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The bedroom was dark, lit only by a sliver of brightness from the wall light in the basement well outside edging its way round the sides of the blind. Helen could just make out the clock as it clicked over to eight fifteen. She knew she should wake Matthew, but she also knew that he would be in a foul temper because she had forgotten to set the alarm. And the longer she left it, the worse his mood would be. She had no choice. She poked a finger gently in his ribs, and then once more when he didn't respond, and he turned over irritably and picked up his watch from the low table beside the bed.

'Fuck, I'm late.'

Helen watched sleepily as he jolted out from under the duvet, smoothing down his charcoal-grey hair at the sides, and started to pull on his clothes – his work uniform of a dark, tasteful, beautifully fitted bespoke suit, well-cut shirt and soft black calf-leather shoes – not bothering to take a shower. He bent down to kiss her brusquely good-bye and pulled the bedroom door shut behind him. She lay back on the pillow, which smelt faintly of the Armani Black Code she had given him on their anniversary, and stared at the crack in the ceiling. It was definitely getting bigger, and she wondered if she should speak to her upstairs neighbours about it. Not that she knew them. She'd seen them only three or four times in the two years

she'd lived here. A couple in their thirties: he was a bit stringy-looking, pale, as if he never went outside; she wore a fleece and had a mousy bob. They had an unexpectedly rampaging sex life though, which Helen could hear through the ceiling about five nights a week and sometimes in the afternoons. It was all very shouty and theatrical. Lots of 'Oh, baby's and 'Yes, yes'es and banging on the headboard. Once, they had been at it at the same time as Matthew and Helen, and it had become a bit of a competition, a sort of groan-off. Helen had always had a competitive streak.

Now she heard the click of the front door closing and Matthew's heavy footsteps going up the stairs to the street and thought about getting up. Deciding against it, she pulled the covers over her head and settled back down, then stuck one arm out into the cold room, fumbled for the remote and flicked on the TV. After all, what was the point of getting up – it was only a couple of hours before she'd be going back to bed again anyway. Because Matthew wasn't heading off for work. It wasn't eight fifteen in the morning, it was eight fifteen in the evening, and he was heading home to dinner in his own house. With his wife. Oh, and his two beautiful children. Because Matthew was married, and not to Helen – to a woman called Sophie. And Helen had spent every Monday night like this for the past four years. And most Wednesday and Thursday evenings, too.

And every Monday and every Wednesday and every Thursday when Matthew went home at eight o'clock, Helen was left alone to choose one of two exciting options: watch TV in bed on her own or get up and watch TV in the living room on her own.

Now, she lay under the dark of the duvet and listened as another scene of marital discord played out on *EastEnders*. Somebody's husband accusing his wife of playing around. Lots of shouting, everything out in the open; they'd either stay together or they wouldn't. That was the way it worked in soaps, but Helen knew the reality was far more complicated. The reality would make for terrible TV because nothing ever really got resolved. The reality was a man coming over three nights a week for a couple of hours and then going home to his wife as if nothing had happened. Over and over again. For years on end.

Helen had never expected to be someone's mistress. She had wanted three things in life: a highly paid job in public relations, a flat of her own and a man, also belonging to her exclusively. Somehow she'd ended up as a personal assistant, which was a secretary in anyone else's vocabulary. She didn't earn enough to buy, so she rented a one-bedroom flat off Camden High Street with a small, dark basement courtyard out the back, a crack in the bedroom ceiling and a large damp patch on the bathroom wall. And as for the man – well, she believed in true love and commitment and till death do us part, it had just never happened to her.

She had grown up watching her parents' dogged devotion to one another, their 'us against the world' united front which often excluded even her, their only child, and she'd been trying to locate that perfect partner for herself ever since, to find her own gang of two. She'd just never imagined she would find it with someone who was already another woman's husband.

Somewhere, way back in her previous life, Helen had been engaged to another man, the most recent in a series of long-term boyfriends. Looking back now, she couldn't remember exactly what she'd seen in Simon. Well, she could, because he was young and good-looking and he had a reasonable job and just the right amount of ambition, but she now found it impossible to fathom why she had stayed with him for five years, except that that was how she was. The one legacy of her parents she couldn't shake off was the idea that relationships were for life. Once she decided that a relationship was worth having, she hung in there determinedly in spite of any warning signs trying to tell her otherwise. So, she ignored the fact that she was the one making all the future plans and she tried not to notice how his eyes glazed over when she talked about saving up for a deposit on a flat. She had invested years in this man, it had to pay off, there was no way she was going to admit defeat. She had all her eggs in one basket and she had no intention of moving them. That is, until Simon threw them out and jumped up and down on them one evening. They'd been cooking dinner together, their nightly ritual, which, Helen thought, was a sure indicator that their relationship was mature and serious.

'I'm being transferred,' Simon had muttered into a colander full of the potatoes he was peeling.

Helen had flung her arms round him. 'You got the promotion? Regional manager, wow. So we're moving to Manchester?'

He'd kept his head down, seemingly engrossed in digging out a particularly stubborn eye. 'Erm . . . not exactly, no.'

‘Where then?’ He was making her nervous, standing there stiffly while she attempted to hug him. He’d put down the potato peeler and turned to look at her, taking a deep breath like a ham actor about to have his big soap-opera moment.

‘I’m moving to Manchester. On my own.’

He’d gone on to say that of course it wasn’t Helen’s fault. It was all him, he was afraid of the commitment. He felt too young, he said, to be settling down with one woman. It was all a matter of timing – if he’d met Helen a few years later when he felt ready for such a big step . . .

‘I love you so much, it’s just me, I’m such a fuck-up. I know I’ll regret this but it’s something I have to do,’ he’d whined, wallowing in his role. He’d insisted there was no one else involved, and Helen had believed him – had, in fact, felt sorry for him, he seemed so pained by the choice he was having to make.

Two months later the news had filtered back to her that he was getting married to another woman.

Helen had been thirty-five. Bruised and battered by the failure of the relationship more than the loss of Simon himself, she had taken the separation hard. She’d made a promise to herself that she would have some fun, take opportunities when they arose without stopping endlessly to analyse their potential. And, right on cue, Matthew had come along – her boss, of course, and twenty years older than she was – but why avoid a perfectly good cliché when it’s staring you in the face? He was handsome in the way that men in their fifties are allowed to be considered handsome despite (or maybe even because of) the

grey hair and the paunch. Tall and confident, he gave off the impression that he revelled in his alpha status. His hair was thinning but he still wore it collar length and swept back, disguising the round hairless spot fairly successfully. When the time came for him to shave it all off and just be bald and proud, he would get away with that as he seemed to get away with everything, because he had a way of striding around the world as if he owned it, that absolute self-belief that public schoolboys have, a way of challenging anyone to dispute their place high up in the social order. He had the ability to make anyone feel as if they were the centre of his world at any given moment. Physically, his most striking assets – his only striking asset – were his pale icy-blue eyes, which stood out in a face that was fairly ordinary, but he carried himself as if he were the most attractive man in the room and somehow that seemed to make it so. His success at work seemed to work as an aphrodisiac, too, on a certain type of woman of which Helen was a prime example. Mainly though, he was good company – funny, a storyteller, a good listener. He was loyal. Unless you were his wife, of course.

Helen had started to work at Global PR at the age of thirty-four, a bit of a late starter, having spent the best part of her twenties travelling and partying, and trying to ignore the irritating voice in her head telling her to get on the career ladder before it was too late. She'd spent the time since she'd got back from her world trip drifting from job to job: accountant's assistant, shop manager, theatre administrator. Periodically, she'd applied for the post of

account manager at one of the bigger, showier public relations companies, but she'd always got knocked back. Finally, she'd decided that a foot on the bottom rung was better than no foothold at all and she'd accepted a job as assistant to Matthew Shallcross, Managing Director of Global PR, a middling-sized but flourishing company.

Global was a slightly overblown name for a company whose clients were exclusively British, but they had cornered the market in a certain type of up-and-coming tabloid favourite. It wasn't large enough to attract the rich and famous but, over the years, it had become adept at forming relationships with those at the beginning of their fifteen minutes and blasting them into the papers with cleverly thought up stunts. It was easy when you had clients who would do anything if it would put them in the nationals. Every now and again one of these wannabes would fuck up – drink-driving, getting someone who wasn't their wife pregnant, going into rehab – and the Global account managers would be out fighting fires and raking in the money. These occasional high-profile blips, if handled correctly, guaranteed an interest in the client, which could be very lucrative. In truth, it was a little tacky, encouraging young and not very bright people to lay their whole lives out for public examination, but Helen considered it the sharp end of PR, and she loved it. And, after a while, when she overcame the irritation of correcting her friends every time they called her a secretary . . .

–'I'm his personal assistant.'

–'But, what do you do?'

–'I look after him . . . make his appointments, organize meetings.'

–‘Filing?’

–‘A bit’

–‘Typing?’

–‘So?’

–‘That’s exactly what I do – typing, filing, fixing meetings. You’re a secretary, get over it.’

. . . she’d started to get off on the vicarious power that being the boss’s assistant afforded her. She was the one who could say yes or no to meetings or telephone calls and, after a while, to requests for press statements. Then, once he started to trust her, Matthew had her read and later write all the releases that were sent out to the papers for several of his less high-profile clients. He’d encouraged her ambitions to have clients of her own and, the more he encouraged, the more those ambitions grew.

Helen believed that several of the other girls in the office envied her for her proximity to the man generally considered the most powerful of the company directors, but she’d kept focused on her work until a fateful lunch had changed everything. If you’d have asked her at the time what she thought about women who had affairs with married men, she would have said they were sad, desperate, unfeeling betrayers of other women. Told you they were top of her list of offenders. People to be looked down on and reviled . . .

Helen had considered whether Matthew was attractive during the time she’d been working for him, of course she had, and she’d thought that, yes, he was, in an older man sort of a way, but that was it. So, when he’d reached across the table at Quo Vadis and taken hold of her hand, she’d surprised herself by not pulling away.

‘I’ve been wanting to do this for ages,’ he’d said and Helen had felt her heart leap up to the back of her throat. She had no idea how to respond, so she’d just sat there and let him take charge.

Matthew had carried on, ‘The thing is, I think you’re beautiful. And I’ve been trying not to acknowledge that that’s what I think for months.’

Helen had blushed. Not prettily like the delicate heroine of a romantic novel but a deep, slightly clammy, crimson.

‘You know I’m married, of course.’

She’d managed to grunt a ‘yes’.

‘We have young children. If it wasn’t for them . . . I’m not going to give you that line – you know, that my wife no longer understands me but . . . it is true we’ve drifted apart. We share the care of the kids; that’s pretty much it.’ He’d laughed. ‘Can you see where this is going yet?’

Helen was still incapable of speech. Her free hand fiddled with the stem of her glass.

‘No pressure. I don’t want you to think that if you say you’re not interested, then I’ll make life hard for you at work or anything like that. Just think about it and, if you decide that, maybe, we could take things a bit further, then you know where I am. That’s all I wanted to say.’

And, in that moment, she’d realized that she wanted to sleep with him. It was something about his self-assurance, something about the way his fingers stroked the back of her hand while he talked to her, the way his eyes never left her face while she’d stammered and begun to sweat.

She'd gone back to the office in a haze and could barely look at him for the rest of the afternoon.

That night she'd bored her best friend, Rachel, stupid in the pub.

'Should I?'

'No,' said Rachel.

'Maybe . . .'

'No,' said Rachel.

'What if . . .'

'Are you even listening to me?' Rachel eventually snapped. 'He's married. Don't do it. Don't become one of those women we hate.'

'Women we hate' were a big part of the bond between Rachel and Helen. They had started a mental list soon after they'd met, backpacking in India, and when they got back to London and Helen was staying in Rachel's West Brompton flat while she looked for her own place, they had started to write it down. They kept a copy each and, regularly, when they were drunk and at each other's flats, they would check them through and update each other with the newest entries. 'Women who steal other women's husbands' had been there from the beginning but, in Helen's mind, her case was different. For a start, she had never encouraged Matthew; he had done all the pursuing.

'You're right. But . . . I think he really likes me.'

'Oh, for fuck's sake. Of course he likes you, you're twenty years younger than him and about to fall into his bed just because he's asked you to. Plus, you do his typing and make him cups of tea. You're a middle-aged man's fantasy. What's not to like?'

‘I knew I shouldn’t have told you about it,’ said Helen sulkily. ‘I knew you wouldn’t understand.’

The next morning she’d waited till Matthew was alone in his office and gone in, shutting the door behind her.

‘OK,’ she’d said.

‘OK what?’ He’d looked up from his paperwork and smiled at her. She’d blushed.

‘If you want to . . . you know . . . then it’s OK, we can . . . you know . . . if you like. I’d like to.’

Matthew had laughed. ‘Are you talking in code?’

He’d pretended to look round the office. ‘Are we being bugged?’

Helen was scarlet. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘I do. And I’m very happy. Are you free on Wednesday evening?’

Helen had gulped so hard it made a noise.

‘Yes.’

Next thing she knew, he was in her bed and all her commonsense and ambition and everything she recognized about herself had gone out of the window. And Helen had kept saying to herself and Helen’s friends had kept saying to her, ‘Get out now. This can’t have a happy ending’, and she’d ignored everyone because, inevitably, after a few weeks, she’d decided that she loved him and he had finally confessed that he loved her, too. And, of course, after a few months, Matthew had told her he wanted to leave his wife, Sophie, when the time was right. And, of course, that had been four years ago and he’d never left her for even a weekend, as far as Helen could remember.

They had been fantastic, though, those first few months with Matthew. He was so much older than any man she'd been with before, it was like a whole different world. He knew how to make her feel special. Despite the fact that they rarely went out anywhere for fear of being seen together, he'd introduced her to all kinds of new experiences – food and music and wines that had simply never been on her radar before. And being newly in love and eager to please, she had pretended to love all sorts of things which, later, once the relationship had settled down, she was able to admit to herself she hated. Like Miles Davis and foie gras and sickly sweet Château d'Yquem.

On their fourth 'date' he'd brought over a copy of Baudelaire's *The Flowers of Evil* and presented it to her, telling her that she would find it unlike anything she'd ever read before. Helen, who had a passable 2:2 in French Literature, had missed her moment to tell him this and, not wanting him to think his gift was unwelcome, had gushed her thanks. No one had ever bought her a book of poems before. Later, lying in bed in a postcoital flush, he'd asked her for her life history.

'Start from the beginning,' he'd said, seeming genuinely interested in the tiny details of her past. When she'd reached the part about leaving home and moving to London, she'd skipped forward rapidly through her university days, but he'd stopped her mid flow.

'What did you study?'

Helen could feel herself colouring up. 'Er . . . French,' she mumbled.

Matthew propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at her. 'French?'

‘Mmm.’

He was starting to smile. ‘Literature?’

‘Kind of.’

‘Kind of?’

‘I mean, yes. Literature.’ She was blushing furiously now. Why hadn’t she just said, when he’d given her the book?

‘So . . . Baudelaire . . . ?’

‘My dissertation.’

Matthew laughed noisily. ‘Why didn’t you say?’

‘Because I didn’t want to spoil your present.’

He’d kissed her forehead. ‘Well, in that case, you can explain them to me, because I’m clueless. I just liked the look of the cover.’

She knew he was patronizing her and she didn’t know why she didn’t mind. It was just that no one had ever been this *interested* in her before. It took the pressure off, being the one who was there to be pleased rather than the one who always had to do the pleasing. It was so liberating not always to have to be the adult.

Matthew had lived, too. He’d been through stuff – not just in a ‘got married and had kids’ kind of way – but he’d been alive for twenty years longer than she had. He’d been through the sixties and experienced it first-hand. She didn’t know why this impressed her – she couldn’t have been less interested in the endless bangings on of the previous generation about the sixties – but somehow it set him apart, made him interesting by proxy, by virtue of just having been alive.

In the early days of their relationship Helen had made sure she wore her best underwear on Matthew days,

rushing home from the office where they both worked to give herself ten minutes to shower and change ready to be undressed again. Their evenings were all about sex, their excitement only heightened by their restricted access to one another and the extended foreplay of a day spent pretending to be no more than colleagues. Gradually, sleep crept in, signalling to Helen a more mature phase in the relationship – they were bonding on a deeper level, it seemed to her, able to relax in each other's company. She stopped worrying whether she was in Rigby and Peller or M&S, she no longer felt the need to retouch her make-up every time his back was turned. She looked back fondly on this time as the nirvana period, that perfect stage when physical desire was joined by companionship and profound respect. It didn't last long. These days, sleep often won out entirely, exhausted as Matthew always was by his high-powered working day. And, more and more, Helen was finding that she didn't really mind. There was something coupley about it, something more real than the frantic nature of the early days. And if it was less exciting, then so what? Excitement couldn't last for ever.

After a few months, Matthew had felt uncomfortable asking Helen to take dictation or pick up his dry cleaning, so he'd requested she be found a new boss. This, of course, was interpreted by Human Resources as meaning that she was difficult to get on with, or incompetent or both, and so the promotion which had been looming drifted away and Helen missed her moment. That had been three and a half years ago. Of course, she could have left and gone to work somewhere else where she

might have been more appreciated, but she'd somehow never got around to it, and she was now officially 'secretary material,' with little reason for anyone to look at her for anything more exciting. Besides which, if she left, she'd miss those stolen moments throughout the day with Matthew and, deep down, she knew that if she wasn't right there under his nose, someone else would probably catch his eye.

So, now Helen took dictation and arranged meetings and drew up proposals for Laura, a high-flying thirty-nine-year-old director of the company, who'd also started off as a personal assistant but had steadily climbed the ladder over the years. Laura was good at her job, she was a considerate boss, she encouraged and supported Helen, always gave her credit where it was due (which was often, because Helen was clever, although she seemed to have forgotten this, and she had a lot of good ideas, for which Laura was very grateful), and indulged her occasional mood swings. She would never for a moment consider asking Helen to fetch her dry cleaning. Helen hated her.

When she and Matthew had first got together, Helen had suppressed her guilt by pushing all thoughts of his wife from her mind – this was a short-term thing to help her get over being fucked about by Simon, an exercise in building self-esteem. It was wrong, but it would be short-lived and no one would be any the wiser. After a while, when she'd realized that things had got a little more complicated than that, the guilt had begun to set in. Tiny stabs at first, and then huge waves that had made it hard for her to look at her reflection in the mirror in the mornings. How would she feel if that were her blithely saying

goodbye to her husband as he went off to work, with no idea about the double life he was leading? It was an irrefutable truth that if no woman ever went with a married man, then no wife would ever have to endure the heartbreak of finding out that her life as she understood it was a sham. As long as one woman was prepared to do it, then all women were in danger. And, currently, she was that one woman.

So she knew she should call time on her and Matthew's relationship now, before any real harm was done, but suddenly it didn't seem so straightforward. She had feelings for him. She would miss him. 'Why should I be the one to give him up,' she caught herself thinking one day, 'when it's me he's in love with?' She began to feel little stings of jealousy whenever Matthew mentioned his wife's name. And, almost overnight, she began to want to fight to keep her man and, in order to do that, she had to demonize Sophie and make her the enemy. You couldn't fight a woman you felt sorry for. You'd lose.