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When Helena had emerged from the audition, she had known she'd nailed it. Even after she'd drawn the bow raggedly over the strings she'd pulled the best from the bad start and found a new fluency. That, she had always been taught, was the true mark of musicianship. To turn mistakes to her favour. As she approached Rose in the car park, she questioned if that maxim was ever true after all. 'I'm sorry,' she said, laying a hand on Rose's shoulder. It shuddered. She wondered if Rose was sobbing or shivering. Perhaps, she thought sullenly, it was both.

'It's not about that.'

'I didn't mean to upset you,' Helena said. 'You're my oldest friend – you and Antonia.'

'It's not about that,' Rose repeated, and stared out to the car park, and beyond to the darkened fields where a flock of sheep huddled together. Through a thin slit in the clouds, a new moon cast a veil of silvery light that glinted on the low-lying mist across the landscape as though it were a mercury lake suspended in mid-air. 'I know you didn't mean to hurt me. But it's there, isn't it?' She turned, her voice wavering. 'It doesn't matter how much we avoid it.'

For the first time in years Helena looked at her – truly looked. What she saw wasn't what she expected. Something had changed; not in Rose's appearance, but her eyes. 'You're not alone,' she whispered, giving voice to the fear she saw in Rose's eyes, 'and you never will be.'

'It's funny,' Rose said fitfully, taking Helena by surprise. Her eyes locked onto Helena's, cold and firm. 'You wouldn't be saying that if it was true.'

‘Forget all this,’ Helena said making an effort to sound upbeat. ‘Have some fun. Let your hair down.’

‘You just don’t get it. I’m twenty-eight, surrounded by younger, prettier people all getting married and living the lives they dreamed of, dreamed with me when I was young with them. And I’m a single mum who works in the same café as when I left school, and just as poor.’ She shrugged Helena’s arm from her shoulder and gritted her teeth. ‘I’m just waiting for Ozzie to grow up and realise...’ Her back stiffened again as she tried to hold onto what little strength she still felt inside. ‘He’ll see soon enough that his good old mum isn’t so good after all. Only old.’

‘Rose... Twenty-eight’s not old.’

‘Sure, no one means to say anything,’ she continued, the lump in her throat returning. She wished the mist-lake would envelop her and take her in its current. ‘I don’t have anyone because... having someone is all I’ve ever wanted.’

‘You have us,’ Helena said. ‘And who knows? Maybe Simon will sort himself out. And Ozzie won’t ever leave you. That’s for life, motherhood.’ The corners of her lips lifted, but not her eyes. ‘You worry too much.’

‘Yeah?’ Rose asked, unable to control a sneer. She wanted to speak again, but some things, she decided, shouldn’t be said, especially not to her oldest friend. ‘You wouldn’t understand.’

‘I understand, Rose. We all do.’

‘Oh, really!’ She couldn’t control what she really wanted to say. It controlled her. ‘I’m alone, Helena. More than that. Alone *with* everyone. And *you*...’

‘What about *me*?’ Helena couldn’t help but sound petulant. She was suddenly tired of the conversation, angry at Rose for turning everything onto her. ‘I said I’m sorry. What else can I say?’

‘You knew I liked John when I introduced you to him.’ Her voice was coarse, unyielding. ‘He was *my* friend, Helena.’

‘That was three years ago.’

Three years ago, Rose never would have spoken to Helena like this. ‘Right. It doesn’t matter. Not now.’ She wiped her hand over her face. As she exhaled, her breath flooded from her as though a dam inside had finally given way. The new moon returned overhead and lit it up like a cloud of diamond dust. And as it billowed around her, she realised she wasn’t upset with herself at all. Something else pressed on her, too much to ignore. ‘Don’t you care what you’re doing to him?’

‘This isn’t about me, or John. Or even Ozzie. It’s about you.’

‘No,’ Rose grunted. Her eyes, hard and unforgiving, locked on Helena. Lingered for a long while. ‘It’s about you. You and John.’

Helena’s eyes darted from side to side, and she knew what Rose was going to say before she said it.

‘One man not enough, Helena?’

She took a step back, eyes glazing over. ‘It’s not like that.’ Her mind suddenly flooded with a sea of thoughts, of fears. ‘How did you know?’

‘I’ve known a long time,’ Rose said. She spoke slowly, bluntly, in an effort to make Helena listen. ‘John won’t take this well.’

Helena’s heart pounded in her chest as she considered – for the briefest of moments – if Rose might be right. But she couldn’t admit it, not even to herself. The air about them seemed too still. ‘This isn’t even about me...’

‘You don’t know him like I do.’

‘He’s my boyfriend!’ Helena laughed incredulously.

‘Don’t say that like it means something,’ Rose spat. ‘You owe him that much.’

Helena suddenly became very aware of the cold. 'He doesn't have to know.' She squeezed Rose's hand, shaking. Through the restaurant windows she noticed John laughing with Ozzie at the umbrella in his orange juice. Wondered how much he could hear. She knew that, with winter, the windows were shut; that he couldn't hear a word they said. And yet she worried, as though the slightest parts of her life had now come under threat and she had to consciously hold them altogether. Or keep them apart. 'Don't say anything. Please.'

Wiping a tear from her cheek, Rose saw Helena as something she'd never seen before. Gone was the picture of beauty, whose prettiness and needfulness got her all the attention from everyone who loved, simply *loved*, her fluttering eyelashes, her delicate cheekbones, her perfect blonde hair. Now, as Helena pleaded in her most pathetic, most broken, uncertain voice, Rose saw someone she didn't recognise at all: a child in an adult world. 'You can't hide it from him when you need him to support you going to college,' she said. 'He'll find out.' She turned on the spot and headed for the restaurant door.

'How...' Helena said, trailing behind her like a lost puppy, her hair blown by a sudden gust so that it stuck to her cheeks. 'How did you know I got the placement?'

Rose halted, turned on the spot and laughed at how ridiculous Helena seemed all of a sudden. 'If they hadn't accepted you,' she huffed with a sullen shake of her head, 'you would've told us by now.'

Shocked Rose knew about the audition, let alone that she'd guessed its outcome from her silence, Helena blinked like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car. 'I didn't want tonight to be about me.'

Rose pushed open the restaurant door. Laughter and heat rushed out to envelop them, but couldn't cut through the vast, aching distance that had descended. 'It's always about you.'

The door swung shut behind her, leaving Helena out in the cold. Alone.

Rose made her way to the toilet, her head low, shoulders bowed. Staring at her reflection, she wiped the mascara tracks from the corners of her eyes with a tissue. Tears no longer threatened. As her breathing calmed she hoped something of what she'd said had pierced Helena's view of the world, a view so unlike her own.

She stared at herself for a long time. For once, she liked the person staring back.

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Helena couldn't stay in the car park all night, but she dreaded returning to the table, to sit only two seats from Rose, her cold eyes on her. She knew she wouldn't be able to hide that she was shaken. She couldn't even hide it from herself.

She pushed open the door. The lights inside made her eyes water, like she'd been crying; maybe the sting from the lights was an excuse to. As she rounded the lobby she saw their table. Rose wasn't there. Relief. And yet it comforted her so little. If not to the table, where had Rose gone? She peered along the bar. No sign. Had she earned a reprieve? A pardon on the eleventh hour? No. Rose would return, and then... Head down, she made for the table with no idea what she'd say.

As she slid into her chair, John put his arm around her shoulders. Blew her a kiss and mouthed, 'How'd it go?'

She wondered if she should make out it was nothing. But that Rose had left at all already made it *something*. 'Rose is just a little upset,' she murmured, too ashamed to

look him in the eye. 'She's...' She trailed off. Cradled by his arm, she couldn't lie to him. Couldn't tell the truth. She couldn't even think it. 'You know what she's like,' she said, and instantly felt guilty for using Rose's insecurities as a crutch for her own.

John pursed his lips thoughtfully. Antonia glanced at her, but quickly looked away as their gazes met. 'Where's Mum?' Ozzie asked, restless with his mother absent.

'Oh, you know your mum,' Helena replied. Her voice was cracked like glass. 'She wanted to spruce herself up.' She reached for her red wine. It was comforting. Settled her nerves a little. She studied the menu in quiet solitude, her mind racing, so many thoughts turning over one another.

As everyone picked up their menus, Ozzie turned to John and asked, 'What about Mum?'

'I'm sure we can find something here she'll like,' John replied. And yet he questioned whether she'd return at all. Putting his doubts to one side, he trailed a grit-lined fingernail down the menu's pages. A waitress came for their order clutching an order pad and a pencil worn down to a stub. Cheap gold earrings jingled as she approached. A few minutes later, minutes spent with an uncomfortable silence hanging over them all, the waitress left again, her order pad scribbled on, the sound of her earrings blending into the hum of the other diners as she went.

The minutes passed.

Antonia brooded quietly. Helena listened to conversations at other tables, avoiding eye contact with those around her. Richard and John filled in Antonia and Helena's silences with idle conversation about nothing in particular. With the arrival of their meals, the atmosphere brightened. John, Ozzie and Richard tucked in greedily, glad for a break from their efforts at conversation. Antonia soon tucked in as well. After a while, even Helena began nibbling. Her stomach seemed so knotted with tension that

she struggled with the smallest of mouthfuls. But as the first morsels had finally begun to settle, something caught her eye and she looked up from the plate for the first time in minutes. Her gut flexed again: Rose had returned, eyes set on her like stone. It was like she'd appeared from nowhere. 'Sorry, everyone,' she said, her tone flat.

They paused, silent and still. Richard looked to Antonia, waiting for Rose's apology to be accepted. Antonia slowly relaxed, smiled; the air breathable once more. Rose looked to the table. 'Oh,' she said, 'you ordered.'

Helena studied her, watching for what she might do. How could Rose act like nothing had happened? What's she thinking?

Rose struck up conversation with her sister. 'So,' she mumbled while taking a bite of food, 'all set for tomorrow?' She knew the best way to take Antonia's mind off her was to ask about the wedding.

'Yes,' Antonia sighed uncertainly, shrugging vaguely. 'Well, there are a hundred we should be sorting out tonight.' She wafted a hand absently. 'Richard wouldn't let me cancel.'

'And we're glad you didn't,' Rose cut in. By the lightness of her tone, she seemed without a care in the world. 'It's not often we get a chance to be together. I'm glad I came.'

'I'll second that,' John said. Raised his glass. 'To the happy couple!'

One by one they raised their glasses and toasted Richard and Antonia. Tension fell away. More drinks were bought and poured as they ate. Ozzie nagged for more wine. John and Richard recounted poorly told jokes that were received by forgiving ears. Antonia ran through the plans for the morning, her voice rising and falling as she

simultaneously shrieked with excitement and cowered with nerves. The argument between Rose and Helena went unmentioned, almost forgotten.

Only Rose and Helena were unable to bridge the gap. They barely joined in the jokes or wedding talk. Didn't speak to each other at all. They acutely felt the distance between them. Smiling in all the right places, they played at being the people they wished they were, not who they'd proved to each other they were.

By the time dessert arrived, Helena could take no more. Her heart raced. She felt unable with each passing minute to sustain the mask of silence she'd forged to keep her safe, her world together. Rose will say something; John is going to find out. The voice in her head was insistent, laughing.

'What's wrong?' John asked. He laid a slice of cheddar onto a cracker from his usual choice of a cheese platter and chewed it noisily.

The colour had drained from Helena's face. 'Nothing,' she said. 'I'm fine.'

'Oh, Helena!' Antonia said suddenly with a high-pitched squeal, remembering what she'd been meaning to ask all evening. She hadn't noticed Helena's dessert was virtually untouched. 'You didn't tell us how the audition went.'

'I...' Helena stammered, half-formed words spilling out. 'It was fine, thank you.' She managed a fragile smile.

'More than that,' John seconded, pride painted in his eyes. 'Tell them what happened.'

Helena felt Rose's eyes on her before seeing them. It was unbearable. Worse than the audition. She couldn't shake them, nor ask Rose to look away. 'What's there to say?' A thin, wavering reply. 'I got in.'

They all congratulated her heartily, clinking their glasses and raising them into the air. Not Rose. Sullen and expressionless, she looked one by one around the table,

pausing at each of them in turn before moving on. Her gaze fell to the person she'd once so admired. 'To Helena,' she said. 'For getting everything she deserves.'

A chorus of voices toasted in unison, spoken from joyful lips. Only Rose and Helena remained impassive, choosing silence.

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The rest of the evening seemed to fly by – though not for them all. Antonia and Richard, having drunk too much to drive home, called a cab. John briefly considered giving them a lift home, but knew that leaving Ozzie alone with only his mother and Helena for company would be a mistake; few things could thaw the cold between them now, and poor Ozzie, John thought, didn't deserve to be in such a position. So he was to take his car directly home, and Helena was to join him. But Rose idled in the car park, Ozzie by her side.

'We can't just leave you here,' Antonia said, giving Rose a reluctant kiss on the cheek. 'Jump in with Helena and John. They're going your way. Save your money.'

Rose waved her hands minutely. 'Honestly, it's fine. We'll get a cab.'

'You know what?' John announced sharply, marching to stand between Rose and Helena. For the first time that night – the first time in a long time – he chose not to raise the pitch of his voice to soften it. 'This is stupid. Get in the car.'

'John,' Rose said, 'its ok.'

'No it's not. You live five minutes from us.' He marched to the car and swung open the door.

Helena stared at the moon reflected in a puddle. Tiny spots of rain made it dance, as though a thousand asteroids threatened to tear it apart in miniature.

‘I’m getting tired of this,’ John said, rolling his eyes with mounting irritation. ‘Let’s just get home.’

Rose looked to him, then to Helena. But it was Ozzie’s face that made her relent. Yawning, he shuffled on his feet, his arms buried so deep in his pockets his collar rose up around his ears. ‘Ok,’ she said.

They entered the car and sat in silence. Stayed that way as they snaked home through the dark. As they pulled up at Rose’s house she whispered a thank you and shut the door behind her and her son. The front door closed behind them, leaving John and Helena alone. Rose hadn’t looked back.

‘You mind telling me what that was all about?’ John said. His eyes were fixed on the road ahead, his jaw clenched.

She lifted a cigarette from her handbag and puffed it alight. ‘There’s nothing to tell,’ she said.

John knew better than to believe her: he’d barely had a straight word from her in days – ever since the last-minute call to the audition had come through. And where he’s assumed then she was nervous, now it was out of the way and had gone so well, he was at a loss to say why she seemed so incapable of talking to him. He turned the key and sped away.

The drive home was short. Every once in a while John would surreptitiously look to Helena. She never once lifted her eyes. Said nothing. John started to feel as if he was at fault. As they pulled up at their house he decided he no longer cared what Helena and Rose had been arguing about.

He’d self-built their two-bedroom semi as their first home the previous year, and since then had continued to work to make it the home they’d always dreamed of, adding a patio and landscaping the garden. Helena had taken charge of the interior,

choosing a light palette to make it look bigger with pristine white carpet for every room. It showed the slightest scuff. Now it irked John that he had to take his shoes off before setting foot inside. Perfection, he thought bitterly, had the thinnest of veneers.

He disappeared into the bathroom as Helena followed upstairs in his wake. When he emerged he found her buried under the duvet, stripped to her knickers. She was already sleepy. She rolled her head towards him and smiled, her breath smelling of cigarette smoke. 'Don't you want to cuddle up?' she asked tentatively, her voice fragile. It occurred to her what a hypocrite she was.

'I'd rather get some sleep,' he said rolling to lie on his side facing away from her.

Helena didn't know what to say, and the night gave no answer. She realised after a few moments that he'd fallen asleep; quickly, as he always did.

The sound of his breathing became a metronome by which she counted the seconds, minutes, hours. A symphony took to a score written by her thoughts, but where she searched for harmony she found only discord. Only his rhythm willed her to play on. A life, syncopated to her own, guiding her through the requiem of her dreams. Hour upon hour upon hour. And in that long night she realised she couldn't give him up. He made her feel needed, loved. And for that, she loved him.

Tomorrow, she decided, she'd break it off with Nick; she'd choose John and make the most of the life she had. Tomorrow.

John would never need to know.