He looked at the clock with half-open eyes. "What time is it?" he asked, his voice rough from sleeping with his mouth open.

"Seven. Are you getting up or do you want a cup of tea in bed?" I asked him in a rather offhand manner. I wasn't feeling in a loving mood.

He was already climbing out of bed to go to the bathroom to relieve his bladder. "I think I'll take a shower — a bit glued up," he answered, oblivious to my sour humour. "Won't come back to bed, I'm going to that exhibition in Manchester with Fred."

He trotted off to the bathroom and I heard him coughing up his usual build up of overnight phlegm. I picked up the pretty black lace undies, thinking perhaps I should frame them and hang them on the wall. They would add a touch of femininity to the rather masculine feel of the room. It had been that way ever since Roger had fitted his own very angular built-in furniture. My bottles of perfume and feminine touches did little to soften the effect. The room had Roger written all over it.

The undies were too expensive for an old geriatric like me to wear in the daytime; they wouldn't do much good for my silhouette anyway. It was all very depressing. I sighed and went to talk to Roger. He was about to get in the shower.

"Do you need any help, Roger?"

He was busy adjusting the temperature of the water. "I can manage thanks." Just before he pulled the shower door closed he

remembered, "Oh, weren't you going to show me some undies or something? Put them on; I'll have a look when I get out of here."

I was thrilled. Not only had Roger remembered my little purchases, he wanted to see me wearing the sexy things. I went quickly to the bedroom like an excited youngster. I slipped off my dressing gown and put on the lacy garments. I dabbed on a little perfume and brushed my hair. I considered using a little make-up, but I rarely use it and it didn't seem appropriate first thing in the morning. Anyway, it was certain other bits of my anatomy that I really wanted noticing.

While Roger was in the bathroom, I went downstairs and quickly made some tea and took it upstairs with a few biscuits. I had to be in the bedroom waiting; Roger must not get dressed before he'd viewed me in my new undies. I heard the bathroom door open and I stood posing by the big wall mirror.

"I've put my pyjamas to be washed," Roger announced regally as he entered the bedroom stark naked, Little Willie dangling unceremoniously from its bushy undergrowth. Then he saw me standing there. "Very nice," he said appreciatively. "I'll just put my glasses on so I can see you better."

I stood in hopeful anticipation, trying to hold my tummy muscles in while keeping my shoulders well back to show off my breasts to best advantage. My rice pudding-skin apron was tucked up and being held quite firmly inside the lace panel of the knickers. There was no spare fat or anything else showing over the buttock and thigh area. My breasts were reaching out over the top of the wired bras in a most provocative fashion. I thought the whole effect was certain do something for him.

"Wow!"

I was almost quivering in girlish anticipation. "You like them? You don't think they were a waste of money?"

"Nothing is wasted on you, my love," he said, his tenderness rekindling my love for him.

He came to within a few feet and stood in front of me. I could see he was aroused; a man can't hide that sort of thing. Soon Roger would be at his peak of manly perfection.

"Turn around and let me see the back view."

Utterly thrilled by the way things were going I turned to face the mirror. He came close and put his arms around me. I loved the feel of his thick body hair against my naked flesh. He slipped the straps from off my shoulders and held my breasts cupped in his hands. "Beautiful," he murmured and kissed the back of my neck.

He unfastened my bra and let it fall to the floor. "That's better, I always prefer you with nothing on."

He slipped his hand inside my knickers. "Take them off, they get in the way," he demanded, but in a gentle sort of way.

I happily slipped them off, but while I was bending he cheekily slapped my bottom. I hated the manoeuvre; it reminded me of being slapped by a lecherous male at the swimming baths when I was a young girl. But now was not the time to complain.

He pulled me up hard against him. "Lovely, much better. We should do this more often," he whispered, rubbing his freshly-shaved cheek against mine.

I just knew we would get somewhere this time. I was sexually excited and deliciously alive, ready for anything Roger was about to do. Unity of ecstasy was in sight.

"Mm, now then," he mumbled.

My heart was racing, my breath panting, and my mind suspended waiting for Roger's next move to complete our act of love.

"Better drink that tea before it gets cold." Switching off his sexual impulses, he glanced at the clock. "Must get dressed, I'm meeting Fred at the station in thirty minutes. Damn it, I was going to walk but now I'll have to drive there."

I wanted to scream. I could have howled with frustration but somehow I managed to keep cheerful. After all, I didn't want to deter Roger from acting on impulse at some other time. I forced a smile and said, "Well, what do you think of my new undies then?"

He was now busily pulling on his underwear. "Fine, very pretty, but you look better in nothing."

"You think they're a waste of money then?" I asked him, now feeling very bad about spending so much on something Roger so easily dismissed.

"No," of course not. If they make you feel better then it's worth it. What does a few pounds matter? We can afford it," he said grandiosely.

He put on his trousers and came over to kiss me. "Come on, cheer up. Go and put the kettle on, I'll be down in a minute."

I'd had my orders and so, putting on my dressing gown, I went downstairs to get his breakfast ready. By the time he came down, his tea, toast and cereal were awaiting his consumption.

While he munched and slurped, I took my tablets and put on a new HRT patch, all the time thinking of how to approach him with my problem. I asked tentatively, "Roger, was it all right for you last night?"

He picked up his paper to look at the headlines. "Was what all right?"

"You know, what we did." I was annoyed that I now had competition for his attention.

He looked over his paper and said jovially, "You mean when you seduced me and kept me awake when I should be getting my beauty sleep? What a temptress you are!"

"Was it all right for you?"

"Of course, it always is," he assured me. He put down his paper for a moment. "Has this got something to do with your little purchases?" But before I could answer, he picked up his paper again and said from behind it, "You know you don't have to dress up to turn me on, you're fine as you are."

I allowed him to get on with his reading; after all, he only had a few minutes before he had to dash off. I let my mind wander to the first day I met him, thinking of how incredibly good-looking he was in his youth. At that time his hair was dark, thick and wavy and he had dense long lashes framing his brown eyes. His heavy eyebrows and his constant need of a shave made him look very masculine. His mouth was softer in those days and his lips tended to curl slightly at the corners. At least they did when he looked in my direction. He was wearing a scruffy looking raincoat that would have done justice to a crime novelist's description of a private investigator's disguise. He also wore an old scarf that appeared to be itchy; he would occasionally flick his head sideways as if trying to get rid of a fly. But when he spoke, his voice was deep, very rich and easy on the ear.

"Damn! I nearly forgot," exclaimed Roger, destroying my precious picture of him. He had finished his last spoon of cereal

swallowed down by the rest of his tea, and was now reaching for my eye drops.

As he put the drops into my eyes, I whispered tenderly, "I love you, Roger," and tears induced by memories of our first meeting, mingled with the eye drops.

"Of course you do. We love each other. Fifty years together must prove something. What's the problem, love?" he asked tenderly, while I dabbed away the surplus teardrops. "Worried about getting old?"

His concern touched my heart and I began to feel bad about my desires. I said uncertainly, "No. Well, not exactly."

"Look," he said, taking command of the situation, "you go and get your hair done, it always cheers you up. Meet a friend and have lunch out. I have to be off now. We'll chat when I get back tonight."

He kissed me and dashed off. I watched him go, love clouding my vision. I stood admiring his energy and enthusiasm. Always so strong and virile, and yet five years older than I am. He never had problems getting it up either, even if it wasn't a daily event; but that was nothing new. I sighed, frustration beginning to build up again. I knew it would be a week or two before he would exercise his conjugal rights again. That morning had been something special and I'd so much wanted us to complete it in a unity of body and soul. Oh, yes, he might do a bit of kissing and cuddling from time to time but the main event, as he often called it, would wait until his need was great.

I couldn't understand it, if I achieved the sort of ecstasy he obviously did I would want it daily. But after much pondering, I thought that maybe deep satisfaction reduces longing and brief topping up sessions were enough until overtaken by a deep urge. I had urges frequently, but even when Roger was in a co-operative mood they let me down during the final moments. Perhaps it was as well that we hadn't gone any further that morning.

My reasoning led me into thinking there was something wrong with me. It was pleasant enough to be touched but it didn't get me anywhere. I longed for him to unite us and for me to feel the fullness of his presence. Certainly, the joining of our bodies gave me some satisfaction, but it did nothing else. Was I devoid of sensation in that area? Perhaps it would make no difference what Roger did. Maybe I was incapable of feeling anything special. Well, I knew I felt pain

if very little else. Four difficult births and a pelvic floor operation made me very aware of an alive and active nervous system!

I sat with a cup of tea, again thinking about my early days with Roger. From the first day I met him, when we started to catch the same train, he would try to sit opposite me. Every time I glanced up, I would find him looking at me and disconcerted by the intensity of his gaze I would shyly turn away my eyes and look out of the window.

He always carried a little case with him, which he placed on the luggage rack above him. When it was quiet I could hear a ticking noise coming from that direction. It was the clock inside his case that broke the ice. Imagining a bomb in the case, I looked up and started smiling at my absurd thought. He must have known what was in my mind because he gave me a big smile. I smiled back, and from that moment my fate was sealed. Eventually he sat next to me and started up conversations. After a few weeks he asked me if I would go to the pictures with him.

That first date with Roger went very nicely. I wore a beige slim-fitting woollen dress with an embroidered net insert at the neck reaching down to reveal a small amount of lightly-veiled cleavage. The fine-knitted material clung to my figure, as was the fashion then. When I took off my coat in the cinema Roger gave me a very admiring look, which made me feel good about myself. He was looking good too; his smart brown suit and a pale beige shirt went well with his colouring. He held my hand while we were watching the films, and I felt relaxed and comfortable by his side.

On leaving the cinema, we walked a little way before he took me home. It began to rain so we stood under an empty bus shelter. Suddenly, he lifted my chin and kissed me. It was our first date and I hadn't expected anything of the kind. His lips were very soft and gentle and I loved the feel of them on mine. His kiss was somehow satisfying even if it wasn't earth shattering. We didn't say anything, just looked into each other's eyes, and then he walked me to my door and said goodnight.

Smiling at my thoughts of long ago, I stood up and walked to the sink to wash the breakfast pots. I looked out of the window and thought how blessed we were to have a pleasant home with an acre of garden. I delighted in the sheep-scattered green fields beyond our wall and the misty mountaintops just visible above a

wooded hillside. From living in a bedsit for three years, we had gradually worked our way up the housing market to our handsome part-slate four-bedroom home complete with two bathrooms — a luxury never dreamed of fifty years ago. True, some might say our furniture, bought as we expanded, was somewhat eclectic and lacking coordination. But we were brought up in an age where things were made to last, not in today's throwaway society. At least, our carpets and curtains are all relatively new and, being carefully chosen, bring colourful harmony to the mix of furniture styles. With a good husband and loving family, I had no right to be discontent. In a pensive mood, I let my mind drift again to when I was nineteen and courting Roger.

He attended evening classes three nights a week and went home at the weekends. We met up on Friday nights only and always followed the same pattern as on our first date. I wasn't sure how he felt about me. I didn't even know if he went out with other girls back home. Of course, we didn't talk in the cinema and there wasn't much time afterwards. We didn't seem to have much to say anyway, it seemed enough just to be with each other.

My sister told me that the daughter of Roger's landlady had told her that he wasn't the serious sort. According to her, I'd better not get emotionally attached to him because he had let a girl down badly at home. The poor kid was put in bed for a week suffering from depression because of him. I said nothing to Roger but what I'd heard had put me on guard. I was determined not to end up as one of Roger's cast-offs.

I took up square dancing with my friend Rosie and we went to lessons at the local dance hall. It was great fun and neither of us was short of boys to dance with, but one in particular sought me out as a regular dance partner. David was a very pleasant boy and easy to talk to. He was very ordinary looking: medium height, slim build, fair hair, and grey eyes behind wire-framed glasses. But I wasn't after a young man to walk out with, and I didn't see David as a prospective boyfriend anyway. I never mentioned Roger because he wasn't relevant to any of our conversations. At that time, I considered my artistic career to be my future, not getting married to become someone's doormat.

David was a very committed Christian. He was exceedingly disturbed when it came out in conversation that I had not been

baptised. I said that surely there must be more to being a Christian than saying a few words and getting splashed. But he really cared about my salvation and told me about the Church of England baptism service. I was already a believer as far as I was concerned and I didn't want involvement in formal religion. I came to see David as after my soul for God, certainly not as wanting me for himself in any way whatsoever. He was always correct and a perfect gentleman.

David asked me if I would partner him on a course he wanted to go on; it was for learning to teach country dancing. I had the time and I enjoyed dancing with him, so I was willing to accept. We met in town after work and he invited me to have a coffee and cake with him. I wanted to pay for my own food but he insisted and since I was helping him out, I accepted.

Roger brought it all to an end.

One Monday, I met David as usual at the coffee bar and we sat talking as we normally did but I could see that he had changed. It wasn't long before the bombshell fell.

"I've met Roger."

That was a shock. I tried not to show my discomfort. "Oh, yes?"

"You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend." He sounded more sorrowful than angry.

"Should I have done? I just see Roger on Fridays — nothing serious."

"That isn't how he sees it."

I was both pleased and confused to hear that information. "That isn't the impression he's given me. Anyway, how did you get to meet him?"

"A friend works at his place and your name came up and he knew we were dancing together. I went to see Roger today during the lunch break. I asked him if he was serious about you and he said he was. He was upset that you hadn't told him about me."

"He knows I come dancing," I said, feeling defensive. "He doesn't like dancing. He's never seemed serious about me so why should I tell him that I have a partner to dance with?"

"It matters to him and it matters to me."

He sounded deeply aggrieved and I was beginning to feel like some kind of two-timing Scarlet Woman. "But, David," I said, "it isn't as if we're going out together, we're just dancing partners."

"That isn't how I see it. I like you a lot," he said, looking at me with pain showing in his eyes.

The situation had taken on a new twist. I had no idea that he regarded me as a girlfriend. I didn't want him to think ill of me and that I had been stringing him along. "Look, David, someone told me not to get serious about Roger. He let someone down badly. He's older than me. You know, old enough to go steady with a girl, but he's not the marrying sort."

"But I am, Alice."

I was staggered. How could he talk of marriage? I had never once thought about him in that way. He had never kissed me or given any intimation of his feelings towards me. I looked into his troubled face and felt utterly wretched. Clearly he loved me and I had, in his eyes, just been using him for my own purposes. I saw him as a friend, a dancing partner, and we got on very well together. But all the time he saw it as a growing boy-girl relationship.

Returning my thoughts to the kitchen sink, I finished off the dishes and went upstairs wondering what had happened to gentle David. Would my life have been very different with him? But I didn't love him and I could never have married him. I changed the bed with my mind still in the past.

What David had discovered had clearly ruined our dance partnership. I knew that from then on he would be dancing with others and I would be lost without him. Why did he have to take our relationship so seriously? I was selfishly angry. But more than anything I was furious that the two of them should meet behind my back and discuss me as though I were some sort of commodity — deciding between them which of them should have me. No doubt David was being very courteous towards Roger; willingly stepping down rather than be the cause of a relationship breakdown. But did I have no say in the matter?

I made my protest to David. It didn't have to be that way. Roger had never shown any sign of commitment, whatever he may have told him. It was only a casual relationship with no strings attached on his part.

He took my hand and said tenderly, "I've told you, he doesn't see it that way. But if he doesn't want to marry you, Alice, I certainly do."

I looked at him and saw a kind of hope through the pain that he was suffering. I was touched but I just couldn't fancy him that way at all. The fact that he went behind my back told me that he believed in male dominance and although I needed that for dancing, I wasn't going to let someone take over my life. I was on a ladder to success and I didn't want a man to hold me back, not even Roger.

The finality of my relationship with David came when he told me that henceforth, although we would meet in the coffee bar until the remaining dance training sessions had finished, he would no longer pay for my coffee and cake. I thought that a bit mean since I had offered to pay for my food in the first place, even though he had invited me there. I didn't have time to go home before meeting him at the training centre near his place. If buying a coffee and a cake constituted ownership, I was glad he wasn't my boyfriend. But I was very cross with Roger.

"How could you go behind my back?" I demanded of Roger when he met me later.

"I didn't, he came to see me."

"But you discussed me as though I were a prize cow!"

"Nothing of the sort. He just wanted to know if I was serious about you. You never told me about him. I'm the one who should be angry."

I was furious that he should put me in the wrong. "I don't see why, we only go to the pictures together. You're not serious about me. I've been warned about how you treat girls."

He was staggered and wanted to know what I was talking about. I told him but he casually dismissed the gossip. "Oh, that was a girl who thought more about me than I did about her. I don't know why. We didn't go out together as such. I never told her I loved her or anything like that."

"Huh! You've never said how you feel about me either. We've only been out a few times. How could you say you're serious about me?"

"Because I am."

“You could have fooled me. Now you’ve ruined things. I’m not going out with David, I only see him to dance with. Now he won’t dance with me any more all because of you.”

“I’ll take you dancing,” he said with incredible confidence.

I was most unhappy at the idea of a beginner replacing the expert David. “You can’t dance,” I told him sharply.

“I’ll learn.”

But Roger never did learn to square dance. Moreover, he refused to wear plimsolls and so he skidded along the floor, knocking others over on his way down. The dance hall became more like a bowling alley. He didn’t care that he totally embarrassed me in front of David and all the other dancers. Eventually, I refused to go with him again. I taught him ballroom dancing instead; but he remained a disaster on a dance floor.

He didn’t do too badly in my mother’s empty back bedroom. We had a training manual and an old wind-up gramophone to aid us. It was hard graft getting him to pay full attention but he seemed to master the rudimentary steps of the dances I was familiar with. I have always admired Roger’s confidence though. At our first proper dance he had no qualms about trying out his budding skills; he headed straight for the floor and started off — wrong foot first. I sucked in my breath as pain soared up my leg and said patiently, “Wrong foot, Roger. Try again.”

Before long we were off but he was out of time with the music. The dance was a foxtrot and he was trying to perform a quickstep so we got our feet tangled up. We eventually managed by doing a bit of a jog-along. The only disconcerting thing was his habit of seeing a space and racing for it. This was to be a habit I never managed to get him out of. He has always been happy doing his own thing on the dance floor. I have always been the miserable one by refusing to dance with him unless the floor is chock-a-block with other dancers. He has two left feet and no sense of rhythm, and is totally unable to be in harmony with a partner. He has no finesse and I should have known his manner of making love would be very little different.

Bringing my mind back to the present, I picked up the black undies and burst into tears. I saw myself in the mirror — just a pathetic old woman in search of an impossible dream. Wrinkles, grey hair, varicose veins, body elastic no longer able to hold up or hold in — like ageing knickers’ elastic of days gone by. I

laughed hysterically as I thought of all the knots that got tied in the elastic of those old navy-blue school bloomers. But, although my flesh has succumbed to gravity, just like the bloomers, what I am is essentially the same. I began to understand why movie stars resorted to surgery. I sighed; there would be no such aid for me; my problem lay elsewhere anyway.

I washed my face and put on a little make-up. I refused to give in to misery, old age or self-pity. I put on my usual bra and pulled the straps up a little to raise my breasts. That gave me a better shape under my blouse. I left open the two top buttons to reveal a slight cleavage. I put on my close-fitting pair of trousers that tended to make me look slimmer. What I saw in the mirror made me feel better about myself. With no sensual garments tarting me up, I was just me — seventy but vibrant with life. I slipped on my blue blazer and went out, determined to continue in my search for fulfilment. My first stop would be the local newsagent.

I walked down the hill into town, careful not to trip over the uneven rough paving stones the council had recently had laid to give the place ‘atmosphere’. Ironic really, tarting up the town to give it an ancient appearance when some of us senior citizens were doing our best to keep young and healthy — falling over knobbly slabs would not help us in our quest. I went into the shop at the bottom of the hill and looked along the many rows of magazines. My eyesight wasn’t good enough to see what was on the top shelves and I couldn’t have reached up there anyway. I pondered what to do. A young girl came up to me and asked if I needed help. “No thanks,” I said embarrassed, and left the shop feeling utterly defeated; tripping on one of the rough slabs but coming to no harm.

I went to my usual café so that I could sit and give the matter some thought. I saw one or two people I knew but I wanted to be alone. I smiled and gave these acquaintances a pleasant greeting, but when they asked me to join them I said I was expecting to meet someone and left them to chat to each other. I found myself a small table tucked away in a corner. The waitress came and I ordered coffee and a toasted teacake. At a time like this I needed comfort, never mind the calories. I sat looking out of the window, giving my ankle a bit of a rub whilst pondering my dilemma.

Across the road I saw the young girl that had been with her partner the day before. She seemed to be waiting and I wondered if

the boy would turn up. I saw him arrive and they threw themselves into each other's arms. Before long they were kissing and petting. My mind went back to my own girlhood and to my first love. He was the boyfriend of my best friend Carol.

In the park I watched them lying under the willow tree with his body wrapped around hers. Eric was kissing Carol and my heart was breaking. I wandered away, as I always did, to visit the wishing tree on the little island in the middle of the lake. As I crossed over the first bridge I stopped and looked down into the water at my own reflection. I sighed; Eric had said that he would kiss me when I was twelve but who would want to kiss a girl like me when Carol was around? Pangs of jealousy pierced my heart.

One day, I went with Carol to the lido. I didn't know she had arranged to meet Eric there. She wasn't supposed to go with boys but I didn't mind being her alibi. I came out of the changing-room and saw Eric in his swimming costume as he lay on the decking. He was taking in the sun while chatting up Carol. He may have been thin but to me he was just right.

After a little while, a certain something fascinated me and I could hardly take my eyes from looking at the unusual sight. It wasn't the interesting bulge in his groin region, that phenomena could have been anything; after all, I had a pocket in my navy school knickers so why shouldn't he have one in his swimming costume? No, what attracted me were little black hairs, like curly bits of wire, peeping out from the legs of his cossie and also sticking up through the material in the region of his bulge. I found them quite riveting — how did they do it? His hair must have been very stiff indeed. I looked at the dark hair on his head, chest, arms and legs but none of it was that stiff. I found it fascinating, absolutely fascinating. He saw me looking at his personal area and grinned. I looked shyly away. There was so very much for me to discover about boys.

It was after the lido visit when Eric kissed me. I never thought it could happen. I had been waiting for Carol under the willow tree when Eric arrived early.

"Come on, Alice, now's your chance," he said.

"What for?"

"What you've been waiting for."

I couldn't believe he meant kissing. "Waiting for?"

He grinned. "This," he said, and pushed me on my back, kissing me just like he kissed Carol.

It was my very first kiss. I didn't know what to expect but it wasn't unpleasant, although the taste of onions was a bit off-putting.

"I saw the way you were looking at me at the lido," he said grinning, but before he could say more, Carol appeared. She gave me a hard look and so I left them to it until it was time to go.

Just before we left the park, he whispered, "Meet him tonight outside the cinema near your house."

I thought he loved me and wanted to be with me, just me, without Carol around. I waited and waited, going over many times the funny feel of his lips on mine. I didn't mind the waiting because I just knew he wouldn't let me down.

Would we go to the back row and cuddle up together on a double seat, like all the courting couples did? Would he bring a bar of Milk Tray for us to eat? I had sixpence left out of my pocket money, so should I offer to buy us ice cream at the interval? Suddenly, he came into view. The sight of him coming along the road filled me with excitement and it was with joyous expectation that I listened for his first endearing words.

"Hello, Alice, there's something I want to ask you."

I waited with baited breath for the words I wanted to hear — words that would linger in my mind — words that would make me feel special, just like Carol. I smiled and said shyly, "Yes, Eric?"

"I need a pair of used knickers for a bet with the boys. Will you give me yours?"

My heart sank. The rotter! How could he? Of course, he could never ask Carol but why did he ask me? I dropped my head as tears rolled down my cheeks. "No," I muttered.

"Damn it!" he said, and walked off without even saying goodbye. I went home and cried myself to sleep.

I was suddenly brought back to the present.

"Hello, Alice, we meet again," said a familiar cultured voice. "Do you mind if I share your table?"

My heart raced with excitement; Tony was standing over me, the whole of his handsome face — eyes, cheeks, mouth, and the dimple in his chin — caught up in his disarming smile. He was dressed all in black, just like the man you used to see in the TV advert for

chocolates. His straight back, broad shoulders and slim waist were emphasised by a broad belt slotted through his fashionable low-cut fitted trousers. His tan looked gorgeous, his hair shone silver white, his blue eyes sparkled and his muscles bulged beneath his tight-fitting shirt. What a man, or so he seemed after thinking about that weedy teenager, Eric!

“Please do, Tony, I’m glad to see you,” I said, unable to hide the real pleasure his presence gave me. I felt the same excitement as when I was twelve and waiting for Eric; it was most disconcerting.

Tony slipped the white jacket he was carrying over the back of the spare chair and sat down. The waitress came to him immediately to take his order. Smiling at him coquettishly, she went to get his coffee. Three women, who’d been waiting ages, were furious when the waitress walked past their table to serve someone else, that is, until they looked our way and saw Tony. They smiled at him and then turned into a little huddle, rapidly talking to each other while glancing in our direction. Tony acknowledged their smiles of recognition with a wave of his hand, and then he turned to where I had been looking when he came into the café.

“I see our young lovers are at it again.”

“Things were so different when we were young,” I replied demurely, looking out at the kissing couple. Even at that distance I could see they had their tongues in a loving embrace. The boy’s hand was now pressing the lower half of her trunk up hard to his groin area. Erotic sensations caused my heart to beat faster. I sensed Tony was watching me and I quickly turned my head away and picked up a menu.

“Decided on an early lunch?”

I wasn’t sure whether he was amused at my embarrassment, or trying to make conversation for my benefit.

“I thought of coming sometime this week,” I lied.

“I know a lot better places to eat. Perhaps you’ll let me take you out sometime?”

My heartbeat rate increased. “Thanks, but I am rather busy.”

“Have you thought anymore about dancing?”

“Quite a bit,” I said truthfully, thinking of my reminiscing that morning.

“Does that mean you’ll consider coming this Friday?”

“I’ll think about it. It all depends on Roger.”

I could see him trying to catch my eye so he could work his magnetic charm on me. I couldn’t help but wonder why he was asking an old girl like me with so many sexy younger women to choose from. Was I some kind of challenge to his male ego?

He took my hand and said softly, “Live a little, Alice. There’s nothing like a tango to regenerate a weary heart.”

Phew, I was getting hot. Regeneration, Tony style, was a delightful prospect. The grinning waitress came with Tony’s coffee, and while she was giving him the ‘glad eye’ I pulled my hand away. But his touch had already swayed my decision in his favour. I realised the dangerous path I was treading when I foolishly looked into his eyes.

“I don’t know about a tango, but I’d love to dance with you, Tony.”

The look he gave me in return sent a thrill down my whole body. I knew we were giving each other coded messages and I had to disentangle myself. I changed the subject and asked him about his recent holiday. Then I talked about our caravan holidays and the coastal paths we had walked. But every time I looked at him, he was captivating me with his ‘bedroom eyes’ and his devastating smile.

A friend of Tony’s arrived; evidently he was meeting him there. Tony introduced us but I stood up to go, saying I had to get back. I was glad to be able to get away even though part of me was under Tony’s spell and longed to be near him.

Tony stood up and kissed my hand in farewell. I noticed women looking in my direction, jealousy written all over their faces. A few had raised eyebrows, but I refused to feel guilty. Even so, I deliberately turned my thoughts to Roger. With determination I put on my blazer, walked to the till to pay up and, with eyes watching me, I walked out of the cafe. With Roger uppermost in my mind, I was on my way back to the paper shop.

I knew exactly what I was going to do; I rehearsed it over and over in my mind so as not to hesitate when I entered the shop. I went up to the counter and said, quite brazenly, “It’s my husband’s birthday tomorrow and I want to give the old codger a surprise to liven him up. I want one of those sexy magazines you keep on your top shelf.”

"I'll get one for you," said the young man with a pleasant smile. He didn't even raise an eyebrow, which made me wonder if oldies were regular customers for top shelf titillaters.

He went with me to the magazine stands. "We have all sorts. How far do you want to go?"

"All the way." I grinned nervously at my boldness.

"Right. They don't go any further than this one," he told me, getting a magazine from the furthest position on the top shelf. "It's rather expensive, do you want to glance at it first to see if it's what you want?"

The thought of being observed looking through a pornographic magazine was absolutely horrifying. "No thanks, if it's expensive, it must be good."

With other customers looking on with grinning faces, I gave him the money and quickly left the shop with the well-wrapped magazine tucked tightly under my arm as if it might try to escape. I just caught a woman's comment before the door closed behind me.

"I hope she knows what she's doing. She'll give the poor bugger a heart attack." The following laughter faded away as I hurried up the road.

When I arrived home, I hung up my blazer and put the kettle on to boil. I sat looking at the wrapped-up magazine as though it were Pandora's Box. I felt very diffident about looking through its pages now I actually had it in front of me, but I could hardly give it to Roger to look at if I didn't know what he was going to see. I took it out of the several bags that covered its shame. Wow! If that was on the cover what was I going to find inside?

I made the tea and poured myself a cup. I started turning over the first page when the front doorbell rang. I nearly jumped out of my skin! Heart racing, I snatched up the magazine and, as if it was about to burn down the house, I looked for somewhere to dump it. The bell rang again. I was going around in circles. Where? Where? Where? With the doorbell ringing again, this time with more urgency, I finally shoved it under a seat cushion of the sofa in the living room. I tried to calm myself while making my way to the front door.

"Hi, Alice, sorry to disturb you. I guess you must be busy." It was my friendly neighbour, Barbara.

I closed the front door and led her to the kitchen. "Not very. I was about to have a cuppa; would you like one?"

"Thanks, mustn't stop long though, I'm meeting Clive for lunch," she said cheerfully. Barbara was certainly dressed for the occasion. She was wearing a smart beige trouser suit with a low-cut pink blouse showing a very attractive deep cleavage.

I offered her a chair at the kitchen table. "Tea okay?"

"Please. No sugar, I'm trying to lose weight."

"Your Clive gets about more than Roger, where's he gone today?"

"It's his band. He's getting involved with the afternoon dancing at the Victoria Hall," she answered, putting milk into her cup from the jug on the table. "The band's been practising all morning; they'll need to, it's ages since they played for ballroom dancing."

I poured the tea into her cup. "Strong enough for you?"

"That's fine."

The mention of afternoon dancing had made me feel a little guilty. I knew I wanted to go dancing with Tony, but was that all I wanted to do with him? I tried to concentrate on Clive.

"He must really enjoy what he's doing. How long has he been playing in a band?"

"He started as a teenager fifty years ago, but it's ages since he's done any professional work."

"Would you like a biscuit?" I wanted an excuse to eat one myself.

"No thanks. Actually, I only called to see if I dropped an earring here the other day."

She was giving the biscuits a longing look. I had to admire her restraint.

"I haven't found one but then I haven't been looking. Where do you think you might have lost it?" I hoped it wasn't in the living room.

"Well, since I was sitting on the sofa, perhaps it's gone down by the cushion." She rose from her chair. "I'll go and look."

"No! Stay here and drink your tea before it gets cold," I insisted, putting my hand on her shoulder to sit her down again. "I know the places where things can slide."

"I'll come and help you."

"No need, I'll only be a minute," I answered quickly. Before she could get up again I was off into the living room like a scolded cat.

I went straight to the sofa, took out the magazine and put it on the floor underneath. I lifted the cushions and put my hand down the sides. Nothing there except biscuit crumbs and fluff. Then pushing my hand hard down the back I came across a condom in its little packet. I wondered how on earth it got there, and came to the conclusion that it must have slipped from someone's pocket when they had been visiting.

"Found something?" Barbara had come into the room while I had been distracted.

I turned around to face her. Laughing, I said what I had found. "But no earring I'm afraid." I hoped that would be the end of the search.

"Perhaps it fell under the sofa? Do you mind if I have a look?" she asked, getting ready to do a bit of pushing.

"You look under the chair cushions. I'll look under the sofa," I insisted, and laughing to hide my embarrassment, I added, "There's probably dust there."

"I'll give you a hand to move it," said Barbara brightly. Before I could object, she had pushed the sofa right back, revealing the magazine in all of its naked glory.

"What's this?" she asked.

Not wanting to see the look on her face, I had my eyes half closed. Before I'd found words to give an explanation for harbouring pornography, she said in a disappointed voice, "Oh, that's all it is."

I opened my eyes fully to see her holding up a ring off a can. I hoped she didn't notice my sigh of relief.

She casually picked up the magazine. As she looked through it, my face was colouring up fast and my throat was going dry. My mind was searching for an explanation. Blame it on the kids?

While I was trying to clear my throat to speak, Barbara beat me to it.

"Clive gets this one," she said. "It's a bit extreme but it works wonders for our sex life."

"That's good; ours too of course," I lied. The sweat was now evaporating from my face and my voice was a little high, but I managed to keep it steady. "Of course, it's not to everyone's taste."

Barbara was busy flicking through the pages. She paused to look at a pair of lovers erotically entwined. "Have to keep them out of the way when the kids come. They'd be horrified, you know. But I expect it's the same for you. Funny isn't it? Do it when you're young and a man's being masculine. Do it years later and he's a disgusting old man. Women the same. It's a funny old world we live in."

"It certainly is," I said, finding it hard to believe I was having this discussion.

"Well, I must be off. Let me know if you find the earring. Cheerio, Alice," she said merrily as she made her way out.

"Cheers, Barbara," I replied and collapsed on the floor laughing with relief.

I poured myself a small glass of sherry to steady my nerves. Sitting on the living room sofa, I picked up the magazine. If Clive had these books on a regular basis, they surely must do something for him. I was beginning to sweat just looking at the cover.

I put down my glass, took a deep breath and turned over to the first page. Pink bodies were entwined in such a way that I wasn't quite sure which bits were which. I turned the magazine around to get various views. I had never before examined a man's private area in fine detail and my face turned hot as I realised what I was looking at. One might say it was rather an unusual shot of the copulation act, but it was viewed from an angle impossible for lovers to see for themselves, that is, without the aid of a number of strategically placed mirrors. With great difficulty, I tried to picture in my mind Roger and me trying it out. Somehow I don't think it would work; we would get stuck before getting very far. Apart from which, I rather think the kinkiness of the manoeuvre would be more of a turn-off rather than a joyful mutual experience.

A knocking on the window shook me out of my reverie and I was horrified to find another neighbour was paying me a visit. This time it was the nosiest scandalmonger of the neighbourhood. The last thing I wanted was Glenda catching me looking through a pornographic magazine. I put the thing behind my back as I waved to Glenda to go round to the back door, then I pushed it under the sofa again.

As I reached the kitchen, Glenda, fresh from the hairdresser's salon and wearing a smart town suit, was already on her way in — she is quite a pushy person.

"It's nice to see you, Glenda," I lied. "I was just having a sherry, would you like one?" I was willing her to say no and that she couldn't stop.

"Thanks, yes please," she said, sitting down. So much for my psychic powers! She continued in a conspiratorial whisper, "I've just come round to tell you something dreadful, but not a word to anyone else please, I don't want people to think I gossip. I went to Barbara's last night and what do you think I heard?" Being much too eager to get over her juicy news, she didn't wait for a reply. "I'm sure they were at it upstairs."

"You went straight in without knocking?" I asked, hoping to divert her from telling me more, but I wasn't successful.

"I always knock first," she said, as though that made it all right. "Well, if someone leaves a door unlocked it's an open invitation to enter isn't it? Anyway, I called out before I went right in, just like I do when I come here. But they were upstairs, doing disgusting things."

"Isn't it their business what they do in their own home?" I said, repulsed by my Nosy Parker neighbour.

"Of course it is, but really — at their age?" Her face muscles tightened, gathering her wrinkles together and making her look like an old hag.

"Frankly, Glenda, that is surely up to them," I said haughtily. "Why shouldn't they enjoy sex? Good luck to them. But you can't possibly know what they were doing anyway."

"My dear, I heard them. He was sort of shouting and she was kind of groaning — I can't say any more," she said through tight lips. But she couldn't hold back the mighty gusher: "It was too disgusting!" Folding her arms, she gave her shoulders a heaving shrug.

"Really, Glenda, you just imagined it all. They were likely doing exercises."

I watched her lips tighten into a volcano-like wrinkled red pout; making her look even more grotesque. If she could have seen herself in a mirror the ghastly sight would have given her a fatal stroke!

"Alice, my dear, you didn't hear Clive," she answered, as though talking to a difficult child.

"Neither should you have."

"I couldn't help it. If Cyril tried anything like that, I'd chop it off!"

I was now feeling exceedingly angry with Glenda, but growing more and more jealous of Barbara.

"It really is none of our business," I protested. "I don't think you'd better say anything else, Glenda." I was sounding a bit prissy as well as being hypocritical. Most of us neighbours loved a bit of gossip and usually I was no exception.

Ignoring my comment, Glenda went on, "And do you know what? One of those dreadful pornographic magazines was on the kitchen table. The pictures inside were disgusting!"

"You looked inside, knowing what you would find?"

"How can you judge if something is indecent if you don't inspect it first?"

I'd had enough of Glenda. While she went on chatting about her indecent neighbours — people I find lively, friendly and warm-hearted — I tried to think of how to get rid of her.

"Oh, gosh! Is that the time?" I said, looking at the clock. "I'm supposed to be meeting a friend in town. Must rush. Drink up, Glenda, we'll have to chat another day. Sorry to hurry you."

I walked to the kitchen door to make sure she got the message. She reluctantly swallowed up her drink and, still talking, left the house. I practically closed the door in her face; she just wouldn't stop her chatter.

I had to get out before someone else came. I gave Glenda enough time to get back home and then left the house. I headed for town and that nice little lingerie shop. Roger had told me to use our joint account and I intended doing just that. I made sure the chequebook was in my bag. A credit card would make my life much easier but Roger had always discouraged me from having one. It's not difficult to understand why.

I knew I shouldn't be doing it but I felt driven from within. I had seen something the day before and it had taken my fancy but I didn't know I wanted it then. Hearing about Barbara and Clive in the throws of ecstasy had strengthened my yearning for fulfilment.

The assistant smiled sweetly as I went into the shop. "Can I help you?" She gave a little lift to her eyebrows. "Another little gift for your friend maybe?"

"Not today," I said, walking over to the nightdress rail.

I picked up a slinky white satin nightdress trimmed with exquisite lace. I held it up against me in front of a long mirror. Pleased with the effect, I took it over to the till.

"Wrap this up please. My daughter is getting married and I want to treat her."

"Ideal! I'm sure she will be highly delighted. That will be one hundred and twenty-five pounds please, madam."

I had a long soak in the bath that evening. Afterwards, I drank the rest of the sherry while waiting for Roger to come home. I had my new sexy nightdress on and I kept getting up and walking around so as not to get it creased. I just had time to see the beginning of a sexy programme before hearing Roger's car. I slipped on my dressing gown. I was in the mood for love but the moment had to be right.

Roger entered the house with an armful of brochures. He put his freebies on top of a pile of others waiting to be read. He threw his coat over a chair for me to hang up later, and came into the kitchen where I was making his hot chocolate.

He came over to give me a little kiss. "Had a good day?"

"Lovely thanks. Had a few surprises."

He wasn't listening. He walked into the living room. "I think I can just catch the news. You're not watching this are you?"

Without waiting for an answer, ignoring the wriggling bodies moaning and groaning on the screen in front of him, he changed the programme over to the late night news. "More trouble! It's all bombs and mayhem. Is my drink ready, Alice?"

I had been hoping he would see the sexy programme and we could discuss it; maybe practice what we saw. "Dream on Alice!" I said aloud.

I took Roger his drink. "How are you feeling?" When he didn't answer, I raised my voice so he could hear it above the television. "Would you like me to massage your shoulders?"

"What? No, not tonight. Going to bed when I've finished this."

I sat down and listened to him slurping his chocolate drink. I decided to go to bed and leave him to it.

“By the way,” he shouted to me, as I was about to go upstairs, “remind me to pay those bills tomorrow. I should have done it today.”

I went up to our bedroom, took off my nightie and hung it up carefully in my walk-in closet. Perhaps the few creases might drop out, if not, careful ironing might help. I looked for the discarded tags and labels in the waste bin. I could say the nightdress didn't fit, or my daughter didn't like it. Then I realised that if I took it back, I'd only get an exchange voucher. I put on my old bag of a nightdress and with a deep sigh, crawled into bed. I wondered if I could sell a few of my pictures to pay for my profligate spending. If Roger knew the financial outlay to get him aroused, it would keep him deflated for months.