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Making Hay

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Extract

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Suzanna stood back from her handiwork and eyed it objectively. The frustrating thing was that she knew perfectly well half of the food she'd prepared wouldn't be touched. The women it was destined for were all bound to be on a diet: Parmesan shortbread with roasted cherry tomatoes and feta cheese would be mentally converted into points and instantly dismissed as having far too high a fat content. Perhaps she should stick a little flag into each canapé indicating its calorie count? She popped one into her own mouth defiantly and gave it her approval: the base was crisp and buttery, the tomato roasted in a low oven overnight to a rich depth, the tiny sprig of rosemary offsetting the combination perfectly. Satisfied that the price she was charging was worth it, she was just about to snap the lid on the last container ready to transfer them to her car when the doorbell rang.

Damn. Her schedule was tight enough, and she had to have a shower yet. Her hair was lank and her skin oily from the fug she'd created in her tiny kitchen. She flew into the hallway, where baskets of snowy-white cloths and napkins were waiting, and opened the door.

'Katie?' Suzanna frowned in puzzlement. 'Why aren't you at work?'

Her oldest friend stood on the doorstep, looking stricken. It was eleven o'clock; normally by now Katie would have done what was for most people a full day's

work. Suzanna had never really got to the bottom of what exactly it was she did – something to do with environmental law – but it was certainly more high-flying than running an upmarket catering company, and made her a great deal more money. Suzanna secretly marvelled at the fact she was still allowed to be Katie's friend. But she knew she always would be. They'd been through so much together. And it was obvious Katie had some kind of a crisis now. She'd double-parked her BMW outside, recklessly abandoning it to the whims of the Twickenham traffic wardens.

'Suzanna.' Katie, who never cried, threw her long, rangy arms round Suzanna's neck and sobbed. 'I had to tell you first.'

All sorts of things ran through Suzanna's head. Breast cancer? The sack? Dead parent?

'What is it?'

Katie looked at her. Tears had soaked the understated pearl grey silk of her Nicole Fahri blouse. She'd have to go and change if she was going into work. Though she was bound to have a rail of suitable clothes at the office.

Katie managed the revelation in a whisper.

'I'm pregnant.'

For a moment, Suzanna felt emotionally winded, and it was all she could do not to step back with the shock. She'd prepared herself hundreds of times for this eventuality, but it was one of those things you could never really be ready for. Despite her inner turmoil, she managed a bright smile.

'That's fantastic. I'm so proud of you.'

She gave her friend a huge hug, hanging on as if to give her reassurance, but really in order to compose

herself, to shut her eyes tight for a moment to squeeze back the tears. Katie was crying even more than ever, but laughing at the same time.

'I thought you'd be upset. I was so worried . . .'

'Don't be silly. You're my best friend. I'm thrilled,' Suzanna lied.

Katie wiped her face.

'Will you be godmum?' she croaked.

'I'd be livid if you didn't ask. Of course I will.'

'Thank God. I haven't slept all night. As soon as I found out, I wanted to tell you. And I couldn't just phone . . .'

Suzanna squeezed her friend's hand reassuringly, then looked at her watch.

'I'm going to have to kick you out, I'm afraid. I'm doing a lunch for Sybilla.'

Katie wrinkled her nose.

'Do us all a favour. Stick arsenic in her Kir Royale.'

Suzanna laughed. 'I'm not killing her off till I get paid. You know how tight she is despite her squillions.'

Suzanna, Katie and Sybilla had all met in Oxford, where they'd shared a grotty little terraced house in Jericho. Katie had been in her third year of law at the university, Sybilla was at the Oxford and County secretarial college and Suzanna was waitressing at Browns and cooking at lunchtimes in a smart-ish restaurant. They'd lived together for a year, fighting over clothes, men and whose food was whose in the fridge, before going their separate ways. Suzanna had bumped into Sybilla in Richmond High Street nearly ten years later, to find that she'd bagged herself a millionaire and a much-coveted house on Richmond Hill, where she lived with her two children, Hamish and Aurelia, a Filipino

housekeeper and a Czech au pair. Katie and Suzanna had always kept in touch, but Katie refused to have anything too much to do with Sybilla nowadays, considering her vain, lazy, shallow and tight-fisted – which of course she was. Suzanna, however, maintained their friendship because Sybilla did a lot of entertaining but couldn't cook for toffee. She knew Sybilla only used her company, Decadent Dining, because she expected a hefty discount. Which she duly gave her, after hiking up the quote in the first place. They had an unspoken agreement that they would pretend not to know each other when Suzanna catered for her: it meant the boundaries didn't blur and kept their relationship businesslike. They both preferred it that way: the thought of socializing with Sybilla's friends filled Suzanna with horror and Sybilla didn't really like to be seen fraternizing with staff. Today was her birthday lunch, her thirtieth, she'd reminded Suzanna breathily, so she wanted it to be special, though she didn't actually want anyone to know she was thirty so no candles.

When Katie had gone, Suzanna took a deep breath. She looked at her watch: eleven thirty-five. Absolutely no time to have a nervous breakdown. She sped up the stairs and hurled herself in and out of the shower, then opened the armoire on the landing where her freshly washed and ironed work clothes were neatly stacked. A lunch party dictated casual, so she chose a white T-shirt off one pile, black jeans off another and a monogrammed chef's apron off a third. She had crisp white blouses and black velvet skirts for more formal occasions. Her black suede loafers went with either option. The key was to look smart and discreet, but definitely not sexy – men inevitably made passes at the catering staff after they'd had a few, and the

last thing they needed was a hint of leg or cleavage to encourage them.

She hung her head upside down and dried her hair quickly. Her long, straight, dark brown hair might be boring, but it was thick, shiny and obedient, and she twisted it deftly into a plait that would stop the ends dangling in the pesto. She sat at her dressing table for a moment, gazing in the mirror, wondering if what she felt showed in her reflection. She decided not: she'd become adept at disguising her feelings. The face that stared back at her was serene and impassive. A blank canvas. Her eyes were a sludgy greeny-brown, like the mossy flat stones at the bottom of a river. Deep chocolate brown freckles were scattered across the bridge of her nose, as if applied carefully by a child doing a drawing. The skin underneath was porcelain pale; her generous mouth punctuated by a single dimple in her right cheek when she smiled – though there was no evidence of that now. Suzanna didn't feel like smiling; she wanted to hurl herself on to the bed and cry her eyes out. But business was business and Sybilla was unquestionably one of her best clients. Swiftly, she applied a flick of charcoal grey eyeliner to her upper lids, a slick of matt pinky-beige lipstick to her mouth, then popped two drops of Bach's Rescue Remedy on to her tongue, praying it would get her through the next few hours.

Sybilla answered the door looking fresh as a daisy in baby-pink Chanel, which set off her baby-blonde hair and her baby-blue eyes. Suzanna was ushered into the kitchen, thirty grand's worth of bespoke beech and stainless steel that she now knew her way round better than Sybilla,

who seemed oblivious to its charms. They exchanged ritual kisses – the only indication that they were friends. Suzanna instinctively put up a hand to brush off the sugary lipstick mark she knew would be left on her cheek.

'Happy birthday.'

'Don't! God! Thirty! I don't look it, do I?'

'No,' said Suzanna truthfully. She looked thirty-four, which was what she was. Sybilla seemed to have forgotten that thirteen years ago, together with Katie, they'd celebrated her twenty-first in the little house they'd shared. They'd lined up twenty-one of Mr Kipling's French Fancies, each with a candle stuck in it, and drunk four litre-bottles of Lambrusco between them. Suzanna distinctly remembered holding back Sybilla's hair while she was sick, but she wasn't going to remind her. Instead, she hustled her out of the way, not wanting her inane babble to distract her while she plated up.

She laid out the food on huge white serving dishes and put them on the dining table, while the gaggle of stick insects that made up Sybilla's closest friends swigged champagne in the drawing room. She'd devised a pretty, girly menu: her own modern-day version of coronation chicken, with lime and coriander and Greek yogurt, followed by a sinful concoction of white chocolate and raspberries which she hoped wouldn't go to waste. Hopefully after a few drinks the stick insects would all lose their willpower and dig in. There was nothing Suzanna loved more than seeing people enjoying her food. She wasn't called Decadent Dining for nothing.

Half an hour later, the stick insects had helped themselves then carried their plates – their tiny wrists barely supporting the weight – out into Sybilla's exquisite

conservatory. Their jaws worked furiously, but no one really ate; they just talked. As ever, Sybilla managed to turn the conversation round to herself with a shock announcement.

'I'm preggers again.'

'Oh my God!' There was a collective gasp of sympathy.

'Bloody Piers just can't keep it in his trousers.' Sybilla lit a cigarette, with total disregard for both her foetus and the fact that some of her guests were still pretending to eat.

'You should send him for the snip.'

'It's a bit late, isn't it? Talk about shutting the barn door.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Get rid, of course. I'm not going through that nightmare again. Aurelia was bad enough, but Hamish . . .' Sybilla shuddered at the memory. 'No, I've made up my mind. I'm booked in for next Friday. I can be in and out by lunch – it's quicker than having your highlights done.'

She smiled brilliantly, but the smile faded as she realized Suzanna was standing behind her, hands trembling as she gripped the sides of a porcelain plate bearing a selection of tiny petits fours.

Suddenly the plate fell to the floor, smashing and scattering tiny crumbs of meringue and pate sucre all over the Fired Earth tiles.

'Suzanna – I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were there.'

'Obviously. Otherwise you wouldn't have discussed infanticide in so casual a manner.'

'I'm sorry. I'd never have said anything if I'd realized.' Sybilla paused, before plunging recklessly on. Champagne

made her more tactless and insensitive than ever. 'But actually – I would have thought you'd have got over it by now.'

'What?'

'It's been more than a year –'

'Fourteen months, three weeks and two days,' Suzanna informed her flatly. The rest of the room was silent, as wide eyes set in Botoxed foreheads watched the drama unfold.

'I mean, I know it was awful – ghastly – and you'll never really get over it. But –'

Sybilla paused, in order to find the right words. Suzanna fought the urge to shake her hard, until her bulging, baby-blue eyes popped out of her head.

'Life goes on, Suzanna.'

Suzanna gave her a long, level stare while she decided what to do. Slap her. Stab her. In the end she just walked out.

Sybilla turned back to her friends defensively.

'Someone had to tell her.'

They all nodded wisely in unison. None of them had a clue what was going on.

'She had a baby. About two years ago. It – he – died when he was six months old.' Sybilla couldn't actually bring herself to say the words out loud so she mouthed them exaggeratedly. 'Cot Death.'

Everyone recoiled in synchronized shock. Sybilla looked round at them defiantly.

'But I was right. Life does go on. Doesn't it?'

As Barney cycled out of Richmond back over the bridge towards Twickenham he remembered Suzanna had been

doing a lunch for Sybilla today, and wondered how it had gone. Sometimes she saw the funny side of Sybilla and sometimes she didn't. Either way, it was good bread-and-butter money for her. And, more to the point, gave her something to think about.

He thought about the weekend ahead, started etching out plans in his head. Definitely a lie-in, with John Peel and *Home Truths* – he still wasn't sure which was more bizarre, that John Peel was on Radio Four or that he was listening to it. Then perhaps the gym, because even though he cycled to and from work every day his abs needed attention and he could never be bothered to do his crunches at home. Suzanna could do the Pilates class, then they could ruin all their hard work by going somewhere on the river for lunch.

He thought about the cutting that was burning a hole in his briefcase. Suzanna had left last week's *Caterer and Hotelkeeper* in the bathroom, and he'd leafed through it in the bath one night. The advert had leaped out at him: perhaps it was meant to be. He decided he'd show it to Suzanna over lunch tomorrow; soften her up first with a nice bottle of something crisp and white. Whatever happened, he couldn't carry on what he was doing. It was destroying what was left of his soul. And if he didn't cut the apron strings soon, it would be too late. He knew it would cause havoc and uproar if he left, but he'd never wanted to be a bloody accountant in the first place.

He'd wanted to be a rock and roll star. And he'd nearly done it. He and his mates from sixth-form college had been the hottest thing on the student circuit in 1985, with their little-boy-lost looks and their bitter-sweet lyrics, the

melodies that got under your skin and wouldn't go away. Girls had swooned over their tousled hair, the jumpers with too-long sleeves and ripped-up jeans. With his huge brown eyes and blond hair, his near-perfect torso peeping through his torn T-shirt, Barney knew he was in danger of stealing the thunder from Tim, the lead singer, and suspected that his days were numbered. It was a game of egos, and Tim was a manipulative, paranoid little shit whose agenda was to divide and rule.

Two days after they'd been signed up as support for a chart-topping act, Barney had contracted pleurisy, exacerbated by too many late nights rehearsing. He'd been wracked with guilt as he lay in his hospital bed gasping for breath, worrying they'd have to pull out of the tour. But Jez, their manager, had soon put his mind at rest. They weren't pulling out. Barney was being sacked, replaced by an older, more experienced and definitely uglier bass player.

His only consolation was that without him the band sank without trace and had split up within six months. Unquestionably, it had been Barney that had held them together; Barney who had given their music the depth it needed, who'd added the hidden extra to each song that made it memorable rather than ordinary. He'd had the talent but not the wherewithal or the political nous to survive the bitchy, cruel world of rock and roll. He'd taken his betrayal lying down, and it had hurt like hell.

He'd gone home to Richmond to convalesce and lick his wounds, found himself skint and taken up his father's offer of a summer job at his accountancy practice while he sorted out what he wanted to do with his future. He realized now that his father had made it easy for him,

made his life very comfortable and paid him more than was realistic, so that any alternative would seem less attractive. And eventually he'd agreed to sit his accountancy exams at evening classes, which he'd passed. He'd then taken on his own clients, and before he knew it there he was, at the age of thirty, earning a good salary with a down payment on a house in Twickenham.

It had been a strange metamorphosis. One minute he'd been there on stage, in a world of sweat and booze and gob and fags and adrenalin, an object of lust, preening and strutting. The next he was in a suit, wearing aftershave, carrying a briefcase and paying into a pension plan. He'd always assumed that he would return to the former, shake off his dull, grey chrysalis and become a butterfly again, but the years had slipped by. Now he was thirty-six and it was too late. He was too old to get away with the little-boy-lost look any more. But if he wasn't going to turn into his father, he needed to take evasive action and quickly. So much had happened to make him realize life was too short.

Barney wheeled his bike into the hallway and halted. Something was wrong: the house had a sense of foreboding. His stomach clenched with dread. It had been nearly two months since Suzanna's last relapse. He'd thought they might be coming out of the woods.

He opened the door of the living room and saw that they were right in the middle of the bloody forest with no hope of escape. Suzanna was sitting on the sofa, staring into space, an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes in front of her and a bottle of red wine, decidedly empty, at her side. Her eyes slid round to the door as Barney entered, and she looked at him dully.

'Katie's pregnant. And so's Sybilla. But *she's* having a fucking abortion.'

Barney winced. He loved her husky voice, with its cut-glass English enunciation. But he hated it when she swore. It grated on his ears.

He rushed to her side and held her tight, this beautiful woman who'd had his baby, whose hand he'd clung on to at the graveside as the tiny coffin was lowered into the ground. He breathed in the smell of her, pressed his lips to her skin, her hair, offering her comfort for the thousandth, millionth, infinite time, wishing he could suck out her pain like poison from a snake bite. She lay crumpled in his arms, almost unconscious with the grief and the guilt she still felt, even after more than a year. She couldn't carry on like this, haunted by reminders and tortured by ironies. Barney's deepest fear was that Suzanna's grief might kill her, for surely death would be preferable to the pain she was suffering. He couldn't bear the thought of losing her too.

He'd met her when she'd done the catering for one of his clients' Christmas parties. He admired her from afar – her cool professionalism, how she was utterly charming yet detached. And her food was sublime; nothing startlingly original or self-consciously different, but perfectly executed. He'd cornered her after the party and got her card. Not that he often had need of a caterer, but because she was the first person to have remotely fascinated him for years. He'd gallantly carried her paraphernalia out to the car at the end of the evening, and persuaded her into a quick drink.

She was astonished to hear he was an accountant. Even

after more than ten years, he still didn't dress like one, favouring Paul Smith and Hacketts. She'd admitted to him, half embarrassed, half defiant, that she hadn't filled in a tax return since she'd started up her business. Horrified, he'd offered to come and sort out her books. She'd looked a bit blank and said she didn't think she had any.

It took Barney nearly two weeks to plough his way through the mess, piecing together five years of scrappy receipts, credit-card slips, bank statements and diary entries until he had established some kind of order. She'd kept no proper records, had no concept of profit and loss, or how to price a job. It seemed that she gave a rough estimate, without working out the costs, then as soon as she had the money, spent it. On clothes, shoes, CDs . . . stuff. She certainly hadn't saved a penny. Barney was astounded that someone who seemed so organized in the kitchen could be so chaotic in their business life.

He filed her return to the Inland Revenue, praying they would be lenient. Then he went through her various bank accounts, credit cards and store cards, added up all her debts and marched her down to the bank, where he negotiated a loan on her behalf spread out over five years that would pay off all her debts and, hopefully, cover her tax bill. Then he sat her down and made her snip up all her plastic, leaving her with just two cards: one for business and one, with a very low credit limit, for pleasure. He followed this with a lesson in book-keeping, showing her how to log everything neatly and efficiently. He didn't even begin to try and computerize it – she had no idea how to turn on a computer, yet alone fill out a spreadsheet. But he hoped by the end of it she'd got at least a vague idea.

He thought she must think him insufferably boring, banging on about annual percentage rates and the importance of keeping her receipts in order. But she'd been hugely grateful, and insisted on cooking him a meal to say thank you. They drank four bottles of wine between them, by which time he was totally relaxed, and he spent the evening regaling her with tales of his misspent, albeit brief, youth. She, in turn, told him tales about her ghastlier clients and how she dealt with them. She was funny, irreverent and unbelievably sexy. Barney didn't think he was in with a chance. Not many girls wanted to screw their accountant, after all. So he was surprised when she leaned over and kissed him, her lips tasting of the orange-scented dessert wine they were finishing. It was only a short walk to the bedroom, and not a much longer walk up the aisle six months later.

They'd had a small but perfect wedding at the Petersham Hotel, and his father had given Barney a substantial raise in recognition of his responsibilities. And as Barney felt the prison doors clang shut, he thought it was a small price to pay for having such a beautiful wife.

That had been nearly five years ago. So much had happened in between. As he cradled and rocked Suzanna in his arms, Barney made up his mind. He was going to put his foot down. He was going to have to take control, ditch the softly-softly approach. They needed a change, a new beginning, a chance to start again. And he thought he'd got the answer.

Three days later Suzanna answered the door to find an enormous bunch of flowers with Sybilla hiding sheepishly behind it.