

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



With a Little Help from My Friends

Patricia Burns

About the Book

They were the talented ones - young, fresh, arrogant, with a bright golden world swinging ahead of them. Then came that terrible, traumatic summer, their last summer together, the summer that had savagely thrust them into the adult world.

Jill - the leader, brilliant, ambitious. She made it to the top but never recovered from that nightmare summer.

Carol - lovely, languid, destined to be a great artist until her own sexuality destroyed her dreams.

Penny - determined to drag herself from a council estate and a scrounging father to the glittering world of the stage.

Andrea - loyal, obedient, self-effacing - and dazzled to be part of the clever set. She never realized her life was a lie.

They never really knew the truth about that summer - just that it had changed their lives.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE ARTICLE CAUGHT Penny's eye as she was trying to get her son ready for his father's Reasonable Access day.

'Unreasonable bloody Access, if you ask me,' she muttered, flicking through the pages of the Sunday colour supplement in search of some distraction from the bad-tempered thumping around in Justin's room.

'Half-past nine. Nobody else in the building is awake, let alone up.'

And then she saw the photograph, under the headline 'The New Right', and her attention sharpened. She knew that face. Swept with a sudden aching nostalgia for the time when life was simple and uncomplicated, she looked at the caption for confirmation.

'Mrs Jill Lovesey, Member for Standingleigh East, with her husband, Mark, and two children, Robin and Emily.'

'Good God,' she said out loud. 'Jill the Red's gone over to the other side.'

If it was the same person. She stared at the face in the photograph, smiling so confidently at the camera, and surrounded by the symbols of her achievement, her handsome family, a couple of sleek ponies, a stockbrokerish house. Jill never could stand horses, or horsey people. But there was no mistaking that level gaze, that square jaw, that defiant stance. It had all been softened now, of course, by success and the intervening years. No longer was Jill the scruffy eighteen-year-old in flared jeans and embroidered afghan coat, half hidden behind a veil of waist-length hair. Gone was the fisherman's smock and the flat sandals. J-boots, Penny thought, with a smile of reminiscence. Instead the Member for Standingleigh East was as well groomed as

her children's ponies, quietly stylish in Jaeger and an expert cut and perm.

Instinctively, Penny glanced in the red-framed mirror by the notice board. Appearance was so vital in her profession. She ran her fingers through her hair and nodded at her reflection, satisfied. Yes, the new streaks did work. Pink was not too young, nor too outrageous. She was only thirty-six, after all. It was not so very long ago that she and Jill and the others were all living in each other's pockets, sharing each other's lives and dreams and ambitions. It seemed like only yesterday. Yesterday, and yet it was another age.

'Mum!' Justin erupted from his room in his pyjama top and football shorts, his thin face thunderous. 'Where are my Liverpool shirt and my tracksuit?'

Penny swallowed the rising irritation. It was always the same when he was going to meet his father. He could never find what he wanted, got annoyed and blamed it all on her. And she, who hated to let him go away from her love, her influence, tried so hard not to cling that she usually ended up shouting at him.

'Where did you leave them?' she said.

Her son glared at her, a fair, lanky replica of herself, with thirteen years of frustration gathered in his blue-grey eyes.

'I dunno, do I? In my room. But they were dirty.'

On any other day, Penny would have asked him why the hell he hadn't put them out to be washed, why he couldn't use his brain for a change. But today was access day, so she used her strongest defence and made herself play a part. Perfect, patient mother. Being an actress did have some advantages.

'Let's go and have a look, shall we?' she suggested, sweetly reasonable.

With Justin scowling and muttering behind her, she poked around in the disaster area that was his room. Good God, what would her mother have said to such a tip? When she was thirteen, Penny was keeping most of the house clean,

not just her own room. She had always envied Jill, whose mother employed a cleaning lady, and who was never expected to do a hand's turn. Not that she had ever let Jill know it. The ability to act came in useful even then. Jill had never guessed how intimidated Penny always felt, going to that gracious, immaculate house with its careless abundance of food and drink, fresh flowers and electrical gadgetry.

The tracksuit, still muddy from school sports last Wednesday, was buried under a heap of magazines and computer tapes. So was the Liverpool shirt. Holding down a now almost overwhelming urge to let fly at him over the state of his room and his inability to do the least thing for himself, Penny held the revolting garments at arm's length.

'There you are. It's far too late to do anything about them now. If you still want to wear them, the most I can do is give them a good brush.'

Justin kicked the bed.

'Wendy always has my things washed and put away by the next day,' he informed her.

'Well perhaps—' Penny began, her voice loaded with venom. And stopped just in time. Perhaps you'd like to go and live with Bloody Wonderful Wendy and your dear darling father, she was going to say. And supposing he said yes, he would like to do just that? She couldn't bear it. For all the worry of bringing up a teenage boy, for all his sulks and silences and constant demands for money, she loved Justin to distraction. He was all she had. 'Perhaps you won't need your football gear,' she substituted. 'Did your father actually say he was taking you out?'

Justin mumbled something about going with the kids to the park, and Penny guessed that he wanted to show off to his two young half-brothers. Unbidden, the picture of Jill and her reliable-looking husband and two nice clean children rose in her mind's eye. Jill didn't have to cope single-handed against a whole family pulling her son away from her.

'It's going to rain,' she pointed out, desperation beginning to edge her voice. 'You'll probably stay in and watch the box.'

And eat wholesome home-made cakes in front of an open fire.

'Oh all *right*. I'll just have to leave it, I suppose.' Justin dragged a pair of jeans from the tangle on the end of his unmade bed. 'I'll get changed,' he said pointedly.

Penny left him to it. Long gone were the days when they both wandered about the flat in various states of undress. Justin was growing up. Soon his voice would begin to break. What if he decided then that he wanted to live with Mike and Wonderful Wendy and they applied for custody? Would the court say that an adolescent boy should be with his father, especially as his mother was periodically away filming? She wandered back into the kitchen and picked up the colour supplement again to banish the thought of the empty echoing flat. There was the Member for Standing Leigh East, smiling fearlessly back at her. Jill must be away from home just as much as she was. She probably had a flat here in London where she stayed when Parliament was sitting, and then travelled back at weekends. But was she accused of being a neglectful mother, pursuing her own career at the expense of her children's security? Penny doubted it. There was the solid, capable husband always at hand, and probably an au pair or housekeeper, even a nanny when the children were younger. No searching for a relief childminder, or ringing up friends who were never there at the last minute before catching a train to some Godforsaken spot for location work. No nagging worry or guilt, wondering if he was all right, not pining or unhappy, or simply resenting her absence. Oh no, Jill would have it all superbly organised, with the help and support of her husband. Her eyes flicked down the columns of print, searching for information on him.

'Mark Lovesey, whom she married in 1969 . . . Managing Director of family firm . . . machine tools and precision

engineering . . . noted sportsman . . .' A real Mr Perfection. And no doubt devoted to his clever wife.

'What's the time?' Justin appeared once more, dressed after a fashion.

The red and grey sweatshirt was one that Wendy had bought for him. It was saggy round the bottom now from when Penny had put it in too hot a wash. Deliberately? She could not remember, but Justin still wore it, whether out of defiance or because he simply did not notice how awful it looked, she did not know. Penny resisted the temptation to tell him to put on something better. God knew, she bought him enough clothes. Really trendy stuff, the sort of thing other boys might envy. She might just as well have dressed him from jumble sales for all he cared, but her own teenage memories forbade it. The humiliation of those second-hand dresses and let-down skirts was still sharp. A whole wall of fitted wardrobes could not contain her clothes now.

She glanced at the kitchen clock.

'A quarter to ten.'

Justin swore under his breath.

'I wanted to be ready by now. Dad'll be waiting.'

Let him wait, Penny thought. She said, 'Well, you are ready, aren't you?'

No answer. Still scowling, Justin stumped into the hall, grabbed his parka and lunged towards the door. Penny trailed after him, wanting to hold on till the very last moment.

"Bye darling," she fought to keep her tone light. 'Have a nice day.'

"Bye."

A slam of the front door, and he was gone.

Penny leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. Why did she always get it wrong? Whichever way she played it, Justin always went off to see his father in a bad mood, leaving her feeling either washed-out or furious. She knew how it would be now. She would be haunted for the rest of

the day by the conviction that Justin would bounce back the moment he met Mike, the charming and cheerful side of his personality rising to the top, so that he would associate the days with his father with the happy times, and life in general with her as one long battle. She must make more effort to do things with him, she decided. When this new series was in the can, she would take Justin on a really super holiday, just the two of them. She built a sunny little daydream round the idea, imagining them on a palm-fringed beach by a glinting sea, herself cultivating a nut-brown tan while Justin skimmed across the bay on a sailboard . . . then she sighed. Justin would complain that there was nobody to talk to. He would be far happier at a holiday camp.

Justin would be at the street door by now. Unable to resist the masochistic desire to see him with Mike, Penny went into the living-room and pulled aside the long royal blue curtains. Sheltering behind one of them, she peered down the three storeys into the road. Yes, there he was, just emerging onto the pavement. And there was Mike's ageing Cortina parked on the other side, and Mike just getting out, looking as downtrodden and ineffectual as ever. Her heart twisted painfully as she saw the spring in Justin's steps as he crossed the road to meet his father, and the eager way in which he scrambled into the car. It was staringly obvious that going to Mike and Wendy's for the day was the highlight of his week. Penny watched as Mike fussed over Justin's seatbelt, struggled with the car - it took three pulls to get it started - and finally drove off out of sight round the corner. For several minutes, Penny stood gazing at the empty Sunday street, vaguely seeing litter blowing in the chill February wind, a lone cat sneaking into an alleyway between two buildings. Behind her, the immaculate flat felt like a howling wilderness.

But the fighting spirit that had brought her so far was there still. Buried, maybe, beneath the problems of being a

lone parent and a bad fit of the midwinter blues, but beating strong at the heart of her tenacious personality.

‘Snap out of it,’ she told herself, speaking out loud as she often did when there was nobody else around to give her the good talking-to she needed. ‘Make another pot of coffee, you didn’t have time to enjoy the last one.’

Good advice, she decided, and made her way purposefully back into the kitchen. Waiting for the water to filter through, she considered all the things she ought to do today. First and foremost, the new script. A good supporting role in an eight-week television drama series. It was the best break she had had in years, and yet Penny could not quite work up the right degree of enthusiasm.

‘I’m getting old and blasé,’ she told herself. But she knew it was not that. She needed someone to share it with, someone to be pleased for her, to encourage and criticise. Justin was quite good, and took an interest in the progress of her career, but it was not the same. She was tired of being on her own, of having to be the strong, responsible grown-up. She wanted someone to lean on every now and again. Not often, for she was certainly not the clinging type, but just once in a while it would be so good to know that there was someone there who cared.

The coffee pot filled, steaming and fragrant.

‘Oh sod it,’ Penny said. ‘I’ll read it later.’

She cleared a space at the kitchen table, sat on one of the chrome and perspex chairs and put her feet up on another. Pouring out a cup of coffee and adding milk and sugar – to hell with the diet – she looked round the room, searching for something to stop the downward spiral into dejection. The kitchen rarely failed to help. She had had it refitted with the rerun money from a comedy series, and was delighted with its clean, shiny high-tech lines. The black and white units with the chrome fittings, the pillarbox red wire racks and accessories had entirely matched her mood at the time – cheerful, efficient, successful. She had been on her way up,

and no-one was going to stop her. As she took in the clean, co-ordinated effect, something of her old optimism seeped back. She was still on her way up. She had not even asked for this new part, the producer had insisted on her playing it. Dickie Forrester had worked with her before, respected her abilities and knew she was just right for the role. If the series was a success, and she was a success with it, then they would be queueing at the door with lovely juicy parts for her to choose from. Keeping this prospect firmly in mind, she reached behind the cereal packets for the colour magazine. She would see what Jill had been up to during all those years since they were at school together.

The article was more concerned with the new MP's political life and philosophy than her background, but Penny managed to cull the major events. After that traumatic summer when they were all eighteen, Jill had gone to university. That much Penny knew already. Of the four of them, all with A levels under their belts, Jill was the only one who actually made it to college. Penny thought of the tense filling-in of application forms, the nail-biting wait, the interviews, the disappointments, the conditional acceptances. Andrea came back from her interview at Exeter in floods of tears, convinced she had fluffed it. Carol was told by some helpful person at the Slade that only one applicant in three hundred was successful. It had all seemed so fraught at the time, yet looking back on it now, it was really quite magically easy. They had the world at their feet then, in the mid-sixties. They were young when youth was in fashion, they were clever, they were talented.

Where had it got them? It had taken Jill all the way to the House of Commons. Penny read the tale of her career. A degree in Philosophy, Politics and Economics, marriage to Mark Lovesey, whom she met at university, three years working at the Lovesey engineering firm, then the birth of two children, a boy first and then a girl, nicely spaced with two and a half years in between. All very neat and well

planned. At the same time there was the interest in local party affairs, and soon after Robin was born, her first term as a local councillor. A few years later the jump up to national level, fighting and losing a strong Labour seat, and finally the chance of contesting a marginal. Standing Leigh East fell to the Tories and Jill in the landslide victory of '83.

Penny skipped through the political bit. Party politics left her cold. She only bothered to vote out of a feeling of gratitude to those amazing suffragettes, fighting for their rights and being force-fed for their convictions at a time when women were supposed to be vapid and self-effacing. One part jumped up at her, though. It was a straight quotation from Jill.

'As a mother, I know that children need to be firmly guided. I think the people of this country appreciate that same firm touch. We were a great nation under Elizabeth the First and Victoria. We can be a great nation again.'

It was not the patronising statement that took her breath away, although it was pretty staggering. No, it was the picture it painted of the woman Jill had become. Penny could hardly believe that this was the same person she had once been so close to. What had happened to her? She read all through the article again, searching for clues, but there was nothing. It must all stem back to the reservoir, to the drowning . . . not a word about that in the magazine, of course. Nothing about beautiful, brilliant Jennifer, in whose shadow Jill had lived, or the parents who pinned all their hopes on their remarkable elder daughter. Penny sat frowning at the frustratingly uninformative print. It told her nothing about how and why the rebellious, left-wing, anti-establishment girl had turned into this model of conservatism.

Of course, Jill would be anxious to hush up that turbulent part of her life, and journalists always latched onto the aspect they wanted to present. Penny knew this from bitter experience. Not that she ever warranted a piece in a serious

Sunday paper. The scurrilous tabloids had been more her mark. Nothing about her acting ability, of course, or about the solid work and step-by-step progress she had made over the years. All they were interested in was her affair with Gerry. She squeezed her eyes shut, shuddering as she remembered the horrendous publicity. That was when Justin started to turn against her.

She wrenched her thoughts away. She would not go over it all again. Gerry was gone, he was part of the past, it was over. She fixed her eyes on the magazine article and let her mind wander back over those other newspaper headlines, eighteen years ago, half a lifetime way. Neither Sunday heavy nor muck-raking tabloid this time, but the sober local weekly of their London suburb.

'Reservoir Tragedy: Local Girl Drowned' and then, in the next issue, 'Drowning: Sister Questioned'. Nothing ever came of it, of course. Nobody seriously considered that it was anything more sinister than an appalling accident. Poor Jill was in a state of shock for days, and no wonder. To see her sister die before her eyes like that, to try and save her but fail, it was enough to send anyone half out of their mind. They all four of them had to grow up very fast that week, to face the stark realities of life and death.

'But it did clear the way for you, didn't it?' Penny murmured, staring at the cool, collected face in the photograph. Looking back on it now, with the wisdom and the cynicism of the intervening years colouring her judgement, it was clear that Jennifer's death brought nothing but good for Jill. No longer was she the underdog, the misunderstood, forever trailing in the shadow of her stunning sister. With Jennifer out of the way, she was the pampered and privileged one, the focus of all her parents' hopes. Oh yes, that was when the change must have started, when the anarchist began to see that the Establishment did have something to offer after all.

Penny tipped the last drop of coffee into her cup and sat with it cradled in her hands, pondering. They had come a long way since then, she and Jill. They had both succeeded in their chosen careers, were both poised to rise to even greater heights. There was no limit to where Jill might fly to. Another eighteen years could see her knocking on the door of Number Ten. And for herself? The old dream of Hollywood beckoned her, tantalising. Anything was possible in this volatile business. Next year could see her breaking into the movies or reduced to bit-parts in adverts, but she had to admit that it was a whole lot easier to slip down than step up. The books of the theatrical agents were bursting with moderately talented people who were out of work more than they were in.

But politicians can be brought down as well, an evil little voice whispered. It happens all the time. A slightly shady business deal, a whiff of a homosexual relationship, an affair . . . however fraudulent or immoral they might be in their own lives, the British public expected their leaders to adhere to a sterner code. Looking at the self-possessed features of the Member for Standingleigh East, nobody would ever guess that once there had been a question mark over her head.

Why would anyone want to guess? she asked herself. What did it matter? The past was gone, there was no earthly reason why Jill should have a promising career ruined by something that happened when she was hardly more than a child. She thought again of that long summer, the year they all left school. Did it really blaze all August long, or was it just the sunny days she remembered? They certainly spent every available moment at the reservoir, sailing or just hanging about the boats, and the boys . . . Jill, Carol, Andrea and herself. They thought themselves so adult, so superior. They were the clever ones, the intellectuals. Penny crawled inside now to think what dreadful snobs they were. Proles, they called less fortunate mortals. Plebs. Even Jill, who

prefaced many of her more outrageous statements with 'Come the revolution'. Come the revolution, all private property would be abolished. Come the revolution, there would be all-night parties every day of the week.

Penny sat with her chin in her hand, looking back over the years. Thank God they weren't to know what lay ahead, those fresh, arrogant, innocent girls. Jill, Carol, Andrea and herself. She knew what had happened to Jill, but what of the others? Where were Carol and Andrea now? Once they had been so close, closer than sisters, and now she did not even know where they lived. Perhaps she would not even recognise them if she passed them in the street. On impulse, she went into the bedroom and pulled a cardboard box out from the cupboards on top of the mirror-fronted wardrobes. Must change those, she thought in passing, as she did every time she looked at them. Gerry, the exhibitionist, had liked to make love with the lights on, and watch himself. He loved himself most of all. But the pain was only fleeting this time. Penny was intent on the distant past.

She heaved the bulging box onto the floor and knelt beside it on the white shag carpet. There it was, all her personal history, bundled away for her old age, or for a generation yet to be born who would see her only as a decrepit, tiresome has-been. At least they would discover that she had been something. She lifted off the layers of playbills and pages from the *Radio* and *TV Times*, publicity photographs and snapshots with names and places written on the back, invitations and programmes, menu cards with dates scribbled on the corners, a fading spray of pressed flowers, a tattered silver horseshoe, letters, stacks of greeting cards . . . and there, almost at the bottom, was the photograph she sought.

Penny sat back on her heels, gazing at it. She had kept this particular snap because it was the only one from that distant summer with all four of them on it. Carol's boyfriend

had taken it, the one they called Satisfaction Smith, because of his fabled sexual powers. Absently she sang the song to herself - 'I can't get no satisfaction.' But her thoughts were all with the four ingenuous faces. Oh, they tried so hard to put on a show, to look sophisticated. Carol, her fair hair bleached almost blonde in the sun, pouted at the camera with what she liked to think was her smouldering Julie Christie look. The full pale-lipsticked lips were all right, but the effect was spoilt by the fact that her eyeliner was smudged from swimming. Andrea had on her prim face. Neat, dark and contained, she sat with her legs tucked properly to one side and her hands clasped in her lap, as if trying to pretend that she was wearing rather more clothes. But, Penny noticed with a smile, she had stuck out her chest, making the most of her underdeveloped breasts. And there was Jill, caught in the act of tossing back her mane of hair from her face. It was Jill who had organised the photograph, who had dragooned Satisfaction into taking it and lent him her expensive camera for the purpose. And finally there was Penny herself, striking a histrionic pose and giggling as she did so. A moment later, she remembered, she had toppled over and fallen onto Carol and Andrea, sending them all sprawling down the grassy bank of the reservoir, screaming and laughing while Satisfaction yelled at them for being silly cows.

'David Bailey doesn't have this trouble. His models do as he tells them.'

They laughed a lot that summer, laughed and cried and sang - all those songs. Every one of them seemed to have a deep significance, to have been written especially for them. And then in a few horrifying moments, Jennifer died, and the carefree time died with her.

'I wonder if you remember that summer?' Penny asked of the smooth, fresh faces.

CHAPTER TWO

A SUNDAY CALM hung over Hilltop House. From her oak-fitted kitchen, Andrea could hear only the blurred jangle of her small daughter Sally playing story tapes in her bedroom. The two boys had been delivered at St James', looking unnaturally scrubbed and shiny, for church parade, and her husband Robert was in the lounge with a pot of Earl Grey and the Sunday papers. Sooner or later he would wander in with some nugget of information from the business section, which Andrea would take an interest in, since it was of importance to him. She liked to feel included in his world. For now, though, nobody was making demands on her, so she worked quickly and methodically at preparing the lunch so that it could get on with cooking itself once their guests arrived.

Andrea had mixed feelings about the Hastings. She supposed that Camilla was her closest friend, yet she always made Andrea feel vaguely uncomfortable. Sometimes more than vaguely. It was Camilla, who believed in speaking her mind and looking truth in the face, who had suggested last year that Robert might be having an affair.

'An affair?' Andrea echoed, incredulous. 'Robert? Oh no, it's not that, I'm sure it's not, he isn't the type. Robert's devoted to us all, he would never do a thing like that.'

'Why not?' Camilla asked. 'Other men do.'

'Robert loves me,' Andrea stated, with quiet conviction. Then added, 'He bought me flowers only last week. A beautiful bunch of roses. Roses, at this time of year! Not many men do that after nearly fifteen years of marriage.'

'Not unless they're feeling guilty about something,' Camilla said.

Andrea refused to believe her. Robert was the bedrock of her life, her security, her reason for living. It was unthinkable that he should be unfaithful. Camilla was just envious of her happy marriage. She and Martin were going through a sticky patch. And of course Andrea had been quite right. Robert explained himself later, saying that the long knives had been out at work, that there had even been a danger of his being made redundant at one point, and he had not wanted to worry her about it. It was all right now, though. Two of his contemporaries had gone, and one of the directors, but Robert had managed to keep his head down and survive the shake-up. Andrea held him close, saying that of course she understood, but he should have told her about it. She wanted to share his troubles. That night he had been his old self in bed again, and soon afterwards they got away for a weekend by themselves that had been almost as good as a second honeymoon.

Quietly, Andrea walked across the spacious hall to peep in at the large through lounge. There was Robert, sprawled in his favourite armchair by the patio doors, engrossed in the papers. His thinning hair caught her heart with a stab of tenderness. Darling Robert, he was nearly bald on top now, but she liked it that way. The fifteen years' difference between them made her feel secure. She could not have coped with a dashing husband like Martin Hastings.

Sensing her presence, Robert looked up, smiled.

'Finished? Like a flick through the comic?' He offered the colour supplement.

'No, I'm hardly halfway. I'll have a look at it later.' She did not like to say she had only come to make sure he was still there. It would have sounded so silly. She went back to the kitchen.

Andrea liked traditional Sunday lunches. Roast leg of lamb with tarragon went into the oven, with a chocolate cake for teatime. Raspberry mousse and hazelnut cheesecake stood ready on the worktop. Andrea busied herself with the

vegetables and the watercress soup. Camilla was a slapdash cook, too occupied with her growing practice as a physiotherapist to lavish the same amount of time and thought on a meal that Andrea liked to. The Hastings would not sit down to a lunch like this at home. Perhaps it would deter Camilla from pursuing her latest campaign, that of getting Andrea out of the house. With Sally now at school, Andrea had very scant defence against Camilla's insistence that she should find a job, take up an interest, do voluntary work.

'You're free now, you can start doing something interesting with your life,' Camilla insisted.

'My life is interesting,' Andrea maintained. 'I like being at home. Besides, what would I do? It's all right for you, you can go back to your old job, do as much or as little as you like, fit it in with the family. What would I do? I don't want to go back to being somebody's secretary again, not full-time, and you don't get responsible jobs like that part-time.'

'There are dozens of things you could do,' Camilla told her.

Chopping up the carrots, Andrea reflected that if it had not been for Jill, she too would have had a job she could take up again. She had been all set to train as a teacher until Jill persuaded her that she should aim higher, go to university. But then, if she had done that, she would not have met Robert, so really she had a lot to thank Jill for. Not that Jill had foreseen that, of course, when trying to direct the course of her life. She had loftier paths in mind. Come to think of it, Camilla was a bit like Jill. Funny how she always seemed to find bossy friends.

She brought the potatoes up to the boil, drained and shook them, stirred the onion sauce, checked the joint. Ten past eleven. Time for a brief sit-down with Robert and the papers before picking up the boys, then changing ready for the Hastings' arrival. She went once more into the lounge, pleased as always by its generous proportions. The front,

Tudor-style windows looked out on the gravelled semi-circular driveway to the quiet road, the patio doors at the back gave onto the large garden, Andrea's creation. Decorated in subdued conservative taste, the lounge was exactly what Andrea wanted it to be, a comfortable, peaceful background to her family life.

Taking the colour supplement, Andrea flicked mechanically through the pages, her mind still on the problem of work. She supposed she ought to do something. Practically all women seemed to now. She had postponed the question when the boys went to school by becoming pregnant again, but she could not take that way out again. Robert had said several times lately how nice it was that the children were growing up a bit and not demanding constant attention. She looked at him as he sat frowning at the business section. Darling Robert. It was wonderful to know that he still wanted her company, needed to have her to himself at times. Another baby would spoil that.

Then the photograph caught her eye.

'Oh!' she said out loud, and peered at it, disbelieving.

'Mm?' Robert's attention was half diverted.

'I've just seen - no, it can't be - but it does look like her, and the name, and the age is right—' Andrea realised she was burbling, and explained, 'It's one of my old schoolfriends, in the magazine. Jill. You know, I've told you about her. The one who organised us all.'

'Really?' Robert sounded politely interested. His own acquaintances often popped up in the business columns. 'What is she, an actress?'

'No, that was Penny. Jill's an MP, member for Standingleigh East.'

'Really?' Robert repeated, but this time he put down his own paper and looked at her. 'She's done well. Unmarried, I suppose?'

'Oh no, it shows her here with her husband and children. Look.' She pointed the picture out. Robert gave it a casual

glance and nodded.

'I expect she has help in the home, and a nanny for the children,' she commented, following the line of thought she was on before seeing the article. 'You couldn't do something like being an MP and be a full-time mother.'

'Husband must be a pretty tolerant chap, letting her spend half her time up at Westminster. Can't say I'd like that.'

'Wouldn't you?' Andrea seized this lifebelt. 'You wouldn't like it if I went back to work, then?'

Robert looked at her in surprise.

'What would you want to do that for? We don't need the extra money.' And then with a touch of suspicion, 'You're not going in for the Women's Lib bit, are you? Independence and separate identity and all that?'

'Oh no,' Andrea hastened to reassure him. 'I'm quite happy as I am. It's just that with Sally at school now I thought I ought to do something else.'

'Plenty for you to do around here,' Robert pointed out. 'There's all that rough ground at the end of the garden. You said you wanted to bring that under cultivation. Soft fruit, wasn't it?'

'Amongst other things.'

Andrea gazed out over the dripping winter garden. Even now, before the bulbs came up, there was plenty of colour out there. She had spent many a happy evening planning plantings so that there was something to please the eye at every season. Yes, there was always work in the garden, and she could start on the rough ground in the spring. But Jill's fearless face in the magazine mocked her. Spend your life digging gardens? Andrea could almost hear her say in that carrying voice of hers. We've got to change the world! And then another point struck her.

'That's funny,' she remarked. 'Jill was very left-wing when we were at school. She was always talking about revolution and changing the world. Now she's a Tory.'

‘Obviously seen the light,’ Robert said.

‘Yes.’ Andrea accepted this simple explanation. After all, they always voted Conservative. So did all their friends. She was more occupied with how Jill managed her present life. She certainly did not spend her time cooking and gardening and ferrying kids around—

‘Heavens, the boys!’ she cried, jumping up. ‘Look at the time, they’ll be out by now.’

She hurried through the playroom and into the double garage where her new Metro stood waiting obediently for her. At the church, Anthony and Matthew were waiting impatiently, shivering in their Cub and Scout uniforms.

‘Come on, Mum, where did you get to?’

Andrea apologised, hurried them into the car.

‘Was it a nice service?’

‘Putrid.’

‘Rubbish. Mum, why do we have to go to church parade? It’s all so stupid.’

‘It’s part of your duty as a Cub.’

‘Boring.’

Andrea recalled the infinite boredom of chapel twice every Sunday, plus Sunday school in the afternoon, and yet she never questioned the fact that she had to go. It was just part of life. Her parents’ whole existence centred round the chapel, and to a lesser extent, God. Andrea graduated from being a Sunday school pupil at fourteen to being a teacher of the babies’ class, and on Tuesday evenings went to the Young People’s Bible Class, until that folded for lack of support. Her contemporaries defected to the church youth club, where they played table tennis and danced, the girls all together, to the latest records. The vicar only turned up for a token prayer before chucking-out time, a fact which was ruthlessly taken advantage of by the irreligious who did a quick bunk before he arrived. Andrea’s parents refused to let her go at first, but then realised that it was preferable to the local authority youth club where religion was not even

given a passing nod. Andrea was still going there once a week, her big night out, when she went into the sixth form and met up with Jill.

‘Don’t you let your Nanna and Grandad hear you talking like that,’ she warned.

The boys groaned. Nanna and Grandad had put them off church for life. There were snorts of suppressed laughter in the back seat. Looking in her rear-view mirror, Andrea could see her sons mouthing at each other. They were probably giving their wicked imitations of their grandparents. She ignored it, pretending she had not noticed. Robert would have sorted them out.

They rounded the corner into their road.

‘You must get changed directly we get in,’ Andrea said. ‘The Hastings are coming to lunch, remember.’

More groans.

‘Oh no, Abigail Hastings.’

‘Yuk.’

More imitations, out loud this time.

‘Well, you don’t have to play with her, she’ll go off with Sally. And you like Ben.’

‘He’s all right, I suppose.’

‘Bit of a Pranny.’

Matthew put on his Kenny Everett voice.

‘Don’t strain your brain, have a spak attack.’

Gales of laughter from the back seat.

Andrea drove into the garage, smiling. The boys were awful, of course, but she couldn’t help agreeing with them. Her own children were so much nicer than Camilla’s. She wondered briefly what Jill’s were like. They looked just about the same age as Anthony and Matthew.

By the time the Hastings pulled up in their BMW, Andrea had laid the table and changed into a fawn dress with a brown velvet floppy bow at the collar. Camilla was wearing a bright pink boiler suit adorned with tabs and zips in unlikely places. She was on top form, bursting with energy.

'We've all been swimming at the leisure centre this morning,' she announced. 'You really must all come with us next week, it will tone you up.'

Andrea was relieved. Perhaps she would drop the back to work bit. As they sipped their drinks, Camilla told them all how unfit they were and Martin sat looking at her with adoration. Their marriage was going through one of its idyllic phases. Andrea felt a flow of self-satisfaction. Not for all the world would she trade her own peaceful relationship for the Hastings' dramatic one. Not for her the unsettling peaks and troughs. She was secure in Robert's steady love.

She was sure of acclaim for the meal, as well. The children turned their noses up at the watercress soup, but she expected that. It was not made to impress them. Camilla did try to persuade them that too much red meat was bad for them when the lamb was brought on, but Martin silenced her after one mouthful.

'Wonderful, Andrea,' he declared. 'Quite orgasmic.'

While Camilla was glaring at her husband, Robert got his word in.

'All this fitness business is fine for some, but personally I like to sit down with the papers. Andrea found an old schoolfriend of hers in the magazine this morning. She nearly jumped out of her seat. I thought she'd been shot.'

Andrea explained once more about Jill. Martin and Camilla looked faintly impressed.

'Clever little lot at your school, weren't you?' Martin remarked. 'Isn't another of your friends an actress?'

'Yes, Penny Fairchild. She's quite often on television. I lost touch with her a long time ago, of course.'

They drifted onto the subject of schooldays, and how many of their old friends they had kept up with. Andrea thought of the four of them. Jill and Penny had gone their separate ways after that last summer, Penny to a small rep theatre on the south coast, and Jill, in a last-minute change of plan, not to the London School of Economics that she had

set her heart on, but to staider Reading. Carol she still saw something of for a while, especially after the hurried wedding and the baby. But after that their lives had been so different, Carol submerged in nappies in her two-roomed flat, Andrea working in an office in the City, that they had nothing in common. In the end, the friendship simply petered out. Without Jill to direct them, they had no purpose. The last Andrea heard of Carol was through her parents, who were then still running their newsagents shop. Carol had left the baby with them and gone off to London. Andrea was more shocked at that now that she had children of her own than she had been at the time. She could not understand how any woman could walk out on her baby daughter.

Penny's life was easier to follow. A grapevine of mutual acquaintances brought the news that she had got the longed-for place at drama school after her year as assistant stage manager. After that, Andrea would occasionally spot the familiar face on the television screen of an evening. It was very odd, seeing someone she had once known so well there on the box. People on television were a race apart, larger than life yet less real. It was almost as if Penny had died and now existed on another plane.

'... None of my crowd made it to Westminster, though,' Martin was saying. 'Pete Crawford's on the council, and old Andy Rivers is a big noise with the SDP, but then he always was a nutter. He's mellowed a lot since we were kids, though. Used to preach red revolution in the Sixties.'

'So did Jill,' said Andrea, without thinking.

'All students were left-wing then, weren't they?' Robert said. 'All those sit-ins and protest marches.'

'I wasn't,' Martin said smugly. 'I was a Young Conservative.'

Camilla could see the conversation slipping away from her.

'With all these famous friends, Andrea, don't you feel the urge to get out there and do something yourself?'

There it was again. Get out of the house, be someone, achieve something.

'Not really,' she said, knowing that she was inviting another lecture.

The children were becoming restive. Ben Hastings had left all his vegetables, and Andrea's boys, who were always made to eat theirs, were working up to a major protest. Andrea seized upon her duties as hostess with relief, and started clearing the plates. She knew she could rely on Camilla not offering to help. When she came back with the magnificent choice of desserts, plus ice-cream for Ben Hastings who never liked anything, Camilla was still in full flight.

'Now honestly, Robert, don't you think Andrea's wasting her talents? She could do something worthwhile with her time.' With masterly skill, she used the diversion of the food to her own ends. 'Now just look at that gorgeous spread. You could go into cooking for select dinner parties, Andrea.'

'She does,' said Robert. 'For me.'

Andrea shot him a look of gratitude. Darling Robert, always there to defend her.

Camilla was momentarily stopped.

'That wasn't what I meant,' she said.

Andrea busied herself with serving. When the admiration had died down, Camilla returned to the attack.

'Honestly, Andrea, you could use a skill like this. I know lots of people who would pay a bomb to have you prepare a meal for them for special occasions. Now, don't you agree with me, Robert? Andrea could make a going concern out of it.'

'What for?' Robert asked. 'I don't see the point. It would just mean that she would be out every evening cooking other people's dinners when she could be here cooking ours.'

'Oh God, Robert! I just don't *believe* you at times! Keep the little woman in the kitchen.'

'Sounds like a good idea to me,' Martin put in lazily. 'Keep 'em pregnant and beat 'em once a week. You women are getting above yourselves.'

But he smiled as he said it, waiting for the reaction. Camilla on her soapbox was a splendid sight, her shiny blonde hair swinging, a flush on her strong Nordic features. She gave off enough volts to run a power station.

The argument ran for the rest of the meal, mostly between Camilla and the two men. Andrea, when appealed to by either side, tried to make non-committal noises. When told by Camilla that she could not possibly sit on the fence over such an issue, she gave the children permission to leave the table and retreated to the kitchen again to make coffee.

Was Camilla right, she wondered, as she stacked the dishwasher. Should she be content with being a housewife and mother when people like Jill were Members of Parliament? She was sure Jill would agree, and Penny too. What about Carol? Jill had her all lined up to go to art school, and she was doing her pre-diploma course when she fell pregnant. Was Carol now out there being Somebody? It struck her that it would be very interesting to find out, if she could but trace them all.