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## Getting Rid of Matthew

Jane Fallon

Helen had never expected to be someone's mistress. She had wanted three things in life: a highly paid job in public relations, a flat of her own and a man, also belonging to her exclusively. Somehow she'd ended up as a personal assistant, which was a secretary in anyone else's vocabulary. She didn't earn enough to buy, so she rented a one-bedroom flat off Camden High Street with a small, dark basement courtyard out the back, a crack in the bedroom ceiling and a large damp patch on the bathroom wall. And as for the man – well, she believed in true love and commitment and till death do us part, it had just never happened to her.

She had grown up watching her parents' dogged devotion to one another, their 'us against the world' united front which often excluded even her, their only child, and she'd been trying to locate that perfect partner for herself ever since, to find her own gang of two. She'd just never imagined she would find it with someone who was already another woman's husband.

Somewhere, way back in her previous life, Helen had been engaged to another man, the most recent in a series of long-term boyfriends. Looking back now, she couldn't remember exactly what she'd seen in Simon. Well, she could, because he was young and good-looking and he had a reasonable job and just the right amount of ambition, but she now found it impossible to fathom why she had stayed with him for five years, except that that was how she was. She couldn't shake off the legacy of her parents' relationships were for life. Once she decided that a relationship was worth having, she hung in there determinedly in spite of any warning signs trying to tell her otherwise. So, she ignored the fact that she was the one making all the future plans and she tried not to notice how his eyes glazed over when she talked about saving up for a deposit on a flat. She had invested years in this man, it had to pay off, there was no way she was going to admit defeat. She had all her eggs in one basket and she had no intention of moving them. That is, until Simon threw them out and jumped up and down on them one evening. They'd been cooking dinner together, their nightly ritual, which, Helen thought, was a sure indicator that their relationship was mature and serious.

'I'm being transferred,' Simon had muttered into a colander filling with the potatoes he was peeling.

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Helen had flung her arms round him. 'You got the promotion? Regional manager, wow. So we're moving to Manchester?'

He'd kept his head down, seemingly engrossed in digging out a particularly stubborn eye. 'Erm... not exactly, no.'

'Where then?' He was making her nervous, standing there stiffly while she attempted to hug him. He'd put down the potato peeler and turned to look at her, taking a deep breath like a ham actor about to have his big soap opera moment.

'I'm moving to Manchester. On my own.'

He'd gone on to say that of course it wasn't Helen's fault. It was all him, he was afraid of the commitment. He felt too young, he said, to be settling down with one woman. It was all a matter of timing – if he'd met Helen a few years later when he felt ready for such a big step...

'I love you so much, it's just me, I'm such a fuck-up. I know I'll regret this but it's something I have to do,' he'd whined, wallowing in his role. He'd insisted there was no one else involved, and Helen had believed him – had, in fact, felt sorry for him, he seemed so pained by the choice he was having to make.

Two months later the news had filtered back to her that he was getting married to another woman.

Helen had been thirty-five. Bruised and battered by the failure of the relationship more than the loss of Simon himself; she had taken the separation hard. She'd made a promise to herself that she would have some fun, take opportunities when they arose without stopping endlessly to analyse their potential. And, right on cue, Matthew had come along – her boss, of course, and twenty years older than she was – but why avoid a perfectly good cliché when it's staring you in the face?