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Housewife Up

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Extract

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Prologue

TRAUMA

THE TELEPHONE PURRED through the early-morning pillows and I answered it sleepily to Leoni's cheerful voice. 'Happy birthday, gorgeous!'

'Thanks,' I yawned.

'Do you feel any different?'

I held up a sleeveless arm and checked my semi-fledged bingo wings, then looked down to inspect the pale pair of legs poking out from the bottom of my cotton-rich nightie. Little mousy weed patches nestled untidily around each wrinkled knee. Those could really do with a shave. Still, why bother? Leaning sideways to catch the reflection of a shockingly mature face in the dressing-table mirror, I pulled the phone

closer to my ear and slumped back lazily against the big pile of cushions. 'I don't think so.'

'So.' Leoni breathed dramatically into the mouthpiece. 'The big four-oh, eh?'

'Good of you to remind me.'

'Why? You don't bloody look it. Anyway, forty is the new black.'

'So long as it's not the new horizontal stripes,' I grumbled.

To be frank, I had ignored the notable birthday looming like a huge black cloud on the horizon in the vain hope that it would just go away. Now that it had presented itself to me in all its seven-signs-of-ageing glory this fine morning, I was feeling more than a little deflated. Forty? Moi? That's just not possible. We had old bags at school who were younger than that. I permitted myself a self-pitying sigh, suddenly noticing that the fine hairs on my arms seemed to be greying in front of my very eyes. The next thing I knew, Leoni was in my kitchen.

'Coffee?' I asked, in a fast-approaching-middle-aged way.

'Don't be so ridiculous.' Leoni dumped her handbag onto a vacant stool, marched to the fridge and helped herself to a bottle of champagne. 'It's your birthday. We're having Bucks Fizz and hold the bloody Bucks, mate.' She brutally tore the cork from the bottle and

tried to catch the minor explosion of froth in her mouth. The force was strong, instantly bloating her face into a souvenir puffer-fish. She quickly pulled upright and stuck her thumb in the top instead to preserve the gushing contents, looking away from my laughing face and trying hopelessly to swallow the fizzing mouthful without choking. We mopped up the mess together and she pretended to wring the Spontex out in her glass.

'I can't believe you're forty.' Leoni eyed me with a serious gaze. 'That means I'm next.'

I smiled at her knowingly.

'It's all right for you!' she complained. 'You're not being sucked dry by the twins from hell or being forced to sit through interminable school plays about bloody baby Jesus and caterwauling orchestra recitals with wrist-slitting kazoo solos. I'm telling you – ' she sought a moment's comfort in a lengthy sip – 'there's only so much any woman can stand, and right now, I'm seriously thinking about taking some drastic action.'

'Really? Like what?'

'I don't know yet.' She squinted her eyes at me suggestively. 'But I'll think of something.' Considering the question for a few seconds she added, 'Maybe I'll start drinking heavily. That'll teach them.'

'You are funny.'

Picking up my glass with a smile, I was aghast to see

two large clusters of liver spots creeping across the backs of my hands. I anxiously tried to rub them off without arousing Leoni's suspicion.

'I'm serious,' she said slyly. 'Loads of mothers do it. I've seen them at the school gates. They're the ones who chew gum all the time.' The more I wiped my hands, the darker the blemishes grew. I hid them self-consciously in the pocket of my apron and wished that the awful noise would stop. 'Happy birthday, honey.' Leoni raised her glass towards me and we toasted the death of my youth.

The irascible tone of the telephone grew louder, gradually amplifying to a shrill electronic blare. My eyes blinked into the rumpled duvet and I waved a disorientated arm out of the bed, fumbling for the receiver. Covering the mouthpiece with my clammy hand, I had a good old throat-clearing croak before answering shakily, 'Hello?'

'Have I woken you up?'

'Leoni? Oh, thank God.' Tiny beads of perspiration chilled the skin on my face. 'I've just had the most horrible nightmare.'

Part One

OLDER, BUT NOT NECESSARILY WISER

Chapter One

SITTING PRETTY

WAKING UP TO find oneself widowed at the grand old age of thirty-seven is a peculiarly uncommon phenomenon. Of those unfortunate husbands who have perished prematurely, there is no question that many among them will have left behind devoted wives whose grief and loss was, and remains, unspeakably painful. But, for some of the few others, it has to be said that widowhood is not without its merits.

Fleeing the suburban humdrum and all the ghastly memories that went with it had been an elementary decision. The street on which I had lived was like the valley of the forgotten people, populated by ordinariness, a waiting room where nothing ever happened.

To remain there would have rendered me brain-dead in less than a year.

Leaving was the easy part. It was finding somewhere to go that had proved tricky. After dithering for weeks that stretched into months and listening to the incessant, well-meaning recommendations from all and sundry who seemed to think that a widow of any age should head for the nearest outpost of Aga Central and buy herself a nice green waxed-cotton jacket and a faithful labrador, I had come to the firm resolve that I might as well try to live a little before the sun finally went down on my amuse-by date. It was a no-brainer. I took my life in my hands and decided to head back to the city. I had been happy there once, as a youngster.

As I never got around to having children ('result', as my best friend Leoni frequently reminded me), I was unaware that two local schools had fared remarkably well in the regional borstal league tables, with the direct effect of adding a soaring premium to the asking price of my flying-ducks semi. After a shamelessly ugly scene in the estate agent's between two fathers (under strict instructions from their wives) who almost came to blows over my humble abode, the deal was done and, in a manner of speaking, I suppose I was on my way.

It wasn't all plain sailing, mind. The sudden impact of a large inheritance brings along its own set of

problems, let me tell you. Especially when you've been used to hanging around by the meat counter waiting for the chops to be marked down. It took me weeks to get over the initial shock, and Julia insisted that I get some proper investment advice in her regular big-sisterly way. Being as my personal financial experience begins and ends with a couple of ancient crumpled premium bonds wedged in the back of a kitchen drawer, she was right, as usual.

Richard Lomax was the only blind date (*Money Programme* version) I had met who seemed completely unfazed at the prospect of handling my weighty investments. I guess you could say he was reassuringly unflappable. Making it last, investing it wisely, living off the interest, not having to worry about money ever again. That's what the man had said, and it was the first conversation I had understood after drowning in the torrent of jargon from the obsequious little man with piggy eyes at the bank, who had been barely able to control himself at the sight of my impressively enhanced balance. So I took Lomax's advice, went independent, and signed on the dotted line. He took care of everything for me and, true to his word, I hadn't had to trouble myself about any of it since. It's a comforting feeling. A stress-free zone.

The flat was the first I had seen. Impulsive, I know, but from the very moment I stepped through the front door in to the light, airy sitting room with

floor-to-ceiling French windows opening out onto a peaceful view of the communal garden below, I knew that this was a place where I could put the past behind me and happily start again. A place where anything could happen. I left the final negotiations to Lomax who, for a not so modest fee, had a knack for brokering a ruthless deal. Not that it was much of a worry. Under his steely gaze my significant lump sum was steadily growing into a Fabergé nest egg of magnate proportions.

As I PULLED INTO the sun-dappled square three months later and wondered why on earth I had chosen to move to an address where you had more chance of spotting an osprey than a parking space, I could hardly contain my excitement. The hazard warning lights blinked a toothless defence against the clear and present danger of clampers, while I quickly unloaded the few belongings I had unfeelingly retained into the hallway behind the heavily lacquered, black front door. Julia had shared with me her homespun philosophy that the most effective strategy for avoiding Her Majesty's Boot was to double park. Her theory is that they can't immobilize your car if it's blocking innocent people in, so they have to call plod and send for a lorry to tow you away instead, giving you about ten minutes' grace to nip back behind the wheel and beat a hasty

retreat. Kicking the clampers in the shins before you speed off is optional.

I parked around the corner on one of the busier thoroughfares, feeding the meter the maximum permissible dose and Sellotaping a big hand-written notice in each of the windows. *For Sale. One careful lady owner. Low mileage* (the car, not me). *Tax and MOT.* My asking price was ludicrously low and took into consideration that by showrooming it on a London meter I had accelerated its depreciation by several squillion pounds a second.

The short walk back smelled of lately fallen rain and reassured my battered heart that its new home was going to be just perfect. Key trembling in my outstretched hand, I slipped it in the shiny golden latch and carried myself over the threshold and into a new life with two beautifully appointed bedrooms, the larger one being nothing short of magnificent, living quarters with enough space to entertain should I find myself popular, and a ridiculously disproportionate kitchen with polished teak work surfaces that seemed to go on for ever. I bet they've seen some action.

The clicking thud of the hefty Banham lock closing behind me for the first time echoed around the empty rooms. The thrilling elation of that moment will never leave me. An untarnished blanket of exhilarating white space that was mine and no one else's, to do with as I wished, to live in as I chose. What a feeling it was. Like

taking the Olympic gold, falling in love, and winning the rib of beef in the Sunday pub raffle all rolled into one. I shook off my coat, dropped it to the dusty floor, and laughed until tears ran down my cheeks.

By Saturday afternoon I was wondering if I hadn't made a terrible mistake, accidentally immersing myself in the total anonymity favoured by most city dwellers, only to find myself a regular Billy No Mates. This wasn't exactly the kind of place where you could share a cup of tea and a natter over the garden fence. The comings and goings of the building's inhabitants were few and far between. (I hadn't yet got my act together on the curtain-hanging front, so had to flatten myself against the wall while spying from the windows.) It crossed my mind that years might go by without my meeting any of my new neighbours. Perhaps I would become so desperate that I'd have no option but to set fire to the place one night just to orchestrate a group hello on the pavement outside. I would contrive to have canapés craftily at the ready.

That first weekend, I was busily loafing around on my new hippie bed-free mattress with the balcony doors wide open to let in the chilly air, watching an old black and white John Wayne movie on the tiny portable television set while trawling my way stealthily

through a packet of chocolate HobNobs, when there came a firm knock on the door.

That's strange, I thought, with a modicum of alarm.

Being on the first floor, one doesn't get knock-knocked. One gets buzz-buzzed. The remote-operated intercom is supposed to give you a sporting chance of identifying a violent criminal before granting them access to the building. Maybe it was an undesirable who had already managed to make it past the first hurdle and was now testing the internal doors to see which flats held the weediest occupants. I stood up and crept towards the door on my silent odd-socked feet, leaning my ear towards the peephole as I approached on tiptoe, waiting and listening for any movement outside. I scanned my immediate surroundings for a defensive weapon. My options were: rather nice newish tweed coat; unopened pack of ready-made curtains (cardboard reinforced corners having potential for a swift Croatian temple jab); wilted prayer plant.

Knock, knock. This time so much sharper that I jumped with a start and held on to my chest with both hands, crushing the half-finished biscuit packet against my sweater. Oat crumbs scraped menacingly against my pounding cleavage. I peered through the spyhole and braced myself for the worst.

Oh my God. It was that gorgeous man from upstairs. Or, at least, I thought it was. I'd seen him leaving for

work in the mornings a couple of times, always suited up like Giorgio Armani (but without the Botox) and sometimes I had even caught a wafting glimpse of his fresh citrussy cologne on my way downstairs to check for the post. Very nice too. Now, through the little round window with the fisheye lens that makes everyone look like a Weeble, there he was, knocking at *my* door.

Well, about bloody time. I'd been sitting there for days waiting for something interesting to happen and fantasizing about what that might be. I had even considered joining something local and social, like the residents' garden association, but the thought of having to introduce myself and then go through the rigmarole of the dead husband story put a major damper over any romantic notions I might have been nursing. I was still trying to decide whether or not to just lie about the whole thing and make up a brand new past that would be better suited to the woman I had decided to become. It would have to be something mysterious and intriguing. Glamorous without being too ostentatious.

'Just a minute!' I called out as I rushed around for no apparent reason, realizing there and then that there was absolutely no chance of rescuing my atrocious Stig of the Dump appearance in the available time. I pulled the pink elasticated band off my unwashed hair and shuffled it around a bit with my fingers, rubbed the

crumbs off my face, hoped that my eyebrow hairs were all pointing in the same direction, and peeked back through the viewfinder. God, he's good looking. I could see that he was most definitely in his Saturday civvies from the top of the white vest that clung to his broad, tanned shoulders, and decided that this was going to be a very good day indeed. I whipped off my odd socks and quickly threw them behind the prayer plant with the remainder of the savaged HobNobs. Open sesame.

'Hello!' he chirped brightly, smiling widely and proffering his hand. 'My name's Paul and I live upstairs.' He pointed upwards to confirm the whereabouts of his nest, then clasped his hands together excitedly. 'And we just wanted to welcome you to our lovely little household here and wondered if you would like to drop by and join us for drinks later.'

Now, I don't usually jump to conclusions about people, but this man was so obviously gay that he might just as well have had a great big neon sign flashing above his head. One hundred per cent, no doubt about it. The white, silk leisure suit pants with the big floaty pockets fluttered against his legs in the breeze that had followed me to the door. My eyes ran their length and came to rest on a pair of ornately beaded flip-flops and French-polished toenails. And his earrings were nicer than mine.