

Acting as a Cleaning Lady

By Susannah Donim

Chapter 9 – A Life in Service

Life settles into a routine for Maria, the cleaning lady and reluctant maid. Then a new business opportunity arises.

Saturday was my first day off for nearly two weeks and it had still been dominated by Maria-time, so I insisted on spending the rest of the weekend just relaxing. We read the papers; watched TV; and consumed lots of alcohol. I had two very unladylike pints of real English ale with Sunday lunch, and we polished off a bottle of Cotes du Rhône between us with dinner.

The abdominal prosthesis came off as soon as we got back from Transformations on Saturday afternoon and didn't go back on until Monday morning. In between we made the most of unrestricted access to Dave's equipment. My over-generous bust precluded wearing any of my men's shirts, and I needed a bra to support it anyway, so I just wore one of Carol's nighties and a peignoir most of the time. As usual the fact that everything she could see of me was entirely Maria drove Sally on to greater passion. I'd given up trying to work out why. I settled for being grateful that she still wanted me, whoever I was.

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But Monday morning soon came round and we were off to the third of Dorothy's friends. We arrived at a handsome four-bedroom detached house a couple of streets away from us – the first of my clients I could actually walk to, if I had to. Sally rang the doorbell. I hovered modestly behind her, once again the immigrant cleaning lady deferring to her betters.

Ruth Baker quickly answered the door. She was brisk and business-like, perfectly coiffured, and dressed in a pinstriped skirt suit, nylons and heels. She looked like she was in a hurry to get out and off to work.

As with our previous clients, Sally had explained over the telephone what we needed to do. Like Dr Hunting-Smythe, Ruth had approved of 'being able to deal with management', as she put it. Anyway she had heard all about us from Dorothy and Joyce and was ready to show us round. We followed her as she outlined her priorities for cleaning. She was keen to have me do her laundry as well, but as she apparently lived alone, there wasn't much. Unfortunately all her underwear was expensive and was 'hand wash only' – as she forcefully pointed out. It was a big house and it clearly hadn't been cleaned at all for weeks. I told Sally (in Spanish) to say it would take me four full days. Ruth wasn't fazed.

As at my other clients, I reviewed her collection of cleaning products. It didn't include everything I needed, so while she was discussing times and fees with Sally, I went back out to the car to collect my basket.

While I was doing that, the garage door opened and Ruth backed out in her Lexus CT 200h Hybrid Luxury Compact – very nice. She waved and roared off, the garage door closing automatically behind her. Clearly she had no compunction about leaving two complete strangers in sole charge of her home. She was either supremely self-confident or very stupid. Or maybe she had done her homework about us and spoken to Dorothy and the others.

“She’s given us a key, because she’ll need to leave before you arrive each day and won’t usually be back till after you’ve gone,” said Sally as she was getting ready to go. “Looks like you’ll be on your own all day, but at least with the key, you’ll be able to come and go as you please.”

I took the key and put it in my handbag.

“She works four days a week as a paralegal at Wainwrights, a big Solicitor’s firm in town,” Sally went on. “No sign of any children; no toys, children’s books, or clothes. I think she’s separated.”

“Yes, I noticed some men’s clothes in the wardrobe in the spare room,” I said. “Looks like he moved out quite recently. I hope he doesn’t come back when I’m here on my own.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said. “If he does, don’t let him in. Call me, and I’ll call Ruth. Maybe she’s changed the locks.”

But nothing happened while I was there all that week. Sally and I agreed that I would make my own way there and back each day on Carol’s old bike, as it hadn’t always been convenient for her to drop me off and pick me up. She would just be there at five-thirty on Thursday to arrange the invoice and payment.

I hoped I wouldn’t bump into someone I knew on the way over – that is, someone that *Dave* knew – but it was very unlikely that anyone would connect him with Maria anyway.

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Ruth got home at four o’clock on Thursday afternoon and tried to communicate with smiles and hand signals how pleased she was with my work. I responded with smiles of my own, little curtseys, and ‘*Gracias, Señora*’ to try and indicate that I understood.

Sally arrived at the usual time. She and Ruth settled the business details while I was packing up.

“Dorothy mentioned that Maria sometimes works in a maid’s uniform,” Ruth said. “I think I’d rather like that.”

“Well she doesn’t on the big spring-clean in the first week,” Sally said, “as it can get too dirty.” I shot her a grateful look. “But she could come in uniform for any regular visits after that.” Grrr!

“That would be lovely,” Ruth said.

I suppose that was quite clever of my wife – a sort of negotiating tactic to get the client committed to further work. I suspected some of Ruth’s friends and neighbours would be invited over while I was there in my uniform. I was becoming a status symbol for the posh Pinner wives. I observed (again) that Sally was proving rather good at managing our little one-maid cleaning company.

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It was a good thing that I was able to finish at Ruth’s by Thursday afternoon, as I was due at Anna’s on Friday morning in my dreaded maid’s uniform. I hoped that at least I would have time to change before setting off to Joyce’s house for my afternoon shift.

Anna must have ordered the uniforms immediately after our talk on Thursday. Transformations had delivered them on Saturday morning, in time for me to parade in front of my sister. At the time I had just hung them up in Maria’s wardrobe. I had pulled the grey uniform out of its protective polythene

sleeve and dressed as quickly as I could to get the whole embarrassing experience over with, still disgusted with having to do the whole degrading 'parlour maid' thing for her. I had put off thinking about the uniforms, or even looking at them properly. But now the fateful day had arrived. I got up early to get ready, and to steel myself for my maid duties.

I took out the grey uniform again and hung it on the wardrobe door. I stood there, the fat immigrant girl in her bra, panties and tights, inspecting this horribly symbolic instrument of my further humiliation.

The base of the uniform was a plain grey dress, 100% cotton according to the label, with a white Peter Pan collar, three-quarter-length sleeves, and buttons down the front. It was accompanied by a white bib apron, with frills around the shoulder straps and along the bottom hem. There was a silly, frilly white maid's cap, which I had to secure to my bun with hairgrips. At least it would keep my fringe out of my eyes while I waited on Anna and her guests.

I was glad that my wife had already gone to work when I stood and examined myself in the mirror. I felt depressed for the first time since I had become Maria. I hadn't minded the female disguise before. As Sally had said, I'd worn sillier outfits in my university revue days. Despite the feminine smocks and slacks, hair and make-up, I could convince myself I was still Dave, just wearing a costume to earn some money by acting a part.

But the maid uniform was different. If I was seen out in this, everyone would know what I was. I could feel myself slipping into the persona of a poor, immigrant female domestic who needed her humble cleaning job for basic survival. I was going to have to talk to Sally about this. I felt like I was losing control of my life.

I arrived at Anna's back door at half-past eight. I was grateful now that I could sneak in the 'Servants' Entrance' round the back and avoid parading myself in the embarrassing uniform at the front door in full view of the whole road.

Anna was not in evidence. She was probably still getting dressed. She had left various notes for me, but the priority was to put the first load of washing in, and for that I would have to go upstairs to their bedroom. She was dressed and attending to her make-up.

"Morning, Maria, dear," she trilled when she saw me. "You *do* look lovely this morning. My ladies will be so impressed by my pretty domestic."

"*Gracias, Señora,*" I said. "*Por favour, no olvides que no hablo Inglés.*"

"What?" she grimaced. "I hope you're not being rude to me!"

I curtsied, but didn't answer. She sighed.

"All right, Dave, you can break character for a moment. If you have something to say, say it."

I stood up straighter with my legs apart and my arms folded in a probably futile attempt to assert my masculinity.

"I was just reminding you that Maria *'no speaka Inglés'*, and your guests will all know that. So there's no point in giving me orders in English. Have you got your cue cards handy?"

"Yes, yes," she said patting the pocket of her cardigan. "Look, you will play nice, won't you? You're not going to spill a cup of coffee all over one of my guests or something, are you?"

“Of course, I won’t!”

“And you will *smile*?”

“As long as you don’t give me a reason not to. I know you’re having a *wonderful* time humiliating me like this, but I warn you – I do have a breaking point.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” she said, shuddering.

She was remembering our first real, no-holds-barred, skin-and-hair-flying fight, when she was thirteen and I was eleven. It was truly physical and my fury and total lack of control frightened her. I was the loser of that contest, being smaller and lighter, and was severely punished by our parents, but Anna emerged far from unscathed. I don’t even remember what the fight was about, but it was the first time she realised that she had gone too far. Certainly she was never quite so annoying ever again.

“You should try and enjoy this,” she pleaded. “It’s another performance, isn’t it? A challenge to your vaunted acting ability?”

“That might have been true a few weeks ago,” I said, “but being Maria isn’t a performance anymore, and it’s not really a challenge.”

I realised that was the first time I had admitted it to myself. I wasn’t *acting* Maria. I *was* Maria. But was I still Dave? Anna didn’t seem to notice my sudden jolt. I brushed past her on my way to the laundry basket.

“Ahora, disculpe, Señora. Debo continuar con la lavandería.”

Well I didn’t know how many loads of laundry there would be, so I needed to get on with it.

* * *

My vacuuming, cleaning and dusting were limited to upstairs so as not to disturb the bridge players. I was ironing quietly in the kitchen at eleven o’clock when Anna appeared to request refreshments.

She stood at the kitchen door and tried to say, *“Café y galletas, por favor, María.”*

Fortunately I knew what she wanted, as an actual Spanish maid would have struggled with her accent, but no doubt her guests were impressed. I interrupted the ironing to put the kettle on and prepare the cafetière and a teapot. I laid out a selection of biscuits on a large plate and fetched side plates, cups and saucers.

It turned out that Ruth was one of Anna’s Friday morning bridge set, so I saw her again when I took the coffee and biscuits in. As I set the tray down on the dining room table I realised that the ladies had been talking about me. I smiled and curtsied but studiously ignored their conversation because of course as Maria I couldn’t understand them. Anna was smirking quietly to herself because she knew I could.

“Frankly to find someone who is friendly and obliging and doesn’t steal is a major achievement,” said Ruth. “If she does a good job too, that’s a bonus.”

“And Maria does a *very* good job,” said one of the others, apparently called Margie, “based on what I’ve heard – and seen at Dorothy’s.”

Ruth hastened to agree.

“Don’t let my sister-in-law hear you say that,” said Anna, “or she’ll put her prices up.”

“Still worth it,” said Ruth. “Plus Maria doesn’t speak English, so we can talk about her and she won’t understand.”

“Watch it,” said Anna. “She’s learning!”

They all laughed. I refilled their coffee cups and passed round the chocolate biscuits, giving no sign of understanding the conversation. I curtsied a lot while I was serving, which Anna knew was sarcastic but everyone else thought was charming.

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When I had finished clearing up after the bridge players’ refreshment break I went back to cleaning, washing and ironing for my sister. The ladies left just before one o’clock. At least two of them had to get back to organise lunch for their families.

I was on the upstairs landing as they were leaving and rushed down to help them with their coats. Margie was asking Anna for Sally’s – that is, *our* – phone number. She also wanted to book Maria to give her house a thorough spring-cleaning and to come for two hours a week thereafter. At this rate my dance card would be full even after I’d finished with the major spring cleans. So maybe we’d get some long-term benefit from my acting as my sister’s maid in front of her bridge friends.

“Thank you, Maria,” Anna said as I was packing up, a smug grin all over her stupid face. “You did very well. Same time next week?”

“*Perdóneme, señora, yo no hablo ingles,*” I said emphatically. “*Por favour, hable con mi empleador.*”

Anna’s black look almost made up for the humiliating morning. Not having to talk to my sister was an unforeseen benefit of becoming an ignorant immigrant girl who couldn’t speak English.

But that was the first time I had referred to my wife as my employer.

* * *

Friday afternoon was the first of my regular fortnightly visits to the Woodfords. My time at Anna’s had overrun but Sally was able to rush back from the bank on her lunch hour to give me a lift. Again I didn’t have time to change out of my maid’s uniform. Sally explained but I could see that Joyce had no complaints. In fact she was pleased and asked if I could always come in uniform. I still wasn’t happy about appearing in public in such a degrading outfit but what would be the point of arguing?

It was two weeks since I cleaned the Woodfords’ house from top to bottom and it was still looking reasonably neat and tidy, but it was such a big house that a proper clean would take me most of the afternoon.

Also the vacuuming and dusting had to be interspersed with doing the laundry. Three full washes were necessary. It was a good thing she had a tumble-dryer. Then there was a huge pile of ironing to do. In the end I was there for nearly four hours.

When Sally came to collect me, Joyce asked her if I would be able to come weekly – in my maid’s uniform. Sally quickly agreed. I just hoped I wouldn’t bump into Peter again. He’d started flirting

when I was just in slacks and smock; there would be no stopping him if I was in my sexy uniform. It seemed everyone liked it except me – even my wife, who was supposed to be on my side, as I pointed out to her bitterly that evening.

“The *señorita* doth protest too much, methinks,” she said, without looking up from her computer.

Further discussion was interrupted by the house telephone. Sally reached for it but I was too quick for her. I grabbed the receiver.

“Dave Jackson,” I said, in my normal voice.

Sally looked horrified, but what the hell? I shrugged. At home I was going to take every available opportunity to be Dave, to remind my wife – and myself – who I really was. The caller couldn’t see what I looked like anyway.

“Hello, Mr Jackson,” came an unfamiliar woman’s voice. “My name is Pat Ashcroft. We haven’t met, but I used to run Pinner Maids. Perhaps you’ve heard of us?”

I had the presence of mind to put the phone on ‘speaker’ so that Sally could hear the conversation.

“Oh hello, Mrs Ashcroft,” I said. “We certainly have heard of you. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

“Well I understand that your wife is starting a cleaning business?” she said.

I was watching Sally’s face. Her eyebrows shot up.

“I’m retired, as you probably know,” Pat continued, “but I might be able to help. Several of my old clients are desperate for a reliable cleaning service to replace Pinner Maids, and I’m still in touch with many of the girls who used to work for me. They really need the work...”

She trailed off, obviously hoping to gauge my reaction. She sounded quite sincere.

“Well, it’s very kind of you to offer, Pat. I’ll need to check with my wife. Just a moment, please.”

I looked at Sally. She was thoughtful. She stepped up to the telephone.

“Hello, Pat,” she said into the microphone, “Sally Jackson here. This all sounds very exciting. I wonder: would you like to come over some time this weekend, so we can discuss it further? Or we could come to you?”

I shook my head vigorously. Dave certainly couldn’t go to Pat’s house and there would be no point in Maria going instead as she wouldn’t be able to contribute to the discussion.

“No, I’ll come to you, if that’s all right,” she said. “My place is in a bit of a state. How’s Sunday afternoon?”

“That would be great – say, two o’clock?”

Pat agreed and they exchanged addresses and telephone numbers.

“So we’re starting a business now, are we?” I said after Sally had hung up.

“We already have a business – J & J Services.”

“But that was the company I set up for my digital currency trading! We only need it so we can reduce our tax bill.”

“Well now J & J Services are branching out into Domestic Cleaning. It’s just that at the moment we only have one manager and one cleaner.” She grinned. “You can have the first ‘J’ for your app; I’ll have the second for my cleaning company.”

She was pacing up and down now. I knew better than to interrupt her at times like these. My role was just to slam the brakes on if she went too far, too fast.

“We’ll have to do some serious thinking,” she said. “We’ll need business plans, financial models...” She looked up at me, her eyes flashing. “But if it’s viable I might be able to leave the bank, and it could be something to fall back on if the Tribunal doesn’t go our way. We should think about it anyway.”

“I guess it all depends on the numbers,” I said. “If I do two to three hours a week for each of Dorothy, Joyce, Dr H-S, Ruth and Margie, that’s still only about two-and-a-half days – not counting bloody Anna, of course. I need more clients to fill Maria’s week.”

“Yes, but as long as I’m still at the bank you’ll have to do most of the admin too – invoices, rosters, corporation tax, etc. I’ll be the Managing Director; you’ll be my secretary, as well as a cleaning lady.” She giggled. “We should get you a nice little skirt suit. You can sit on my knee and take dictation.”

“I’m already a director of J & J Services,” I protested.

“Dave is a director, but he isn’t around, is he?” she said, firmly.

“But I can’t help you ring up all Pat’s old clients as Maria.”

“I suppose not,” she admitted. “Okay, you can talk to clients as Dave, but by telephone only, obviously.”

“Well, there’s no point in thinking about it any further till we hear what Pat has to say,” I said. “I’m a little worried she might be trying to push her way back in. Dave will have to be out when she comes, of course, but Maria can serve refreshments, and potter around. If you meet with Pat in the dining room, I can listen in the kitchen through the serving hatch...”

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My second free weekend as Maria arrived. No way was I going to wear a maid’s uniform or even a dress on a weekend if I didn’t have to. I spent Saturday trying out the clothes Dorothy gave me. When we went out to the shops for groceries and a *lot* of replacement cleaning materials (which we would charge our clients for), I was wearing a nice pair of white jeans and a lace top. Sally was quick to confirm that, yes, my bum definitely *did* look big in them. My big boobs lifted the delicate lace way up, revealing my flabby midriff.

As we had some spare time this weekend for once, we experimented with my hair. Sally helped me braid it and secured the braids round my head with pins. It felt a little like wearing a heavy helmet but my hair wasn’t in my way for the first time since Sharon put the extensions in.

I checked myself out in the mirror afterwards and realised my outfit and curvy figure were likely to attract a fair bit of attention, especially *male* attention. Oh well, if you’ve got it, flaunt it, I suppose.

* * *

After our shopping we had a lazy afternoon. We cooked dinner together and retired early.

I was getting quite good at removing my false bottom by now. I washed it and hung it up to dry on the shower rail. I went back to the bedroom wearing only a black vintage babydoll nightie from Dorothy's collection. I was just stepping into the matching panties when my wife called from the bed to tell me not to bother...

* * *

Pat arrived promptly at 2 pm on Sunday. I was wearing a demure floral housedress (one of Dorothy's) with Carol's red cardigan and a brightly-coloured, Spanish-looking apron over it all. When the doorbell rang I scurried into the kitchen, while Sally went to answer the door. She showed Pat into the dining room, as planned, opened the serving hatch, and called through to the kitchen (in Spanish) to request tea for two. She left the hatch open so I could hear the conversation.

"Before we begin, Mrs Jackson..." said Pat. She had a very slight North London accent.

"Oh please call me Sally," my wife said.

"...Sally, I just want to stress I really don't want anything out of this for myself, if you were worrying that I'm trying to get back into the business through you." She smiled, clearly a little embarrassed. "I'm quite secure, financially. I just want to help out my old clients and staff – and you with your new business."

That was actually quite a relief. We'd been wondering if she had an angle.

"You probably know that we got in trouble because a couple of my girls started thieving," she continued, clearly upset by the memory and the admission. "The police caught them eventually, you know, and all the rest of my maids were honest as the day is long. It's not right they should suffer."

"No, no," Sally said. "I quite agree."

"I had my suspicions about the two bad girls when I first met them, but I'd taken on too many clients and I was desperate. That would be the only advice I'd give you, by the way – you need to learn to say no, and not get greedy as I did."

At that point I came in with a tray of tea and biscuits. Sally introduced me.

"This is Maria, Pat." She turned to me and introduced *Señora* Pat Ashcroft to me, in Spanish.

"Maria's actually my only cleaner at the moment. I can't really call it a business yet, and I hadn't intended to expand until you called."

"Oh, I thought..." Pat sounded surprised. "Your sister-in-law said..."

At that point I nearly dropped the tray. A teaspoon clattered against a side plate, interrupting Pat's flow. So Anna was going round telling everyone we were starting a cleaning business! Was she genuinely trying to help, or just trying to embarrass me in front of more people?

"Yes, Anna's been very helpful," said Sally smoothly. "I didn't know you knew her...?"

“Oh everyone knows Anna,” Pat smiled. “She and Dorothy and I were talking at the Women’s Institute the other day. You must come along. Everyone is saying how good Maria is, but I didn’t realise she is your *only* cleaning lady. I understand she’s from Spain and is learning English?”

“Yes, that’s right,” said Sally. “Slow progress, I’m afraid. She’s an excellent cleaner, but – between you and me – not terribly bright.”

My wife seemed to be catching the habit of teasing me from my sister. In Spanish she instructed me to introduce myself in English. They both turned to me. I handed Pat her teacup.

“*Myee nem eez Mar-i-a,*” I said haltingly, in a sing-song voice. “*I ham ferry pleeze to mee choo.*”

I did another of my not-quite-a-curtsey curtseys and scuttled back to the kitchen where I tried to sound busy while Sally and Pat laughed at my horrendous accent. Well, I’ll take it. Comic actors love to hear the sound of laughter from their audiences.

Pat got a small notebook out of her handbag and started reading through a list of potential clients.

“You can have this,” she said. “I originally started the business... oh, nearly thirty years ago now, after my husband died suddenly. It was just me and my two daughters. We were none of us any good at schoolwork, so we didn’t have much in the way of qualifications, and we didn’t like the idea of working in an office anyway. The business grew really quickly – I’m sure you’ll find the same. Most of the ladies round here work, and those who don’t are too posh to clean their own houses.”

She smiled. *Yep, that describes my sister to a ‘T’*, I thought.

“At one point I had more than twenty girls working for me,” Pat continued, “mostly part-time of course. We had clients all over Pinner, Watford, Harrow, even as far as Rickmansworth. Both my daughters ended up working in the office, only going out cleaning to fill in for the regular girls being sick or on holiday. Eventually two of my grand-daughters started working for us. In fact, they’re the girls I’d recommend you talk to first – Chloe and Fleur. They’re good, hard-working girls and I know I can trust them. They also need the money! If it takes off as I think it will, I can recommend another couple of really good girls.”

“Well, why don’t you bring Chloe and Fleur round?” Sally said. “Any evening this week would be fine. I’m still working full-time, but my husband, Dave, will be helping me. He’s out at the moment. I think this is very exciting! I’ll start ringing round the clients you gave me. If even half of them want to hire us, there’ll be enough work for Chloe, Fleur and Maria. But are you sure you don’t want anything out of this for yourself?”

“If you can give my grand-daughters some gainful employment, that will be quite enough for me...” she said. “Well I suppose there is one thing. I’m not as young as I was, and I really struggle with the housework myself these days. Perhaps one of your staff could clean for me too?” She smiled.

“I’m sure that could be arranged,” Sally laughed.