

ONE

London, February 2003

You have one new message.

Robert? Jen dropped her bags and pressed the key to listen.

‘Hi, John,’ said her husband. ‘I’m on my way. But, listen, don’t cook for me . . .’

Did he say Jen or John?

‘. . . Jen’s class has been cancelled and she’s doing one of her bloody Thai things. I promised I’d be home at eight, so we’ll only have an hour. Sorry. I might be a bit peckish, though. But, er, no doubt you’ll have something long and tasty for me.’ Robert groaned and signed off with, ‘Can’t wait.’

Julie Highmore

To listen to the message again, press one.

‘Hi, John, I’m on my way—’

She saved and switched off. She could hear it a hundred times and he wouldn’t say ‘Jen’.

In the kitchen, on a chair, she stared at her mobile, as though it might offer some sort of explanation. Then hated it, because it had made her cold inside and sick, and had drained all strength from her limbs, and made her hands shake and her heart race and had ended her life, or so it felt. She should unpack the bags, put stuff in the freezer, but she couldn’t move.

Had she misunderstood? Misconstrued? The idea that Robert might have a son he’d kept quiet about suddenly struck her, but then it was gone . . . *something long and tasty* . . . A sweet shop? Sticks of rock, lollipops . . . ? She was clutching at straws – very slippery, fragile ones. Robert didn’t have a sweet tooth. He ate desserts out of politeness.

The ice cream, she remembered, managing to get up, legs shaky, everything shaky. After ramming the carton in the freezer, phone still in hand, like vital evidence she couldn’t let go of, Jen unpacked the rest. Cereal, tea went in the cupboard; a raw pink free-range chicken, bought at the butcher’s, in the fridge. Lemongrass, a carton of yogurt . . . she began to taste bile, swallowed hard and ran to the cloakroom.

Afterwards, she splashed cold water on her face and

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reached for the towel, then rubbed and rubbed at cheeks, forehead, eyes, as though trying to erase everything: images of Robert – her still-attractive husband – naked with a man; the way he'd talked about her. She stopped rubbing and looked in the mirror. Even in its current raw state, it wasn't a bad face. Her father's deep brown eyes and what someone had called an intelligent mouth. She still had no idea what he'd meant. There were one or two stray greys in her dark, shoulder-length hair, but for forty-eight she was doing OK. Not OK enough for Robert, though.

John couldn't be a woman's name, she wondered, lowering the loo seat and sitting down. Short for . . . or maybe he'd said Joanne? If it were a woman, at least he'd still be Robert, not someone she'd never known. She picked up the phone from the floor and listened again, and then again. John, he was saying. Definitely John. *Can't wait.*

She sat rigid, the tap dripping beside her. If only her French class hadn't been cancelled. Celia's daughter had phoned them all. Tonsillitis. Jen would have gone to the pub afterwards, got home around ten, ten thirty. Robert would have made them a nightcap, whisky for him, hot chocolate for her. They'd have read in bed and rolled over and gone to sleep, Robert first. And she'd never have known. Now, ridiculously, she felt she'd made this happen.

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She was losing her mind, clearly. And not one part of her body felt the way it had twenty minutes ago, when she'd walked through the door with the shopping, wondering who'd been phoning her in the car, and looking forward to cooking. Now her mouth was dry, her knees ached. Everything ached. She was sweating. Her heart was abnormally loud and she wasn't breathing right. Oh God, she thought, AIDS. When did they last . . . ? Months and months ago . . . November, perhaps. After the boozy meal and the taxi ride home. His birthday treat. No, once since then. Christmas? Hard to remember something so unmemorable.

Jen clutched the towel and rocked back and forth. Then the phone rang in her hand. In shock, or revulsion, she let it fall on the floor. Robert realising his error? How horrible it would be to hear his voice. No, she didn't want to hear him. Not yet. Or see him. Was he outside the house, too nervous to come in? She reached to the cloakroom door and bolted it.

The phone stopped but the tap continued to drip. Turning it off, Jen found herself staring at the soap dish Robert had excitedly bid for at an auction, insisting it would match the floor tiles perfectly, which it had. She picked it up and tipped out the Pears, then rotated the pretty antique blue-and-white latticed dish just inches from her nose, examining it now in a whole

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new light. Had she spent their entire marriage missing all the signs? She tried to think of other clues, but everything had become a blur, all hazy and jumbled, along with her emotions.

Jen stayed in the cloakroom, her head racing through flashes of their life: holidays, watching TV with meals on their laps, walks on the heath, having people over. Normal married life, only it wasn't, hadn't been normal at all. Her husband was attracted to men, she thought, staring at her thin gold wedding ring, twisting it back and forth. In all their time together he'd never talked dirty with her, not like that. Romantic sometimes, but not dirty. His computer, she thought. If she had the strength . . . Another call came, and again she left it. All that life they'd had, such a waste. No children, even, and now no future. Their plan to sell the properties and move abroad, like everything else, was gone. She looked at the ring again, and twisted it up and off her finger.

She wondered about phoning Sarah, but dreaded an awkward silence, then, 'Actually, Jen . . .' and there'd be a story of him making a pass at some guy at a party; Sarah blurting out stuff she'd been wanting to say for months, years. Jen had told her about Robert's lack of interest in bed – hers too – and how dismal it was when they did get round to it. Dutiful, robotic. How she needed a toyboy, ha-ha. That was before Christmas

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some time. Sarah had looked uncomfortable and busied herself with a salad. And she hadn't commented, which was very un-Sarah like. Stupidly – well, now it seemed stupid – Jen had wondered about Sarah and Robert. Just fleetingly, though. The idea of Robert screwing around had been too ridiculous. He'd never been lecherous, or even flirtatious with other women.

Of course he hadn't.

She slid the soap up and put it back in the fussy little dish she'd never seen the point of, then yanked tissue from the roll and blew her nose. 'Shit,' she said, 'I bet they all knew.' She got up, dropped her ring in the bowl of potpourri and unbolted the door.

A glass of wine might lead to another, then another, and her thoughts were muddled enough already. She'd have tea, she decided, and eat. Something simple. Bread went in the toaster and she filled a pan with water. When it was halfway to boiling, she lowered an egg in on a shaky spoon. After buttering the toast, she stood motionless, counting four minutes on the wall clock.

With her meal on the table in front of her, Jen continued to watch the time. Seven twenty-five, thirty. Thirty-five. No longer crying, she still shook, only now it was with dread as the minutes worked their way, too quickly, towards eight o'clock. She needed to calm down, think of something to say. Seven forty-one. She

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pictured him in his car, either aware of his blunder and chewing a thumbnail, or oblivious and singing along to something. Six minutes to, five to, four.

When the time finally came for Robert to walk through the door, drop his briefcase and kiss, or not kiss, her cheek, Jen stared and stared at the cold congealed egg she hadn't touched. Unable to move. Unable to make the tea she'd forgotten.