

## Chapter One

The sound of the headboard butting against the wall seemed to echo. A sure sign the window was left open. Again. She raised her head to peer over his shoulder and saw the sheer curtains billowing in the breeze, the sunlight streaming through them. *Fuck*, she thought. Or did she say that out loud?

She used to think day sex was decadent. That a midday, middle-of-the-week shag was something of soap opera-level hedonism. Not just a quick, lunch-hour hump or a vacation bang, but a proper roll in the hay in one's own bed, the noon sun diffused through window treatments, and all the time in the world to drink each other in. That's just heaven, isn't it?

Once upon a time, it was. But in that June of 2015, it was merely a reminder of everything that was not. All that was gone. What had been fucked up beyond recognition and everything that went awry.

The headboard's pounding continued to echo, competing with her moans, which were now competing with his. She heard herself in the distance, irritated that the neighborhood would be made aware of their intimacy. Again. You'd be surprised at how quiet it can be in the hours between lunch and after-school traffic. Quiet but for the two of them.

"Oh, my God," she said a little too loudly. Her body quivered with an aftershock.

"That was..." He was unable to finish his thought. The blood hadn't quite returned to his head.

"I know." She smiled and gave him a kiss.

He pulled her into his chest for a post-coital cuddle. She nuzzled in and felt herself start to drift. She knew that, if she closed her eyes, she would fall into a deep slumber. And what could be more delicious than a midday nap after a midday shag? She took in a breath to fill her lungs and allowed herself to float. Before she closed her eyes, she made the mistake of

checking the clock. *Christ*, she thought. Or did she say that out loud?

He followed her glance. “Shit. I’d better hop in the shower before I pick up the kids.”

He reached over her to the nightstand for his wedding ring. She always pretended not to notice when he slipped it back on. Like the infidelity was lessened somehow if that ring wasn’t there when he slid in. He kissed her shoulder and rolled out of bed. Even after all this time, she still had to point him to the wastebasket to discard the condom. She watched as he gathered his clothes off the floor. There was always one article he couldn’t find. A sock this time it seemed. She propped her head in her hand as she observed his search. It wasn’t as entertaining as it used to be.

Yes, a middle-of-the-day bang was once an indulgence. Now, it’s simply a symptom of unemployment. And screwing a married real estate broker.

You can get away with a lot in broad daylight. Nights and weekends are dead giveaways for impropriety. Mornings and afternoons, however—who’d suspect? That’s when they met on too regular a basis. That’s how easy it was to have an affair, and to have one for over a year, without getting caught.

*This is wrong. This is terrible. Absolutely deplorable. What kind of woman does such a thing?* She’ll spend the better part of the day with that playing in her head, imagining what would happen if they were ever found out. Each scenario, every outcome, the utter wreckage that would be wrought by his indiscretion, and her part in his adultery, has run through her brain to the point of nausea. But, somehow, she was able to lose herself in all that wrong and be all right with it.

That, for her, was the worst part.

“Do you ever feel guilty?” she asked. This was a subject they never discussed.

He paused for a moment. “Only about not feeling more guilty. Why, do you?”

She gave a shrug. “Not really. I mean, it’s not like I want

to have a real relationship with you.”

“Gee, thanks,” he answered, still searching for that sock.

“You know what I mean, Paul.”

“You know, Helen, I don’t know that I do. You’re that whole enigma wrapped in a puzzle thing.”

“Riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. He said that about Russia, you know.”

“Huh? Who?”

“Churchill.”

Paul Mosley looked away to roll his eyes. A man freshly forty, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and noticed his belly looking soft. Contracting his muscles to hold it in shape, he pulled back his shoulders to see if that would help, too. He’d have to start hitting the gym harder, he thought. Middle age was going to be a bitch.

Helen Clark slinked out of bed to pick up the sock hiding under the chair. She pressed her naked body to the back of him. He turned to face her and she kissed him even though she knew she shouldn’t, aware of what could start. She broke from it when she felt trouble rise.

“You do know what I mean, Paul. You just don’t want to admit it.” She kissed him again. “Hurry up or you’ll be late.”

Paul gave her a placating smirk and went off to get clean. Helen crawled back into bed and pulled up the covers. When the afterglow fades, the disappointment sets in—and disappointment comes with a chill that can make even a June afternoon seem frosty.

Helen listened as he hummed in the shower and felt more alone than before Paul arrived. She always hoped each time would be the last. Always hoped that she could be strong enough to tell him no, tell him it was over, tell him they couldn’t see each other anymore. But she wasn’t there yet. And she wasn’t sure when *yet* would arrive. For now, she was doing her best to hold herself together, hold on to what might still be left of the old Helen Clark without letting go completely

and slipping into the abyss. She was starting to discover that kind of strength made her hard. Not that Helen Clark was that soft to begin with. No one would accuse her of that. But the walls she had before had grown taller and more fortified. What little vulnerability survived was being starved out. Paul's affection gave her some nourishment, but it was akin to giving candy to a famine victim; it might fill the void for a moment, but then a sickly feeling replaced the comfort.

Helen owned her role in it, though. She had let this thing with Paul happen—for more-than-a-year happen. She almost had to. You'll take what happiness you can get when you're in the shit, no matter how it comes.

And then it goes.

Paul walked in to find Helen still naked in bed, on the verge of sleep, and kissed her before leaving. He knew the way out and to lock the door behind him—irritated that, after all this time, he still didn't have a key. Helen had told him it wouldn't be smart; it would lead to questions. But Paul knew his wife would never notice. *It's not like she notices me at all*, he thought, much too matter-of-factly. After nine years of marriage, their communication style had gone from affectionate bickering to stony silence. *It's just a matter of time*, he told himself as he fingered his wedding ring.

He chirped his SUV unlocked, resenting the compromise he was forced to make. Better than the minivan she wanted when the second kid arrived, but still bitter at having to get rid of his sporty coupe. When he traded in that car, he'd handed over his balls with it. He figured it was high time to get those back.

As he buckled the belt, he felt a grin slip across his lips and checked himself in the mirror, savoring the sweetness of sexual conquest. He loved the way Helen felt. Loved the way she tasted and moved. He loved the way he felt after her. Like a man. At least for a while, before the everyday bullshit tore at him. He brushed that aside and decided he'd see Helen again tomorrow. He liked that she remained available to him, de-

spite subtly pushing him away. He took that as her way of playing hard to get and he liked it. To a point. She was pushing harder lately. He was getting the signal. She wanted more and that was fine with him; he wanted more, too. Paul had a plan. He was just slow to put it into play.

“Doesn’t want a real relationship with me?” he asked himself rhetorically. “Yeah, right.”

When she heard Paul drive away, Helen leapt up to get on with her day. She turned on the shower and stepped in, learning long ago there was no use trying to conserve water—they’d just end up back in bed. When she stopped showering with him, she used to help him dress, walked him to the door, kissed him goodbye. Kept the romance going. Now, she left him to it, pretending to be asleep more often than not. She didn’t want to show how much she wanted him to leave, but she couldn’t wait for him to go. The days he made better excuses and had all afternoon for her were the hardest. She used to love having the luxury of lingering. He was insatiable then. His attraction to her, his utter lust, was exciting. She buzzed from it. She needed that lift after being so low for so long. Now, she hated how weak she was, and that she remained weak knowing this should have ended before it began. In the past few months, she’d started watching the clock and gave him warnings, “Look at the time. I don’t want you to be late.” He took that as a version of foreplay, an inkling she was aching for another go. She looked for excuses to cancel or be unavailable whenever she could, but that’s hard to do when you don’t have much requiring your time. She wasn’t even able to fake a period anymore; he had gotten over that phobia and was happy to “surf the red wave.” The proud look he had on when he’d say that. She knew it was time to end it. The next time she saw him, she would. And, this time, she meant that.

She lathered the soap and washed them from her body, scrubbing away the shame, rinsing off the residue of regret. This usually took a bit more time, but Helen was late. Again. She hurried through her Silkwood shower, dried off quickly,

slapped on some makeup then gave up on her hair before throwing on a decent outfit and dashing to the door. She paused, noticing what Paul left on the entry table, both relieved and frustrated. She told him not to do that anymore but he never listened. She slammed the door locked behind her and jogged to her car, amazed by how she wasn't able to be on time these days, not even just once. Unemployment is a weird existence. She was flummoxed by how much more time everything took when one was without a clear purpose, and how exhausting that was.

For the first time in her life, she suffered insomnia. She hadn't gotten a night's sleep worth a fiddler's fart in months. The dark circles could no longer be hidden behind what was left of her quality concealer or minimized by the samples of fine eye creams acquired from counters she once frequented as a prized customer. She had grown pale. Three quarters of a mile from the beach and not a tan line to be found. She hadn't seen the water or touched the sand in ages. She spent her days inside refreshing Craigslist, hoping that a job post would fit her skills. She turned down social engagements, unable to accept another gifted meal. Besides, she wasn't exactly the best company. Small talk's impossible when all you have on your mind is worry. She found very little joy these days. Thoughts, rather dark ones, of what to do if things didn't change soon plagued her. It was well past time to get her shit together. She was trying. It may not have seemed that way, but she was.

She was heading in the wrong direction. She knew it, but she needed a pick-me-up. She had two appointments on her calendar that day; neither could be blown off and both required her to put on a veneer of competence and functionality. That required caffeine.

Caffeine's not a cheap addiction, especially when grabbing it on the fly. Helen endlessly relied on the kindness of friends and, sometimes, strangers. She was not above going into her bank for a free coffee or bottle of water when needed. Why not? Wasn't that what her money was paying for? The money she once had, anyway. She had gotten to the point

where she didn't even bother feigning a transaction. She would just walk in, smile and take advantage of those little perks. That stopped when the overdrafts started and made it more uncomfortable than it was worth. The stink-eye from formerly friendly bankers stung. Now, she was forced to get her free fix from an ex-employee. It was a humiliating task, but she had grown used to those. She sent a quick text to confirm Jeff would be there and, thank God, he was. This meant going a few blocks out of her way and onto the nightmare that was Abbot Kinney to get that free, organic, almond milk latte. A high cost in and of itself.

The wave of rich hipsters that crashed upon Venice with the arrival of 'Silicon Beach' had displaced much of the quirky artists and aged hippies who gave Dogtown its unique appeal. She hated that term: *Silicon Beach*. Everyone who lived in Venice before Google arrived hated Silicon Beach. It used to take balls to live in Venice. There were gangs and crime, danger and drive-bys. You had to have guts, stay on your toes. Now? All you needed was money. Helen had moved there right after film school and regularly wondered how much longer she'd last, despite the rent control.

Helen wasn't always this broke or so pathetic. That was something she had to keep reminding herself. The Helen of yore was quickly fading from memory, though—and not only her own. Five years ago, she'd had a solid career as an assistant to Hollywood types. Good, steady salary with perks and bonuses that allowed her a certain lifestyle, and the ability to pay off her debt. She even saved for both retirement and a rainy day. Even with that, Helen was the only one in her circle who stayed a renter when the rest went into a real estate frenzy back in the early aughts. That was about the last smart move she made. While those friends were dealing with sub-prime loans and reduction in property values, Helen was in a rent controlled duplex paying under market. But she had been ready for a major change, one that was life-sized.

Leaving Hollywood isn't all that easy. A career in 'The Industry' comes with a side of Stockholm Syndrome. You

identify with your captors, drink the Kool-Aid and keep believing it will get better—someday it will get better, it just has to. You keep doing that until you are able to plan a final escape. Even then, you almost have to be sure to burn every bridge just so you aren't sucked back in.

Helen didn't have a plan, though, and she knew better than to believe it would be different. All she had were offers to work for a different kind of crazy. The common knowledge of those seasoned in Hollywood insanity was that it's best to work for the lunacy you knew. If you didn't think it could be worse, you were sure to find out the extent of your foolishness. So Helen stayed put, hoping that something better would come her way, even if by fluke. And, boy, did it.

You might not see it, but Helen's a lucky girl. A winner, as a matter of fact, having actually won the lottery. She didn't win the big one; missed that by a megaball. Still, she was handed a tidy sum and, when all was said and done, her prize netted her a bit above four hundred grand. While it's gauche to talk about money, it's important to bring up her run of good fortune so you might have an idea how painful it was for Helen to get that free latte from Jeff, her former assistant, and step foot onto Abbot Kinney knowing what it still holds.

Despite what a certain magazine claimed, it was the worst street in America as far as she was concerned. Getting that java from Jeff meant Helen would be two doors down from *It*. Even when Helen tried to avoid *It*, she'd still see *It*. *The Failure*. The knot in her stomach would grow as she neared *It*. But Helen was not in a position to quibble. She couldn't cough up the cash for coffee elsewhere and Wells Fargo no longer felt welcoming. *It* was the price she would have to pay. At least she found parking. See? Her luck hadn't completely run out. As she pulled up the emergency brake, she braced herself for the inevitable. *It* wasn't what she needed today.

Jeff winked when he spotted Helen making her way through the line. Only on Abbot Kinney would there be a queue out the door for an overpriced joe at quarter-to-four.



Helen pushed her way through the crowd and slyly shuffled over to the pick-up counter. Not that she needed to worry about anyone noticing—everyone was head-down, staring at a screen, thumbing away.

“We haven’t seen you in eons,” Jeff admonished as he handed her the compostable cup. “Kyle’s starting to take it personally. Dinner next week?”

Helen nodded and they blew kisses at each other before she made her way out. They both knew she wouldn’t make it over for dinner, next week or any week after. The forced banter peppering the awkward silences was too painful. Out of work and out of money, she was out of interesting things to say.

Jeff still felt like he owed Helen. If it wasn’t friendship or a free dinner, then it would be comped coffee. It was Helen who introduced Jeff to Kyle, the way-too-hunky-to-wear-brown UPS guy. *Her* UPS guy, once upon a time. She encouraged Jeff, however forcefully, to properly ask Kyle out. And now they were engaged to be married. They still hadn’t told Helen, though. It seemed a compassionate act not to share their happy news with someone who was miserable. Jeff kept hoping Helen would get back on her feet. She deserved that.

She adored Jeff. When everything went to shit and *The Failure* fully hit, Helen made sure she found him a job. It was the least she could do, especially since he and Kyle had just moved in together, finding a cheap place in the neighborhood that was still too expensive. It may not be a dream job, but at least he’s management. Sometimes, though, Helen wished she’d pushed for him to take a gig as a bartender.

She sipped her latte and averted her eyes as she made her way back to her car. She was concentrating hard on not looking, on not seeing *It*, but someone shouted, “Hey!” and, instinctively, she looked up. There *It* was. Its windows covered with butcher paper and a ‘LEASED’ banner pasted over Paul’s ‘For Lease’ sign. *When the hell did that happen?* she thought. Or did she say that out loud?

Before she realized what she was doing, she was walking toward *It*. Needing to investigate further, to see the shell of *It*, the place where her store once was—a tiny little sliver of retail wonder all gone. Through the paper, poorly taped leaving gaps and dropped corners, she looked in and saw men at work. She couldn't see their faces, just jeans and boots smudged with dust from the debris-covered floor. When she goose-necked, she could see plans being mulled over. With a final craning, she saw the hole. The hole in the wall that was once hers, the wall that held shelves of books and purses and wraps and earrings. It was all gone.

Helen looked away from the wound, feeling a physical pain, and noticed that the restaurant next door was 'CLOSED FOR RENOVATIONS.' Around there, that meant, *We finally got out of the lease we could no longer afford and now it's on to some other sucker!* Another one bites the Abbot Kinney dust.

The boulevard was hardly recognizable anymore. Hal's was gone. Surfing Cowboys was gone. Primitivo would soon close, too. All the independents had left, or were hanging on until their lease was up, no longer affordable to renew. There's nothing left of Abbot Kinney that was the original Abbot Kinney but The Brig, Joe's and The Roosterfish, and who knew how long they would last? Helen was sure The Roosterfish would be the lone survivor. You lose the heart of your town when you kill its gay bar. Dogtown was officially drowning in the wake of Silicon Beach, and no one seemed to see the sense in saving it.

Helen took one last look. *It was really good to me*, she thought. And she had done right by *It*. She knew she was lucky to have had *It*, even if the ending wasn't happy.

*It* was how Helen and Paul met. He had gotten her a great lease. Things were cheap in 2009. Even cheaper in 2010. Paul worked with the kindly landlord, a woman in her late-seventies who liked, "A plucky young girl," though Helen was neither plucky nor particularly young at the time. Still, the landlord appreciated Helen's idea of a boutique with nothing

over \$100 in it, where one could get something wonderful and chic without spending an arm and a leg.

“We want the shop to have unique offerings—something for everyone, especially a self-centered indulgence,” Helen explained as she shook the owners hand and agreed to the lease. She said *we* because Helen had a partner. Therein lied the problem.

The problem had a name. Angie was Helen’s ex-boyfriend’s sister. Technically, he was her boyfriend at the time. At the time of Helen’s big win and the windfall’s arrival, Kenny and Helen had been together for three years. They were living together in her duplex apartment, a move he made after their first year together to help him save money. He was always needing to save money. Helen was never quite sure where all his went.

At the time of the win, he was starting his career as a personal trainer. This was after he gave a shot at being an app developer and website designer. Helen was more or less supporting them, having the major income. She didn’t mind at first. Of course, that was two years and two career incarnations ago, before she had started truly hating her job and wanted her own chance at reinvention.

Working as an assistant of the personal variety to a volatile actress, Helen was burning out. But, as a woman in her mid-thirties and after the economy’s crash, there weren’t a whole lot of career options waiting for her. At least not many that wouldn’t involve a return to school and time spent getting a specialized degree. The lottery money was an unexpected and needed boon. Who would have thought a random stop at a liquor store for a Friday night bottle of wine would change her life? But that’s how simple those things can be. She only checked the numbers when she heard a winning ticket was purchased in her area. When the check arrived, Helen and Kenny stared at it like it was an alien, and they had to figure out how to keep it alive.

“You could pay off your debt,” Kenny suggested.

"I did that already," Helen reminded. Every bonus and extra cent for five years had gone toward that endeavor.

Kenny looked up from the check and at her like she had a second head. "Really?"

"Where have you been, Kenny? When's the last time we took a vacation or I bought something new?"

He shrugged. "To be honest, I just thought you liked being cheap."

She gave him a glare.

"This is like a perfect opportunity to buy a house or something."

Helen bit her tongue. She had no desire to buy a house for him to live in, break things and be unable to repair them. Renting did have the upside of provided maintenance. "There's nothing in this neighborhood under a million dollars, and I just can't stomach moving east or dealing with a mortgage. Not in this economy."

"Fine," he answered, his fantasy of a bigger place with an office of his own now dashed. "Maybe you could take time off. Figure out what you really want to do. What do you really want to do?"

Helen sighed as she thought about it for a moment. "I really don't want to work for the needy anymore. I'm done. I don't want to work for another actor or celebrity or deal with the industry ever again." She said that with much more force than she intended.

Kenny leaned back. "Dude. You really hate your job, don't you?"

*Not as much as I hate you calling me 'Dude',* she thought. By his lack of reaction, she was fairly confident that she didn't say that out loud.

Through the course of the evening, and a bottle of wine, Helen hashed out a plan for the store she had always wanted to shop in. Amazing, fun, stylish stuff at fair prices. No matter whom you had to buy for, there would be just the thing. Baby

shower, birthday or bachelorette—she would have it covered. Something for him or her or them? She'd have that, too. Needed to perk yourself up? You'd find something with a price tag that wouldn't make you feel worse the next day.

Helen told Kenny what she'd envisioned—the layout, the music, the colors on the walls, the champagne social hour for special customers. She wanted a community as well as a clientele. Local artists and artisans would be showcased in her shop. Books by local authors. By midnight, she was buzzing with excitement. This was it. She had a plan. This was going to happen. She knew the business manager she was going to call first thing in the morning to ask for a favor in helping draft the business plan and budget, and the bank managers she would talk to about a small business loan. But first, she had an email to send: *I quit*.

She sent a second email to Ingrid Harmon, her friend and former headhunter: *I quit*. Knowing that Ingrid would call the right people to fill the gap on her behalf, Helen took in a satisfied breath and smiled. She was free to live her life. And it was an incredible feeling.

“You know who'd be great for this, like, seriously, the perfect partner for a store like this?” Kenny grinned as he waited for Helen to inquire. When that didn't happen, he answered himself. “My sister!”

Helen didn't like Kenny's sister. At all. Angie was irritatingly arrogant. She had an MBA from UCLA and actually added those three letters to the end of her name, like PhD or Esq. Like it was important. Like it mattered.

*BFD*, Helen thought with every email she received from Angie, the signature line added to each message whether it was from Angie's iPhone, iPad, iMac or Gmail itself. But, that wasn't something Helen could share aloud, so she politely acted impressed with Angie's accomplishments whenever they were brought up. No matter how vague they might be. She had to. She loved Kenny and his parents. You do things like that when you love someone.

Despite her educational pedigree, Angie hadn't achieved much. Not that Helen felt she could talk. A three-letter degree in film and her career was currently defined by serving smoothies to a starlet. At least Helen had held that position for a couple of years. Angie, on the other hand, seemed to bounce from job to job. "Recruited," Helen was told. *Doubtful*, was Helen's thought. When one is recruited, one usually moves up or makes a higher salary. For Angie, the move was usually lateral or, sometimes, a slight demotion.

That never seemed to stop the bragging from Kenny or his mom and dad. Angie had an MBA from UCLA and, by God, that meant something.

"Don't you think, babe?" Kenny asked. "Angie would be perfect. She could focus on the business side while you handle the creative stuff."

Helen realized that was her cue to act enthused. She smiled at him and said, "Wow. Just wow. Sure. That's a great idea, honey."

Before she could stop him, Kenny called Angie to set a meeting. Helen went to reach for her glass of wine. She found both her glass and the bottle empty. Some omens shouldn't be ignored. But she went through with it. The meeting. The partnership. The fuckery that ensued. All leading up to *It, The Failure* and Helen's current circumstance.

Taking in a deep breath, Helen pulled herself away from the scar of her boutique and started back to her car. By chance, she glanced across the street and spotted Paul stopped at the crosswalk. His girls in the backseat, windows down on that breezy summer day. All of them in full view. All of them smiling. Animated. Happy.

As if her visit to Abbot Kinney wasn't demoralizing enough, what was left of Helen's self-esteem plummeted to the sidewalk and splattered next to the latte she dropped.

*Fuck!*

By the look on the faces of those around her, she had said that out loud.