

Drink



The house was in shipshape. There wasn't a thing out of place or a speck of dust that could be found. Ellie Roberts was dressed to the nines. However, she wasn't expecting guests, and she wasn't going anywhere, either. Although she was dressed in an elegant, black velvet, off-the-shoulder evening dress, it was only twelve forty-five in the afternoon. If she was going out, she'd have to take off the magenta blusher she wore to highlight her cheeks, and wipe the cherry red lipstick from her mouth, then change into a hoodie and sweatpants. Her figure was for his eyes only, and no one but him was allowed to appreciate it.

It wasn't always like this. In the beginning, there were picnics in Hyde Park and days out to the country, weekends away spent in hotels, flowers every other day, and gifts every other week.

She couldn't believe her luck when he asked her if he could see her again the night they had met. He even made sure she got to her front door safely. They met at a singles night in central London. She wasn't even there to find anybody.

She was there with her bestie, Heather, who was always complaining that no one ever wanted her. Heather had legs that went on forever and breasts to die for (and that's coming from a woman). Ellie thought Heather looked better without any makeup on than she herself did with makeup. From that evening, life couldn't have been better. Especially for someone like Ellie.

She had nothing, did nothing, was nothing. She had been born a loser. Anything she did in life never amounted to anything and why should it? Loser was in her genes. Her mother, Melanie, was sitting in the Homerton Hospital mental health unit. At times, she didn't even know who she was, let alone who her daughters were. Loser! Her father, Frank, had been sitting up in Pentonville Prison for five years of a twenty-five-year sentence. Loser! Ellie herself, who had a good education, could never find a decent job and could never spend more than six months in the mundane ones she was offered.

When Jason Baker came along, she was in between jobs, had fifty-seven pounds in her current account, and a whopping zero in her savings account. Loser! But there was Jason, the big city broker, who seemed to have unlimited funds in his bank accounts. That fifty-seven pounds in her current account and the big fat zero in her savings account didn't matter anymore.

On their second date, as they ate a steak dinner and drank wine at The Square in Mayfair, Jason said he'd take care of her. She didn't need to worry about anything, let alone money.

Two months later, she moved out of the flat in Hackney that she shared with three other people. She slept in a small room with only enough space to fit a single bed and a wardrobe. And she moved into a three-bedroom house in Islington.

Jason kept his promise. He took care of her in every way possible. He made sure she had everything she needed. But she soon learned, and should already have known, nothing is free. There is always that small print that, although you should read, you never do. All you see is the big picture, in all its splendour.

The kitchen was magnificent! Stainless-steel appliances, big cooker, double fridge-freezer, genuine granite countertops, (none of that fake stick-over shit that you can get at your local department store for a few pounds), and oak stools surrounding the island. It was all showcased by the sunlight that filled the kitchen. Through the triple bay window over the kitchen sink, Ellie had a perfect view of the neatly manicured garden.

She saw the spacious living room, with the sixty-inch television, the leather sofa and armchairs, the oak coffee table, and bookshelves filled with books on the stock market, as well as classic novels.

She saw the black Colorado fabric king-size bed, the huge wardrobe, and the bedside nightstands with reading lamps. Her bare feet sank into the plush red carpet as she walked through the house.

What she didn't see were the cleaning products stored under the sink that she'd have to use to wash

and scrub the countertops, mop the floor, and polish the stainless steel.

In the splendid picture that was painted for her, she didn't see the Hoover under the stairs that rested alongside the broom. She had to use both on that plush red carpet. First, the broom to make sure all the dust and dirt were picked up properly, then the Hoover to make sure there was nothing left behind.

Ellie didn't see the dusting products she would have to use to make sure there wasn't a speck of dust on any of the surfaces around the house or a cobweb hanging from the ceiling.

She didn't see the newspaper and vinegar that she had to use once a week to clean all the windows. Ellie didn't wait to inspect the fine details of what the big picture had in store for her. Like most people, she only saw the fantastic objects and the bright colours that were shoved in her face. Six months after moving in, she'd barely be able to see the 'big picture,' let alone see the 'small print.'

Jason had invited two of his work friends over to watch the Arsenal vs. Tottenham match. However, they weren't really friends and she knew it. Even though he invited them to his house for an enjoyable evening, they still had to address him as Mr. Baker. After all, he was their superior.

If someone forgot where they stood in the scheme of things, he made sure they were quickly reminded with the Jason Baker Three Strike System.

Strike one was The Putdown. You received this

for forgetting your place in the hierarchy. Anyone who forgot where they stood by addressing Jason incorrectly, or by being late to the office, was instantly met with belittlement and mockery.

Strike two was The Shun. What Jason said went, and if you went off and did your own thing, you would instantly become the invisible man in his team and were ignored at all cost.

Strike Three was The Better Person. Anyone who Jason considered a threat to his position would quickly, for some reason or another, find himself unemployed.

Ellie laid out the hot wings, garlic bread, crisps, and other various snacks she was told to prepare on the black tablecloth that covered the oak coffee table. Jason nodded lightly at her in approval as she left the room.

She returned a few minutes later, carrying a tray with three pint glasses filled with beer. She offered each guest a drink from the tray. Jason's friends each took a pint and thanked Ellie. As she held out the tray to Jason, she saw his eyes snap up from the glass and meet hers.

'Is everything okay?' she asked.

'Yes, love, this is great stuff,' one of Jason's friends chimed in before Jason could open his mouth. 'Everything is just fine and dandy,' the other friend added, reaching for a hot wing and tearing into it, totally oblivious to the fact that the question wasn't a general one. Jason said nothing, picked up the glass from the bottom, and placed it on the coffee table.

All evening as they watched the game, she knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what. And every time she asked if everything was okay, the only answers that came were from Jason's friends. Jason said nothing at all. For most of the game, he wasn't even paying attention to what was happening on the screen.

As the game went on, the crisps in the bowls disappeared, the mountain of wings decreased, and Jason's friends emptied their beer glasses. Jason's beer sat untouched. When offered refills, his friends would gladly accept, but Jason would just shake his head, glaring at the glass.

Two hours later, she'd find out. Tottenham had lost 3-1, and the guys sat around talking about what went wrong for the team. Ellie cleared the dishes and bowls from the table and picked up Jason's friends' empties. She reached out for Jason's pint glass, but he stopped her, motioning with his hand for her to leave it where it was, not saying a word.

Twenty minutes later, she stood with him at the front door as they both said goodbye to their guests. He closed the door and walked past her back into the living room. She followed swiftly behind.

As she turned into the living room and opened her mouth to ask him what was wrong, she was only able to get the word 'what's' out of her mouth before... Wham! His fist connected with her right eye. She let out a shriek of surprise and pain as her head snapped back with the force of the blow. Her hands flew to her face. She screamed as she was struck again, not with

his fist, but with the liquid from the beer that splatted in her face, adding a sting to the throbbing pain he had just caused.

‘Never serve me a drink in a dirty glass again! Ever,’ Jason said as she wiped the dripping beer from her face. ‘And clear up this mess you caused,’ he said fiercely, then walked out of the room, leaving her dazed and confused.

While she didn’t have to hand over money directly, she sure had to pay for all the nice things he brought her and the things he did for her. After that night, when her eye returned to its normal state and she could see clearly again, she made sure there wasn’t a smudge or fingerprint on any of the glasses and no dried-on food on any of the plates. Of course, she made a mistake now and again. And she paid for it with a slap here, a kick there, or a plate full of food to the face when something was over or undercooked. Over time, she made fewer and fewer mistakes, but the fear of another beating always kept her on her toes.

The evening after the first beating when Jason got back from work, he sent her out to the shops for some wine. When she returned, the house was in darkness. As Ellie closed the front door and turned to walk down the hall, she saw a red dinner dress hanging on the bannister that led up the stairs. She took off her trainers, put them carefully on the shoe rack, and stepped closer to the dress. There was a note pinned to it. It read ‘put me on.’ She took the dress and hurried upstairs and changed into it.