**55**Leo knew this harbour from his childhood but it wasn’t until now - in middle age - that he saw it from the third storey magnificence of the luxury, converted warehouse flats standing next to the old bridge. As the afternoon sun shrugged off a passing cloud and bathed the oak floor of number 16 in corn-coloured light, Leo turned back into the room and smiled: it couldn’t be more perfect.

The next morning Leo wrapped a newspaper around his smug grin and hugged his secret. On the other side of the news, Mary buttered toast. Leo cleared his throat and offered up a topic for conversation by reminding his wife about the office party on Friday night.

“Has is really been a year?” Mary replied, ransacking her wardrobe in her head and wondering what on earth she was going to wear.

Mary looked through her wardrobe with trepidation, held up a party frock up against her thickening waistline and grimaced: no way would it fit her now. She stuffed her small-waisted dresses into a bin liner, thinking as she’ll never get into them again they might as well go to *Oxfam*. But what on earth was she going to wear to the party?

Leo typed into his computer. His actions were furtive. He looked around to see if anyone could see. Or understand what he was doing. He typed in an address: 16, Waterfront View. He took out a credit card, scanned the number punched across the front and typed it carefully into the request boxes.

Mary opened Leo’s side of the wardrobe and looked at his row of suits. His figure hadn’t changed that much. He could still get into his clothes. Why was that? They ate the same food; she always had the smaller portion. She piled three suits on the bed, bound for the dry cleaners.

Mary made sure she only had two potatoes for dinner and no bread. Later, Leo and Mary watched television. It was a sexy scene – the girl, wearing a red satin Basque, slide sensually over a naked man. On top. A position Mary and Leo hadn’t attempted for years. Her eyes darted briefly towards him and clocked him watching the coupled TV couple with interest.

‘Why don’t you wear underwear like that anymore?’ Leo asked abruptly, his voice husky.

‘Don’t be so ridiculous, that’s the sort of rubbish you wear when you’re young.’ Mary squealed indignantly; covering her thoughts of sliding over Leo’s thighs.

Next day Mary picked up Leo’s suits from the dry cleaners. A small plastic bag was pinned to a lapel, inside a note said, *Look’ee what we found*. Mary opened the little bag and took out a credit card purchase receipt from a lingerie shop. As Mary looked at the receipt in disbelief a little moan escaped from her lips.

During dinner Mary mentioned to Leo that she had been listening to a programme on the radio about people running into credit card debt.

Leo put down his fork and smiled at his wife, “Money needs to be earned before it is spent – which is precisely why I have never owned a credit card.”

Mary wanted to shout, “Liar!” but instead she dug her nails into the skin of her palms.

Mary found it difficult to sleep. She needed to find out the truth. It would be no good to ask Leo what was going on, as he would deny everything. He would probably say he bought the lingerie as a favour for one of the women in the office who, come payday, had then paid him back in cash. And that the credit card was a perk from work and that didn’t count, so he hadn’t been lying at all. And some other guff, which he would, no doubt, make up on the spot, because Leo was many things but Leo certainly was not stupid. By lunchtime Mary had worked herself into such a fizz that she found herself standing outside Leo’s office building. Hiding around a corner. He had taken a packed lunch, that she had made, as always, but she knew, knew absolutely that he would emerge from the building during the midday break; knew that he was on a mission; knew that he was going to see her. The Other Woman. She followed him down the High Street and watched him disappear into a dress shop. What on earth? She could see him through the window flitting through dresses on a rail. Underwear and now dresses? For Her? For his jumped up little Madam?

On Friday evening Mary and Leo got ready for the party. She squeezed herself into a plain dark skirt and threw on a commodious black top in the hope that it would hide the bulge around her middle. Leo was wore a charcoal grey suit and a shimmering electric blue tie.

He walked over to the wardrobe and took out a pair of stilettoes. “Why don’t you wear these anymore?”

“Because they’re bloody uncomfortable and I’d look like mutton dressed as lamb.” “No you wouldn’t.”

“If you’re so keen, you wear them.” Mary retorted tartly as she flounced out of the room. Oh, my God, he’s a transvestite!

At the party Mary looked pained as Leo complimented work colleague Sarah on her dress. When Amanda spotted Leo she glided over to greet him and Leo was embarrassed as he introduced her to his wife. Amanda was suddenly embarrassed too. Mary felt an urge of certainty that this Amanda must be the one; the one having an affair with Leo.

“Who was that?” hissed Mary as Amanda scuttled away to greet another couple.

“Someone I work with, you know?” But she didn’t know.

On Monday morning Leo was not at his desk when his telephone rang. Sarah answered the call. The caller stated that there has been a break in at the flat and Leo should come around to sort out the security arrangements as quickly as possible.

Mary answered the shrilling telephone. Sarah relayed the message and told Mary that Leo’s mobile was switched off and he was not due back in the office until late afternoon. Shocked, Mary wondered what it all meant. Mary dialled the phone number given to her by Sarah.

The voice on the other end said, “Waterfront View.”

Mary explained who she was and said she would come around immediately. She double checked the address. At the flat the caretaker showed her in, saying that it looked like nothing had been stolen, because, apart from what was built-in, there was nothing to steal. The front door was damaged but could easily be repaired.

Alone, Mary stared incomprehensively at the modern white goods kitting out the kitchen. She hadn’t had a new fridge-freezer in a dozen years. More. Tears filled her eyes. She walked around the huge apartment thinking of her little terraced house. How could he do this to her? And who was this love nest for? Amanda? In the bedroom she threw open the vast built-in wardrobe. Dresses, shoes, and underwear swam into focus. Her grief was giving way to anger. She flipped. Rummaging around in her handbag she took out a pair of manicure scissors. She grabbed at the clothing and angrily snipped then ripped into a dress, a pair of knickers, another dress –

The shreds of clothing lay dead on the floor. She threw herself onto the pile and wept.

Leo stood at the door. She turned her head towards him, her eyes still full of tears.

Angry words, recriminations, fisticuffs. Calm. His fingers found hers. He led her to the bed where they sat on the new mattress covered in protective plastic. Close. Next to each other.

“There is no other woman – only you.” Leo explained, “All I wanted was a new lease on our married life. Bring back the magic. It was all meant to be a wonderful surprise, Mary. My silver wedding anniversary gift. For you. For us. Our just desserts.”

“What about Amanda?”

He laughed, telling her that she was the estate agent who sold him the flat.

She asked about the clothes.

“I wanted you to feel good about yourself. You’re still so beautiful. I wanted you to believe it again.”

“I’m old and fat.”

“No,” said Leo, “Not to me. You’re still in your prime.”

Unable to articulate the damage she had done she quietly wept. He dried her tears by brushing his fingertips across her cheeks.

“As an insurance broker I had the foresight to get cover. Wasn’t it awful that the thieves broke in and wilfully destroyed all of your lovely new frocks?” He said with a twinkle.

“You wouldn’t?” she said.

“You watch me.” He replied. “We are sure to get back every penny spent And then...”

“No.” She shook her head. “You know how much I hate shopping.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “This time we’ll go together. But first, come and look at this view.”

-ends-

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