

### Caught Out

Her name was Carrie. She'd been employed to help out in the office next door, something temporary I believe. I would have guessed at early thirties and therefore about ten years younger than me.

Deep brown eyes, short black hair and not particularly pretty, not particularly special except for the fact that when I smiled at her, she smiled back. Then came the snatched moments in the corridor, moments I wanted to last forever. She always had a knack of being there at the right time - an endearing giggle as she approached and, if I dared to look long enough, an enticing wiggle as she walked away.

I fell deeply and quickly, I don't know why and there's no excuse other than sometimes I suppose things just happen. Then, one glorious autumn evening, the opportunity I'd been waiting for finally arrived.

It was a regular thing, the evenings out with work colleagues on a Thursday. Not that I'd been for a while – not after my wife Vanessa had found out about my recent affair with a colleague and the resultant threats about what would happen if I ever did it again.

I'd confessed, it seemed the right thing to do and anyway, I had an inkling she knew already. When I'd offered Vanessa a name of the girl, she said she didn't care, it was more the fact that I'd looked elsewhere that was enough. That's always been my problem - I've always been a man with a wandering eye so obvious, I might as well be wearing a badge.

The pub was busier than normal and disappointingly, Carrie ignored me at first. I tried to say hello, join the group conversation but every time I spoke, she lowered her gaze. I should have known. Why on earth would she really be interested in me, other than simply to tease. So I left them alone and then people watched in a different area of the pub to finish my drink.

I was about to leave and grabbed my coat from the back of chair. I only went to say goodbye in case I'd got it wrong, the inevitable hurt of rejection seemingly worth

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the risk of one last chance. I'd only gone a couple of steps when Carrie appeared in front of me.

'Going so soon?' she asked.

We found a table, chatted and drank, my already receding inhibitions lowering by the minute and then came seven magic words.

'I know a place we can go,' she said.

I should've questioned what was going on and given myself time to pause, think, but I didn't care for the hows, whys, or what ifs. The fact we had a 'where' was all that mattered.

Zips unfastened, buttons undone, moral judgement swept away in a whirlwind of kisses, caresses, racing hearts and oblivion I lost myself, if only for a few, precious moments.

However precious those moments were, they were quickly replaced by an overwhelming feeling of guilt and a realisation of consequences to come. Vanessa had forgiven me once, even accepted her part of the blame for the way we'd drifted apart. There's no way she'd forgive me again - the financial warnings and promises of divorce she'd laid out to me had been very clear. I had to speak first and tell Carrie we should keep this to ourselves as our little secret but unfortunately, I delayed too long.

Carrie sat up, her back swiftly covered by the black dress I'd recently and so clumsily removed. She lit a cigarette, finished the wine in the glass by the bedside and turned towards me.

'When are you going to tell her, your wife I mean?'

I thought she was joking, expected to hear the giggle I'd heard so many times. Instead, she stubbed out the cigarette on the windowsill, put on her clothes and left the bedroom without saying another word. Looking back, I'm sure that was the moment to convince her she had me completely, the shock on my face and my obvious inability to even consider a reply must have been tangible.

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The door to her flat slammed shut and I sat up, looked around the room - the way I was suddenly feeling matched by the tacky, half-painted walls and shabby curtains. Even the sheets were dirty, the distinct, sour smell of unwashed fabric more obvious now the haze of perfume had left the room with Carrie.

An expensive taxi and a hope I wouldn't see Vanessa when I got home was soon extinguished by the sight of her opening the front door. I mumbled something pathetic about having a few drinks too many. In return I received the angry, accusing response I fully expected, her final words about not even thinking about lying to her again repeating endlessly in my mind during an almost sleepless night.

I went to find Carrie the next day – any hopes of a reassuring glance to confirm I'd misread the situation were quickly snuffed out by the sight of an empty desk when I walked passed her office. As I did so, my pocket buzzed with the announcement of a text message.

'What did she say?' it said, from a number I didn't recognise but of course I knew exactly who it was from.

Ten minutes later came another one.

'You have until six o'clock, Sunday Night.'

I texted back this time. 'Or what?'

'Or I tell her what happened. I have evidence.'

'What do you want?' I texted back. 'Surely you can't be suggesting I leave my wife for you, we hardly know each other.'

Her next text included a picture of a laughing face. 'Don't flatter yourself,' it said. 'Your choices are 1) tell your wife or 2) give me fifty thousand pounds, no negotiation. You have until Sunday.'

Fifty thousand pounds is a lot of money. I had it though and more, or at least we had it, Vanessa and me. The only reason I'd stayed with her was because of the money she'd inherited that effectively set us up for life. I briefly thought of paying Carrie, have an end to it but then I changed my mind. There was no way I wanted to

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waste our money, especially now we were so close to an early, luxuriant retirement, so I returned her text.

'Do whatever you want - no-one will believe a girl like you.'

Friday evening - the end of the working week and a chance to unwind. Our house is no different to most on any normal Friday. However, with the news I had, this one wasn't going to be normal.

I knew what I had to do. I had to be careful with my words, especially after the warning she'd given me the night before about fabricating the truth. Even so, I knew I had to go through with the story I'd concocted about this strange girl from work who'd taken a shine to me. I'd tell Vanessa how this was the reason I was late the previous evening and how I'd tried to talk it through and make this besotted girl see sense. Once I'd got that out of the way, I could then decide how to deal with Carrie's so called evidence.

I drank some wine, barely ate the meal I'd been cooked and waited for my opportunity. My fingers fumbled at the bottom of the glass and similar to the moment on the bed with Carrie, I delayed too long.

'Everything okay?' said Vanessa. 'Don't let work bring you down tonight.'

I looked at my wife. She'd hardly said a friendly word to me for weeks and yet here she was, speaking in softened tones.

'Go out, have a drink and enjoy yourself,' she said. 'I'll still be here when you get back.'

I smiled, trying as best as I could to hide the surprise - not at her apparent change of manner, but more at the fact that for first time since we'd met, she appeared unable to read my thoughts. I'd often wondered whether it was because we'd never had children that she took such an interest in everything I did and why she was constantly on my case. This time however, it appeared she'd misread the situation completely.

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'You're right,' I said. 'There's a lot of pressure at work at the moment, maybe getting out for while would do me good.'

I went to get ready and pick up a few things from the bedroom. I wasn't expecting to be able to leave the house after what I knew would be a potentially difficult conversation. Without knowing it, Vanessa had given me the perfect opportunity to put everything right.

Getting ready wasn't the only reason I was in the bedroom. I also wanted to check an account balance on my IPAD that was hidden in my bottom drawer. I'd made a few transfers lately without telling her and all this talk of money was making me nervous.

A call from downstairs made me close the drawer prematurely with a thud. With as innocent a look as I could muster, I grabbed my wallet and went back down the stairs to where Vanessa was standing and waiting.

'See you later,' she said, her cheek brushing against mine as she aimed a kiss that didn't connect.

I convinced myself I was under the limit, then drove to the bank and withdrew some money from one of the accounts I'd made a transfer to. Luckily the funds were there and even though it wasn't anywhere near enough to pay off Carrie, it was some of it. All I needed was enough money in my hands to show Carrie and therefore to persuade her let me into her flat.

I phoned the number she'd called from earlier. No answer, so I left a message.

'I've changed my mind, I've got what you want and I'm on my way.'

My plan was to scare her, let her know the person she thought I was wasn't actually the same person she was dealing with. I parked, not perfectly, but at an angle that would allow me a quick getaway. I climbed the steps to her flat, the memory of how I'd felt that night when I'd followed her up, the desperate need to get inside now replaced by thoughts of revenge.

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A beam of horizontal light shone below her front door. I was about to bang my fists against it when it swung open from the inside.

'Carrie?' I said, making my way into the flat. Apart from the entrance hall there was only one other light on so I headed towards it, curiosity getting the better of me. The first thing I became aware of was that the T.V. was on, with the sound turned off. I nudged open the door, expecting Carrie's shocked face to look back at me but when I went inside there was no-one. On the table there was an empty, lip stick lined wine glass and a half finished meal.

I picked up the black dress that was draped over the back of the sofa, the same black dress she'd worn that night in the pub I'd so clumsily removed later that evening. It was still warm and pressing its soft fabric against my face, I was suddenly taken back to the best moments of mine and Carrie's evening together.

I was just about to leave the flat, deciding it would a better idea to come back later or maybe another time, when I noticed something had fallen from one of the sleeves of the dress. That something was so obviously a photograph of a naked couple. I looked at it once, twice - the first time in denial, the second as confirmation that it was definitely not just a photo of me, but also of Carrie. I turned it over to find something else that was familiar.

Two words in Vanessa's handwriting.

'Got you.'