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PERFECT TEN

Written by **Jacqueline Ward**

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PERFECT TEN

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JACQUELINE WARD



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For you, Mum.

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‘It is impossible to suffer without making someone pay for it; every complaint already contains revenge.’

Friedrich Nietzsche

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Chapter One

I couldn't believe it when the delivery man rolled up to the door. As soon as I saw him standing there on our overgrown front pathway with your luggage, I knew that I would have my day after all.

'Mrs Atkinson?'

I nodded. It wasn't a lie. I'm still Mrs Atkinson. Even after a year. I never changed my name. For the sake of the kids, of course.

He fumbled for his signature machine and I counted the cases. Four large, matching Samsonites. My heart hurt as I realised that they were the luggage we took on our honeymoon. I signed – just a squiggle – never give your own signature in case there are damages. I learned that in the research lab at the university where I work. Yes, even after everything, I still have a chat at the coffee machine. I still have colleagues. You didn't destroy my life after all. Almost, but not quite.

I pulled the cases into the hallway as the driver walked away and I was just about to shut the front door when he hurried back.

'Oh, there's this one as well, Mrs Atkinson.'

I smiled. I liked the sound of it. It'd been a while. Then, as I looked down at his offering, I positively beamed. He handed me your black leather overnight bag and I already knew what was inside. I could feel the edges through the soft skin, the corners. The hairs on my arms stood up and my mouth went dry.

'Thank you. Thank you so much.'

I shut the door and stared at the cases. It was obvious what had happened. You hadn't changed the labels. When you left for Toronto a year ago you turned over the little pieces of paper so that our address was hidden. So that you could obliterate me. I can almost hear you saying it. *Blank slate.* But things have a funny way of turning back around, and you'll never forget me. I'll always be somewhere in the background.

You were back and waiting for your lost luggage. And it was in my hallway. I wanted to open it there and then, to smell your clothes and your cologne. To recapture the essence of you that's been gone so long from my life. But I didn't because, just in time, I remembered what a bastard you are. Instead, I grabbed my coat and bag and hurried off to work. It had been exactly a year and I figured that another eight hours wouldn't matter.

All day my mind alternated between fear and anticipation. What if someone found out that I'd pretended you still lived in the house we'd shared for eleven years? That I had accepted your things, knowing that you didn't live there? It would be like before. My hands shook as I poured my mid-morning coffee and checked my phone for missed calls. They never came. So I rationalised. The delivery man would have a record of the address. Sooner or later you would know what had happened and get the cases collected.

That moment, in my tiny office in the depths of the university, my life changed. I made a plan. After all the years of manipulation and lies at your hands, I took control. It was a long time coming, I knew. All the sadness and suffering, the uncertainty, everything that had rained down on me and caused me problems, all this would be resolved for me today. At two o'clock, when I couldn't wait a moment longer, I called the delivery company.

'This is Caroline Atkinson. Twenty-five Willow Avenue. There was a delivery today.'

The call-centre worker wasn't interested. She took the details. She wasn't suspicious at all. I didn't need to explain, but I did anyway – for the recording. Just in case. I didn't want any comebacks this time.

'I was so busy on my way to work that I didn't look properly. Not until the man had driven off. But the delivery was meant for my ex-husband and he doesn't live with me. Yes. There are four cases.'

I could sense her pity in the silence. Poor divorcee, not knowing her arse from her elbow, dithering around in the morning, dull eyes from crying over her lost love. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. I'm crying for my children.

Two things. One: you're a cheating bastard. Two: I'm well rid of you. But how could she know that? How could anyone? Because you muted everything that was bad about you. You were the one who ruined our marriage, yet you made me look as though I was howling at the moon. Like I was paranoid, jealous, almost infantile in my accusations. Because I could never prove it.

You made it look like I was mad. Worse, you made it look like I had no remorse for the things you lied about me doing. No conscience. And I suffered in unspeakable ways. I almost lost my job. You, with your Ph.D. in Environmental Science and your carefree, travel-the-world attitude; you told them that I was imagining it all. Your solicitor was good. Very good. Turning my profession around, my lifelong passion for psychology, until it was reduced to mere overthinking. Using my Ph.D. study into designing a psychopath test to suggest that I *was* a psychopath. It was never actually articulated, of course, simply alluded to. That I knew too much.

Worst of all, you took the children. You were clever. You knew you would never get custody because you were lying, so you

manipulated the situation and you manipulated me. You thought it would break me and it almost did. But not quite.

All the while you smirked your way through life, shrugging and hinting that none of it was your fault. None of my complaining and ringing your hotel to make sure you were there, none of my checking your flights and calling work colleagues to understand your diary. None of it was your fault.

As the call-centre operative gave me a number to ring to get your bags collected and helpfully read out your destination address to me – thank you very much for that – I remembered that karma is rarely instant, no matter what John Lennon thought. No. It usually takes years for *what goes around comes around* and this is it.

This is it.

My hand's still shaking when I replace the receiver. Now, even though the delivery driver made a mistake and I signed, everyone will know that I did the right thing and got the cases picked up. Those four huge cases with all your belongings. I didn't try to keep them or even open them. I just left them in the hallway where I'm picturing them now.

Even my insides are shaking with anticipation. I watch the clock all day as I click, click, click away at the websites I'm collecting papers from. I'm lucky to have this job after what happened and I don't want to fuck it up. But as the day goes on I slip into the realisation that there, at home, in my hallway, is the key to everything that has nagged away at me for years. Even before you left. All the pain, all the sadness; the answer is waiting for me in that leather holdall.

No one would notice if I slipped away early. I sometimes wonder if anyone would notice if I didn't turn up at all. But I have my research deadlines. My job allows me to maintain the aura of respectability that I almost lost. That's what pisses you off, though.

My success. I've always excelled at my job, despite everything. It's an umbilical cord to keeping my lifestyle outside work, which, to be honest, wasn't that good recently, until today. But now I realise why. Everything was leading up to now, when I would finally have my answers. I'd been in limbo.

By four o'clock I can't bear it any longer. I see my reflection in the monitor, my pupils large, yet to all intents and purposes I look normal. Inside I'm anything but. My stomach is churning, a kind of turmoil that precedes a major discovery. When you know there's something big on the other side, but you don't know exactly what it is.

So I drive home and my fingers tap on the steering wheel at the traffic lights as I imagine you getting the call from the delivery people. I can pre-empt your reaction because I know you. Anger, because you wanted to come back here and start again. And straight away I'm somehow involved. Feigned worry that I will have your address, because you always do your best to keep up the pretence that I'm a psychopath. But the cases will arrive and you will breathe a sigh of relief until you know I've got your holdall.

You'll ring the delivery company and demand that they pick it up. I'll tell them that I never had it and it must have got lost, like your other luggage. Why did you check it in the hold, anyway? Then I remember you like to carry just a novel and a trendy messenger bag on – image is everything to you, isn't it?

You might even phone the police, but this time it's you who can't prove anything. I've been thinking about it all day. Turning it over in my mind. Everyone, even the police, work on the most likely explanation. Like when you painted yourself as a picture of glowing innocence and me as the screaming harpy? So, in the end, who did everyone believe? The calm, collected, secretly serial-cheating

fucker or the manic, on her last nerve, desperately-in-love wife?

Horrible, isn't it, Jack? Knowing someone is lying but unable to prove it because there's another perfectly reasonable explanation for what's happened?

Of course, if it had been a clean divorce and you'd admitted what you had done there would be no need for all this unpleasantness now. If we could have shared the care of our children. If I could have retained at least a fraction of the life we built together I could have let it go.

As I turn the key in the front door, the delivery van pulls up behind my car. I push the oversized leather holdall behind the lounge door and stand by the huge suitcases. I exhale as I see it's not the same guy, it's an older, greyer version of him in the same brown uniform. I smile.

'Here they are. Sorry. Sorry. I was in a rush this morning and I didn't read the labels.'

He smiles back and scans the hallway, which is piled high with a year's worth of takeaway menus, then the cases.

'Wouldn't have mattered. Labels are blank. Driver must have turned one over instead of looking at the docket.'

He tuts and shows it to me. I can see the spider shadows of the black ink I used to write our address on those cases for our honeymoon, almost invisible on the other side. Turned inwards.

'Thank you, I did ring as soon as I realised what must have happened. These belong to my ex-husband and …'

He's nodding diplomatically. No one wants you to mention a divorce. He reverently removes the cases and, apologetic, asks me to sign again. I replicate the scribble that means nothing and go inside.

My hands are itching. I'm half blind with giddiness and retribution and the knowledge that, in about half an hour, you'll know exactly

what I'll be doing. For the first time since you closed that door behind you, our minds will be back in sync.

You know me, Jack. You know what I'm like. You know that I can't wait for anything. I must open things immediately, ripping off the wrappers and devouring instructions – with surgical gloves that I keep under the sink for unblocking the drains, of course, because you can't be too careful. You'll know that the first thing I do when the delivery van has left is to break the lock on the leather holdall and pull out your papers. The visas and the photograph of you and the kids. The business cards with a thick rubber band around them – you're still old school – and the Manila file that holds the record of your life. I flick through, even though I've seen it all before: birth certificate, our marriage certificate and our decree absolute. You're the petitioner, of course. Family arrangement documents. Various embassy documents and the address of your cheating fucking solicitor. You like to keep them all together when you travel, I remember that only too well. A whole year, you've been away, and nothing's changed. You still bundle everything together and lock it away.

I reach deeper into the bag and pull out a black leather briefcase. I've seen it lots of times, even touched it once or twice. But I've never actually been alone with it. You made sure of that. I don't know what's in here, but I know it's something you didn't want me to see. Something important that you carry everywhere with you. Something that disappeared when I needed to prove what a piece of shit you were.

I linger a little, reading the section of our divorce papers where you turned on me. After everything you did, you crucified me.

> The petitioner feels that the respondent has imagined or manufactured a set of baseless accusations and has persecuted the petitioner unreasonably. The petitioner would like to stress that there is no basis to the claim of adultery and that a divorce be granted on the grounds of unreasonable behaviour.

No basis? We'll see if there's no basis. I'm waiting, checking the clock for the twenty-five minutes until your cases are delivered to you. I imagine your face when you realise that I have your precious possessions. I hope you panic and ring the delivery company, trying to explain how important it is that I don't get my hands on whatever is in this briefcase.

Finally, time's up and I find a sharp knife amidst the five-plus days of dirty pots and wipe it on a filthy tea towel. Things haven't been going well lately and I have a sudden insight into the fucking disaster area our beautiful home has turned into. I glimpse the piles of clothes and newspapers, and all the unopened boxes I bought during vodka nights alone in front of the shopping channel and from Amazon Prime. It's a mess. A crowded, built-up mess. No one comes here except Fiona Mast because you stole my friends, so why should I give a screw about the state of it?

I should, I know, because I want my children back. You made them think I was mad and you took them from me. It's spiralled from there, the way hopelessness does. But I knew you had a secret, something you didn't want me or anyone else to know about, and suddenly there is a spark of hope. Is it a dodgy business deal, something that will discredit you? Is it porn? Have you stolen something – apart from my children? Whatever it is, it's a way to

show you for what you really are and it's about time.

I hack away at the lock, like you hacked at my heart, and it takes me a while to prise it away from the thick casing. Good. You'll know I'm doing this because you know me. You'll know that I'll lift out the two journals, both with locks. You'll know that I select the older one – you probably started a new one when you left and I want to know the whole story, from the beginning. You'll know that I open it and read it and you'll know exactly how my expression changes when the awful realisation of what this is hits.

Chapter Two

Alanis is playing on the radio now and she's telling you that *you oughta know*, and I can't find the radio or the plug socket in all this stuff to end it. It's brought my world into focus. The journal. I'm sitting in my kitchen – our kitchen – and I can hardly move for the shit I only bought to try to ease the pain of being alone. Of being wrong when, really, I'm right. It didn't work. Because I always knew that the thing I was searching for was in that case.

The first pages of the first journal make me think that I was wrong. Completely wrong. There's an early picture of you and me at nineteen, when we first met. My blondness, your jet-black crew cut – opposites attract. But we weren't opposites at all, really. We were both fiercely competitive and the darlings of our university year. We married a year later. I sometimes wonder if that's why things went wrong, because we were too young. Then I remember that things went wrong because you were sleeping with other people.

The phone rings and startles me. Five rings then I let it go to answerphone. Naturally it's you, Jack. Your voice, calm and controlled, booms around the kitchen.

'Caroline. I know you have my bag. I'm warning you. You need to give it back. All my papers …'

But I'm not listening to you. I can't hear the words. I'm listening to the background of the call, ears desperately pricked for children's

voices. Charlie and Laura. Are they there with you? You took them away and not a single moment has gone by in the last year when I didn't miss them. My babies. Every time I shut my eyes I see my son's face, terrified, as he realised I wasn't coming with you. Laura crying as you bundled her into the car. You prevented me from seeing them at every turn and forced fear into my soul.

The call ends and I sink back into the journal. I might pretend to myself that I care about your other women, and I did back then. But what I really care about is getting my children back. And this is a means to an end.

I force myself to turn the pages and see myself age slightly: us in front of the Christmas tree right here in this house, and your handwriting at the side of the picture. *Perfect ten*. The warm reminiscence turns a little cool. Perfect ten? That's what you said to me when we first slept together. You said it like I should be pleased, but all it made me do was think of who you were comparing me to.

'Oh, I bet you say that to all the girls.'

It was a statement, not a question. A warning shot. But you answered.

'No. I've never had a ten before. Eight. Nine. Yeah. But not a ten.'

You said it with a smile, but it niggled and I didn't know why. I suppose that I was still heavily invested in romance and love back then, and I just didn't expect you to mark me on my performance. I let it go. I shouldn't have. Because it led directly to this moment, when I turn the next page and see a picture of a blonde woman.

Younger than I was then. Around nineteen. Arms linked with yours. That would be around fourteen years ago, just after we married. You're at The Cabin, a nightclub you worked at as a part-time barman. It's stuck in with glue and I pull it from the page and turn it over. *Christine Dearden*. There were more photos, all dated,

spanning two years. Then, overleaf, in the bottom right-hand corner of the page, I see it. You marked her too. *Eight out of ten.* You stuck hotel receipts and even a condom packet between the pages.

I turn the pages quickly. There are nine more women, all marked out of ten.

Julie Carson. Seven out of ten (possessive).

Frances Burrows. Six out of ten. (No BJ).

Pam Harding. Nine out of ten (would have been a ten but couldn't keep her mouth shut).

Alicia Turnbull. Seven out of ten (expensive tastes).

Lorna Kershaw. Three out of ten (great company but frigid).

Katy Squires. Eight out of ten (drinks too much).

Louise Shaw. Nine out of ten (would have been a ten if she hadn't wanted a kid).

Paula Lord. Nine and a half out of ten (nearly as good).

And the last one: Emma Parsons. Eight out of ten.

Each of these women had long-term affairs with my husband. Not one-night stands – those were at the end of the journal with a puny line each. Thirty-seven one-night stands, all marked out of ten. I try to tell myself that none of them knew that you were married to me, that we had two beautiful babies. I read the detailed descriptions of your mistresses, months and months of receipts tucked away, I stare at the picture of Paula. If I was in any doubt at all about these women being innocent, this killed it dead. Paula knew I was married to you. Paula was my bridesmaid. Paula is my sister.

My phone is in my hand and, fuming, I speed-dial the last number I had for her. Out of all of the women, this is the worst by far. It doesn't even ring out. Out of service. I start to dial my parents to see if they know where she is, but stop. They would ask how I am and right now I'm not sure.

I sit for a while on the kitchen floor, my back against our expensive units, my morbid curiosity driving me on to know everything. Somehow it feels like relief, because I knew this all along. I knew. All the times you were on late-night dives, working in far-off quarries, hiking the Scottish countryside, I knew. People would tell me they'd seen you around, and at first I was sure that they were mistaken. Then I saw you myself. I was driving through Manchester and you came out of the dry cleaner's. I pulled over and watched you walk towards the car park and drive your car away.

When I asked you why you were in Manchester, you didn't even try to make an excuse that you'd been delayed or had missed your flight. You'd straight-out lied. You told me that you weren't in town; you were in Milan at an environmental conference. You made me doubt my own sanity. It turns out that I was right all along.

I'm reading and rereading. It's as addictive as it is painful. There's a knock on the door. I look around at your possessions scattered all over the part of the kitchen floor that isn't occupied by unopened kitchen appliances. I peer around the door frame and see the outline of a brown uniform with a yellow lapel badge. Pushing the papers and the briefcase back into the holdall, I throw it out of the back door and close the door quietly.

'Coming. Just coming.'

I wrap a towel around my head and pull on my dressing gown over my clothes. I catch a glimpse of myself in the hallway mirror as I open the front door and realise I am crying.

'Oh. Hello again. Just in the shower.'

The delivery man looks past me into the hallway.

'Did I leave anything?'

I follow his gaze.

'No. I don't think so. There were the cases I gave you earlier.

That's all.'

He stands there, looking into the garden now.

'Could you check? Only there was another item.'

'Oh. Right. I don't think so. I don't remember anything else. But I'll have a look.'

I shut the door and back into the lounge. There's only a tiny floor space left that isn't filled with piled-up newspapers, academic papers and Amazon boxes, but I flick the light on and pretend to look for the bag. I count to fifty then go into the kitchen. Then I go back and open the door again.

'No sorry. Look, I don't know what I'm looking for so would you like to have a peep, just to see if it's here. I mean, the other man might have popped it inside …'

He steps into the hallway and peers around the lounge door, then the kitchen door. His eyes meet mine and the shared acknowledgement that I'm not exactly coping flashes between us.

'Right. No. I can see it's not here. Must've been left in the van. I'll check tomorrow. Thanks, love. And this lot,' he points into the house, 'you can get help, you know.'

I nod and shut the door.

He's right. I could get help. But, unfortunately, I am the help. That's what everyone says. *Physician, heal thyself*. I only do it because it makes me feel better, but I do admit that it's got out of hand. You handed the house over to me as part of the divorce settlement. Why would you need it? Besides, it made you look ever more snow-white. With no mortgage to pay and a subsidised restaurant at the uni, I had minimum bills and a lot of salary.

Naturally, conversations in the staffroom revolved around unit trusts and high-power pensions. ISAs. Although I joined in and faked concern about my future, my need was more urgent. Every

day, I'd leave my office and plan to watch a film or go to yoga, or something everyone else was planning for the evening ahead. Most days ended with me completely pissed in front of the shopping channel.

From the little I can remember, I would order anything that promised to make my life easier. It seemed to be a running theme on the labels of the items that appeared over the subsequent days. 'Save time with a combination microwave and oven.' 'Improve your kitchen experience with this food processor.'

I've been doing it most nights since you left with Charlie and Laura. My regular delivery people came every morning first call, leaving the items on the overgrown path if I was too hungover to surface. I'd heave them in and pile them up. They were almost ceiling high in the lounge, and the kitchen was catching up fast. The hallway was lined with smaller items, mostly costume jewellery. Opened once and then returned to the box.

I'd ordered toys. Lots of toys. There's a special section at the bottom of the stairs piled high with unopened boxes of toys that I started to buy for Christmas. Surely I'd get to see them at Christmas? Surely you weren't so cruel that you'd keep them from me then? The boxes never even made it upstairs. They're still there, a testament to my love.

It made me feel better and I was torn between seeing it as a disorder due to the suffering I had gone through and treating it as part of the healing process. Either way, my home was packed almost to the doors with boxed goods. There were little pathways here and there to allow me to, say, get upstairs, but, on the whole, the house looked nothing like it did when you were here. Maybe that was the point.

I retrieve the holdall and pack it back up, leaving only the briefcase on the kitchen side. The journal is still open on the floor,

the pages fat with the evidence of your secret life. I bust open the second journal, which is much thinner. The pages are crammed with your neat handwriting, your thoughts sprawling over the buff. Men are supposed to compartmentalise, but this is ridiculous. It's almost as if there are two versions of Jack in front of me, and both of them are different to the Jack I knew.

The second journal has lists of books you've read, music you've bought, galleries you've visited on your travels. No surprises with the music. You love American rock and Madchester. I scan the galleries and wonder why on earth you kept your love of modern art to yourself. You've read hundreds of books and, right at the back, you've ranked your top ten.

You love biographies. Alec Ferguson. Robbie Williams. Roy Keane. Beckham. Obviously. Tom Jones. *Lord of the Rings*. *The Hobbit*. Terry Pratchett. Martin Amis. And Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity*. Really? And you've written a review. I can feel my blood pressure rise, the familiar redness sweep over my chest and neck as I read your words.

> *'... what a sucker. I'd never do that for Caroline. Apologising to exes? That'd be a long job. Work in progress. LOL. Anyway, she's too dense to know what it's all about. Clever academically, but ... well ...* 😀

I close the journal. That's enough for tonight. The words are shut between the pages with the receipts and the photographs and the condom wrappers. Sordid souvenirs of your life outside our life. It all seems like an anticlimax now as I reach for the blackcurrant-flavoured Absolut vodka.

Too dense to know what it's all about. I'm momentarily defensive,

of course, but you're completely right. I was too stupid to know what you were up to and, when I did have an inkling, too clumsy. That's when it started, really. I'd been at your office, waiting outside to surprise you, take you out to dinner.

It was the early days of our marriage, just after our first anniversary. That first year had flown by in a mist of romantic lunches and late dinners. Then, just after we'd returned from a weekend in Paris to celebrate our first year, it tailed off. I'd mentioned it to my friend Anita.

'It's as if, well, as if he's … losing interest.'

It was all I could do not to let the brimming tears out. She'd patted my arm gently over our cappuccinos.

'Well, I'm surprised it's lasted this long. Most people just settle back into their lives. But you two are strong. He's not losing interest. But if you feel like he is, up the stakes. Surprise him.'

I'd trawled the internet advice columns for hints and tips on 'surprising your husband'. Underwear and cooking seemed popular, but I settled on a surprise date. After all, you always decided what we did. You always paid. So I booked a table at The Ivy, where we'd joked about celeb-spotting. There'd been a cancellation and I snapped up a six-thirty table. You were working in your London office, so I took the train down and waited outside after work.

You weren't expecting me. That was clear. I saw you through the smoky glass, slightly swarthy with your five-o'clock shadow, and felt the familiar glow. Then I saw her. She followed you out and you were laughing and joking. My hackles rose but I reminded myself that you had female friends. Of course you did. That was normal. So why did I feel so angry?

Maybe I already knew deep down. Looking back, it was classic denial. You were always looking at other women and if I made a fuss

you'd make a big deal about my 'green-eyed monster'. This time it was more. You were touching her, your arm around her shoulder. She was laughing into your face.

I hurried around the corner and watched as you stood on the pavement, hailing a taxi. I bit the bullet and walked around the corner as if I had just arrived. Suddenly you were colleagues. I remember thinking that it felt rehearsed, as if you'd been caught together in a lift or something. She knew who I was immediately.

You'd windmilled your arms towards me.

'Caro. My God. What a surprise.'

I was still shaken.

'Clearly.'

You looked at the woman.

'Sorry, how rude. This is Christine Dearden. She's in from our German office. I'm tasked with looking after her while she's here.'

I squared up.

'Well, that shouldn't be much of a trauma, should it? Going anywhere nice?'

I was arms folded, rigid with temper. But you continued.

'Caro. Don't be like that.' She was smiling. You shrugged. 'I was dropping her off at the Ibis before I got the train home. On my way. Anyway. What're you doing here?'

The doubt had crept in. Had I got it wrong? Had I?

'I booked a table at The Ivy. For us.'

I glanced territorially at Christine. She just smiled at me. Maybe I had been imagining it, I thought.

We went to The Ivy, but the next day, on my way back from dropping you off at your office in a taxi, I dropped by the Ibis. I asked the concierge to call Christine Dearden's room to tell her Lisa Phillips was waiting in reception for her. I watched his fingers

carefully as he keyed in the room number. 252. I waited until he was busy with an elderly American couple asking directions to the British Museum and hurried to the lifts, doubling back to reception and feigning confusion.

'Oh, I've left my card in my room. 252. Christine Dearden. Energy Logistics.'

The receptionist checked the room and the booking and gave me a new key card. I clearly remember the feeling that descended. It appeared from nowhere, some kind of madness that drove me on. This didn't feel wrong, it felt like retribution.

I calmly took the lift to level two and opened the door. Christine Dearden's room was a mess. I packed her cases and swept all her make-up and toiletries into a plastic bag. I emptied the room, all except for a small bottle of Chanel No. 5, which I put into my own bag.

Then I wheeled the luggage to the lift and pressed the -1 button. It halted and the doors opened into a long corridor with a gym on one side and a fire exit at the end. I left her luggage by the fire exit. Serves her right, I thought, as I took the lift back up and exited the hotel. The mist lifted and I sprayed a little bit of the Chanel No. 5 on my wrist.

On the train home I felt slightly sick. What if they found out it was me? What if there were cameras? But as the days went by and you didn't mention it, I just forgot about it. But I kept a close eye on you. I felt like I'd redressed the balance over Christine, but I was uneasy and a spark in me had ignited.

Two weeks later we went out to dinner and I sprayed myself with Christine's perfume. I walked through a thick mist of it and, as the tiny droplets clung to me, I felt warm inside. Warm in the knowledge that you'd smell it and think of Christine. Maybe your

brain would make the connection and you'd wonder, just for a moment, if I had anything to do with her missing belongings.

If you did, I never noticed. You never mentioned it and I never found out what happened. We went out to dinner and you were my Jack again. And yes, it did occur to me to just ask you. I'm a psychologist. I know all about Pavlov's dog. How you offer the reward and ring the bell. Well, I was Jack's bitch. You'd conditioned me not to ask awkward questions by completely switching off when I did. Then, when I stopped, you'd be the best husband in the world. Good girl, Caro. Good girl.

I swig the blackcurrant vodka and suddenly realise that I can find out all the things I desperately wanted to ask. Right now. I open the journal again and turn back, right to the beginning. There she is. More than a page. Christine Dearden. Eight out of ten. A couple of hotel receipts. I run my fingers over the Ibis receipt. Room 252. Then she'd moved to the Hilton just around the corner. Paid for by Jack.

Panic. She didn't work for Energy Logistics at all. She didn't work with you. So why was she in your offices? I slam the journal closed. I'm woozy, but not in a nice way. Vodka usually mellows me, but this is one of those nights. I just know it. I pack everything away and push it under the sink.

Of course she didn't work with you. I'd seen her in your offices and drawn that conclusion myself when you'd lied. Thinking on your feet, as you called it when you lied about other things. She was in your office to meet you. She was known there. They'd just let her in. My God. They probably thought that she was me. Your wife. My vodka-addled brain is trying to work out how, if they thought Christine was me, had you explained all the others in the Journal?

For some reason, I'd imagined – still imagine even now – that not everyone knew about these women. That you'd kept this big

secret from me and everyone else. Otherwise, how could you have defended yourself so publicly? And how could everyone we knew have believed your shit about me being crazy?

Now, as I'm nearly vodka blind, I'm laughing. This was no secret. The only person who didn't know about it was me. All the office parties I'd attended with you, the dutiful wife, everyone there had known. All the nights out with friends. They'd all known, too. They'd probably spent time with these other women.

I glug down a couple of mouthfuls of the vodka and wait for the sweet release of nothingness to close over me.