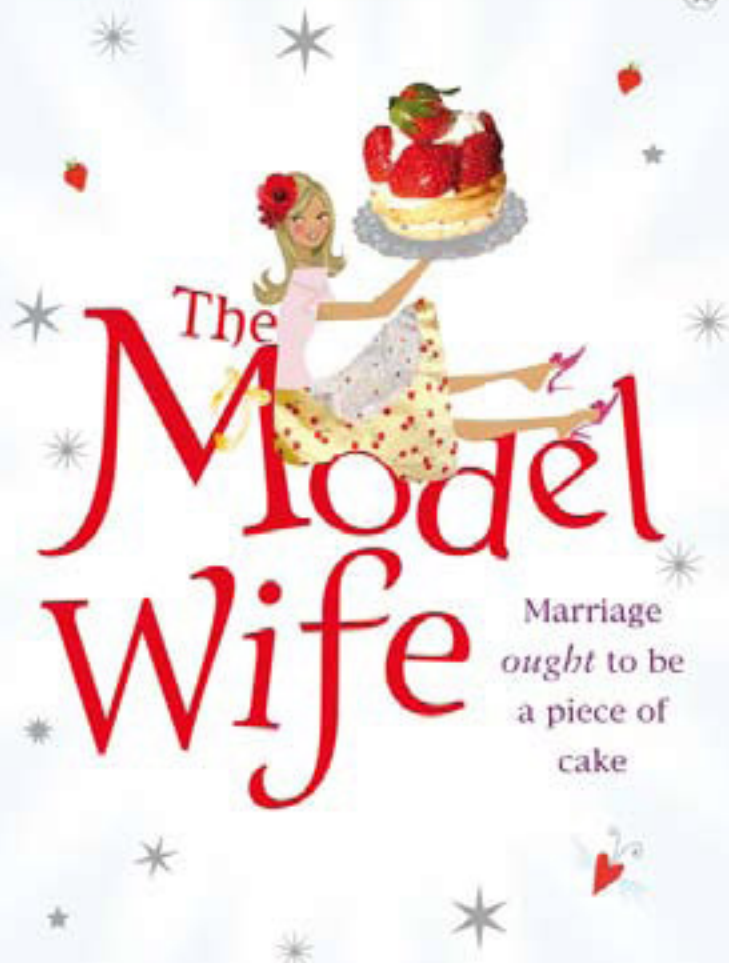


From the bestselling author of AMY'S HONEYMOON



The Model Wife

Marriage
ought to be
a piece of
cake

JULIA LLEWELLYN

The Model Wife
by
Julia Llewellyn

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I

Poppy Price had always dreamed of marrying a handsome prince, of catching his eye across the crowded ballroom floor, of him approaching and asking: 'Shall we dance?' They would swirl round the floor all night to the strains of the 'Blue Danube' and the next morning, on bended knee, he would ask for her hand in marriage.

Things didn't quite turn out that way with Luke Norton. The first time she saw him was on a damp Friday morning in June when she served him a double espresso. Poppy was twenty and working as a waitress in Sal's, a grimy café in King's Cross wedged between a shop selling Japanese comics and another selling organic beauty products. Poppy had recently taken the job because modelling assignments had been few and far between, and the rent needed to be paid on the tiny flat she shared in Kilburn with her old schoolfriend Meena.

Luke was sitting alone at a corner table, talking agitatedly into a mobile phone. When Poppy saw him, her stomach lurched as if she had leant too far over a cliff. Tall, dark with a broad jaw, he looked like the rugged hero of the black-and-white movies Poppy loved to watch: the kind of man who'd rescue you from a burning building or bundle you on his camel and carry you across the desert.

He was old, admittedly, nearer fifty than forty, but that didn't bother her. As a model Poppy came across a lot

of young men, handsome young men, but they were such lightweights: panicking if they thought they'd put on half a pound and sucking in their cheekbones when they looked in the mirror. Poppy wanted someone more solid than that, someone who could protect her from a world which seemed to be full of hard elbows and backbiting. Protect her in a way her father might have done, if she'd ever got the chance to know him.

'Christ, Hannah, I don't know if I can . . .' Luke was saying, when a sour-faced woman three tables away bawled, 'Waitress!'

'Yes?' said Poppy through gritted teeth.

'I've been waiting ten minutes for my coffee. Where the hell is it?'

'I'll just check,' Poppy said as serenely as she could. She stuck her head round the kitchen door. 'Hey, Sal, hurry up with that coffee for table ten.'

'You never ask me for a coffee for table ten,' protested Sal, her very patient Portuguese boss, looking up from his copy of *Metro*.

'I did. Ages ago.'

'You didn't. Poppy you are a terrible waitress.' But he was smiling, because it was hard not to smile at Poppy with her cropped blonde hair and saucer-shaped eyes the colour of the translucent minty cough sweets Sal was so partial to.

'Oh sorry. Well, she'd like a latte.'

'Coming up,' Sal said. Poppy went back into the so-called dining room with its red-and-black laminate floor, Formica tables and framed photographs of the gardens of Madeira.

‘It’s coming,’ she said to the woman. To her disappointment, she saw the perfect man had been joined by an equally perfect woman. Perfect from behind, anyway. Poppy couldn’t see her face. She had black hair in a French plait and was wearing a very elegant pinstripe trouser suit. She was about to go and take their order, when a woman with a buggy stopped her.

‘Excuse me, do you have high chairs?’

‘Hannah’s giving me so much grief again,’ she heard the perfect man say. ‘She doesn’t want me to go to Germany for the elections because it’s Tilly’s sports day.’

The woman sounded exasperated. ‘Poor you. Doesn’t she realize this is your *career*? I mean it’s not like you were a house husband when she met you.’

‘Exactly. How does she think we can afford Tilly’s bloody ridiculous school? I . . .’

‘I *said* do you have high chairs?’

‘Oh! Yes. Of course. I’ll go and get you one.’ Ears straining to pick up more of the conversation, Poppy returned to the kitchen. Their one high chair was covered in smeary mush from the last baby who had sat in it. Poppy had meant to clean it, but she’d forgotten. Hastily, she wiped it down. As she hurried back into the dining room, she saw the perfect woman disappearing through the door. The perfect man was still sitting at the table, looking gloomy.

‘At last,’ said the woman with the buggy. ‘I thought you’d died.’ She lifted the baby out of the buggy. ‘Come on, darling. Now you can have some breakfast.’ Just then Mrs Angry yelled. ‘Waitress! This is getting ridiculous. Next time I’m going to Starbucks.’

‘Sorry,’ Poppy gasped. She hurried back to the kitchen and emerged with the latte.

‘About time,’ Mrs Angry snapped, ‘and if you’re expecting a tip, you’ve got another think coming.’

‘Sorry.’ Poppy repeated, her face flamingo pink.

‘And I’d like to order too,’ chirruped the woman with the buggy. ‘Two croissants, please, and a latte.’

She heard Luke clear his throat.

‘And if it’s not too much trouble, I’d love another double espresso.’

‘Oh, OK. Sorry. Sorry.’ She rushed into the kitchen, shouted the orders to Sal and rushed out again.

‘I’m so sorry. I thought I’d taken your order already,’ she said to the woman with the baby, who rolled her eyes and said nothing. Poppy turned to Luke. ‘I do apologize.’

He smiled so the corners of his eyes crinkled. ‘It’s fine. You’re cheering me up. I think you’re having an even worse day than me.’

The line she’d been daring herself to say rolled off her tongue: ‘Want to talk about it?’

‘You know I really wouldn’t mind.’

Buttoning her green mac, Mrs Angry approached them. Poppy braced herself for a bollocking, but she was smiling.

‘Excuse me, I’m so sorry to interrupt. But I’ve just realized, you’re Luke Norton. I had to let you know I love the programme. Only intelligent thing on television these days.’

‘Thank you,’ Luke said.

‘Er. So.’ The gorgon had transformed into a simpering southern belle. ‘Good luck. Sorry to bother you. I’m just such a fan.’

She bustled out. Luke ran a hand through his hair.

‘God, I hate it when that happens. So embarrassing.’

‘Are you on TV?’ Poppy asked.

‘I am.’ He smiled. Then he patted the chair vacated by the perfect woman.

‘Do you want to sit down?’

‘In a minute,’ Poppy said flustered. ‘I’ll just serve this lady.’

So she served the croissants and – with no other customers in sight – sat down and talked to Luke for nearly an hour. He told her how he’d once been a war correspondent, reporting on conflicts from all over the world. How he was now the anchorman for the *SevenThirty News*, which sounded extremely glamorous, though Poppy couldn’t say she’d ever watched it, and how he was writing a book about the history of the Balkans, which he hoped would be seen as ‘definitive’.

‘I’m sure it will be.’ Poppy nodded, not quite understanding what he was on about.

The woman with the buggy left, leaving no tip. Luke continued talking about his family, his three children, the way he was growing apart from his wife.

Poppy’s heart sank temporarily when she heard the word ‘wife’, but like a cork in water it immediately popped up again because their marriage was so clearly on the rocks.

‘It’s so difficult,’ he said. ‘I want to be a good father, but we married too young and we’re just not making each other happy any more.’

‘That’s so sad,’ said Poppy, thanking the Lord that Sal’s was such a terrible café they’d probably get no more

customers until the lunchtime trickle, meaning she could carry on talking to Luke all morning.

He smiled at her. 'You're very sweet. What are you doing working in a dump like this?'

'Well, actually,' Poppy confided, 'I'm a model. I just do this between jobs.'

She hated telling people what her job was, because they immediately looked her up and down, clearly thinking 'too fat, too small, nose too squodgy' – all the things booking agents muttered when she stood in front of them. Women made a sneery, scornful face; men eyed her like an expert from the *Antiques Road Show* evaluating a Victorian dining table. Both sexes were clearly thinking 'thick as a plank'.

But Luke simply smiled again. 'I thought as much. It can't be long before someone as beautiful as you hits the big time.' He looked at his watch. He had big, competent-looking hands. 'Damn. I've got to go. Conference in five minutes. But it was lovely talking to you . . . ?'

'Poppy.'

'Poppy. See you again, I hope. If you're not strutting down a catwalk in Milan.'

'I hope so,' Poppy said. 'I mean I hope I'm not strutting down a catwalk in Milan, I hope I'm here.'

He laughed and she smiled all morning and not just because he'd left a five-pound tip.

After that, Luke came in regularly and they talked. In the meantime, Poppy started watching the *SevenThirty News* on Channel 6. She was stunned and impressed to discover her new friend presented it on average four nights out of

six. Poppy couldn't believe she knew such an important man. She made notes on the news stories of the day and plied Luke with questions. Did he think there would ever be a solution to the Israel problem? What was the answer to teenage crime? How could the government sort out the NHS?

'You're very sweet.' Luke said every time. Poppy knew he was being patronizing, but she didn't much care, though it would have been nice if he'd bothered to answer her properly.

After a couple of weeks Luke asked her if she was free for dinner. She met him at half past eight in a slightly scuzzy Korean place near Channel 6's headquarters in Pentonville Road.

'I'd love to take you to the Ritz,' he said, 'but someone might recognize me.'

She didn't care about the Ritz, but she was a bit upset afterwards when, walking up the road, she tried to slip her arm through his and he shook her off.

'Sorry. But someone might see us.'

Before she could dwell on that, he asked her if she'd like to have dinner again. That happened twice more and after the third meal, they went to bed back at her place, which was happily empty because Meena was visiting family in Bangalore. Then began the most wonderful twelve months of Poppy's life: twelve months of tangled limbs, sweaty bodies and garbled shouts of 'I want you!'; of giggly meals in out of the way candlelit restaurants; meals which were far more about alcohol than food; of expensive lingerie and picnics in hotel bedrooms.

Of course Poppy had had boyfriends before, but very

few. She'd attended a smart girls boarding school in Oxfordshire called Brettenden House and only met boys twice a term when they were bussed in for what the teachers called a 'bop'. It was at one of these that Poppy, aged fifteen, had met Mark from Radley College. They'd slow-danced all night, kissed in an alley outside the kitchens where the bins were kept and after that had met on alternate weekends in Henley, spending most of the time smooching on a bench by the river. But after three months Mark dumped her because she wouldn't go all the way. Propelled by a mixture of confusion and spite, the following week she lost her virginity to Mark's best friend, Niall, under an elm tree in the far corner of the playing fields. The next day he dumped her, telling everyone she was a 'lousy lay'.

After that humiliation, Poppy avoided all men for a few years. The one to recapture her trust was Alex, who worked in the food department at Harvey Nichols, where she had her first job. Alex cuddled and kissed her a bit, but to Poppy's great relief he didn't pressure her into sex. Then she discovered he was gay and they went their amicable but separate ways.

And that was it. Meaning at the grand age of twenty, Poppy was practically a virgin. She had certainly never been in love before. So when it hit her, it hit hard.

A lot of it was the sex. Luke was very gentle with her the first time and very encouraging. He kept moaning, 'Oh God, you're so beautiful' which was an improvement on Mark's 'Can I put it in now?' or Niall's 'I . . . uh . . . awaaargh!' He showed her what he liked and he asked what she liked and the result was so unexpectedly

fabulous that every time Poppy thought about him she felt goose pimples explode across her arms like thousands of tiny fireworks and she forgot even more of Sal's customers' orders than usual.

But it was more than just the physical stuff. Luke was a real man. He picked up the tab. He asked her what wine she'd like and, when she admitted she hadn't a clue, said he'd like to teach her all about varieties of grapes and vineyard soils. He took her to the opera which she pretended to love, even though she spent most of it in a fantasy borrowed from a coffee advert involving her and Luke waking up in some sunny loft apartment and feeding each other croissants. Best of all, after one session on her narrow single bed, he lay back on the pillow and said, 'How long has that pipe been leaking in the bathroom?'

He was talking about a pipe under the basin that dripped into a bucket like an unsophisticated form of torture. Meena and Poppy had to empty it regularly into the bath. Once they had both gone away for the weekend and the bathroom carpet had got drenched so it smelt like a mangy dog in the monsoon.

'Months,' Poppy replied. 'Meena and I keep asking Mrs Papadopolous to fix it, but she just says, "Yeah, yeah." I suppose we should call a plumber but he'd just rip us off. Again.' The last plumber had charged two hundred and eighty-nine pounds plus VAT to fix a dripping kitchen tap and – with some justification – Mrs Papadopolous had refused to reimburse them.

'I can't stand it any more,' Luke said. 'I'll bloody do it now. Have you got a tool kit?'

He might as well have asked if Poppy had a guide to

quantum physics hidden under the bed. When she said no, he just smiled.

‘Hang on there. I’ll go and get one.’

He returned twenty minutes later, then lay under the grubby bathroom sink grunting and groaning. By midnight the pipe was fixed. Poppy gazed at him with adoration.

‘Thank you, Luke,’ she breathed.

It was such a relief. Poppy had always had to fend for herself. Mum had never been the sort to do her cooking or cleaning or laundry. At an early age Poppy had learnt if she wanted to eat she had to find something to put in the microwave and if all her clothes were dirty she had to switch on the washing machine, though she never was quite sure how to add powder and what temperature you were meant to set it at, meaning her underwear was perpetually limp and grey until Meena explained about whites and colours. When something broke down, Poppy either called a repair man who usually made a pass at her, then ripped her off, or she just threw it out.

It wasn’t like that for Meena. When she wanted some TLC she just went home to Wembley where her mum did her laundry – even ironing her knickers – and stuffed her with curries and her dad mended the dodgy gearbox on her car. Poppy found it very tiring being all alone, but with Luke by her side, she wasn’t. Not any more.

‘Thank you,’ she said again.

Luke smiled, only a little smugly. ‘Nice to get my hands dirty,’ he said. ‘It makes a change.’ He paused. ‘And nice to be appreciated. For once. With everyone else it’s just take, take, take. “Why can’t you make it to the

school play?” “What do you mean you can’t take two weeks off at Christmas to join me in Barbados?” “I want a pony.” “Can I go skiing?” You’re the only one who just lets me be.’

The domestic references set faint alarm bells ringing, but the overall message was what she’d been waiting to hear. Poppy stroked his face. ‘I love you,’ she breathed.

He smiled at her. ‘I love you too, my Poppy.’

In Poppy’s short life it was the first moment of true perfection. Perfection only slightly marred when five seconds later Luke’s mobile rang and he looked at it, frowned, switched it off and said, ‘Oh shit, I’d better be off.’

He began pulling off his clothes for the shower he always took before heading home. Sometimes Poppy felt insulted that he had to wash off all trace of her, but tonight she didn’t mind. She sat on the edge of the bath and watched him, liquid joy coursing through her veins. *He loved her. He loved her!* They were going to live happily ever after.

Only after he left in a minicab did Poppy focus again on that pesky matter of the wife. And the three children. Poppy knew they lived in North London, that there were two teenage girls and a younger boy, that the wife was called Hannah and had been a journalist but was now a full-time mother. She wondered if Hannah wondered where her husband was these late nights and for just a millisecond felt a shiver of guilt. But then she shrugged it off. Luke never talked much about his family, then only to complain, so he couldn’t care for them that much. It wasn’t Poppy’s fault if he preferred being with her. It

didn't occur to her Hannah could stand in the way of her long-term happiness. After all, men left wives and children all the time. Look at what had happened to Mum.

Poppy had met her handsome prince. And somehow or another, she would get him to the altar, because that was how all good fairy tales ended.

You didn't exactly have to be Sigmund Freud to see why Poppy might be searching for a handsome prince. Her dad had walked out on her mum, Louise, when she was only twenty-two and seven months pregnant. Poppy knew virtually nothing about him except that his name was Charles, and that Louise had met him in the South of France where she was spending a summer selling ice cream on the beaches. Poppy found the idea of her nervy mother behaving in such a carefree fashion rather hard to believe, but there was evidence in the form of a photo of her laughing on a pebbly beach in white shorts and an acid-green T-shirt that read 'Frankie Says . . . Relax', with a floppy black blow in her permed hair and a tray of ice creams round her neck.

Anyway, Charles and Mum had had a brief fling. Then he disappeared and never responded to any of Louise's letters telling him she was pregnant. That was all Poppy knew. If she tried to find out more about him – what he looked like, where he was from, his favourite music – her mother would snap: 'You don't need to know anything about that bastard, we've managed fine without him, haven't we?' So when very young, Poppy had stopped asking questions.

And in a way, they had done fine without him, very well in fact. Obviously Louise had had to work extremely

hard to support herself and her baby daughter. She'd found a job with a recruitment agency, so Poppy's early years had been spent either in a nursery or with her gran who came to live with them when Poppy was four. But a couple of years later, Gran's arthritis got too bad to cope with a small child, but by then Louise had founded her own company and was making good money. So Elisabetta from El Salvador was drafted in to be Poppy's surrogate mum, which worked out fabulously until the phone bill arrived sending Louise into meltdown and Elisabetta on the first plane back west.

After that au pairs came and went in quick succession. Poppy had lost her heart to each of them. Her earliest memories were of Margarita from Colombia cuddling her when she cut her knee, of Greta from Austria applauding when she rode her bike without stabilizers for the first time, of Adalet from Turkey walking backwards in the swimming pool encouraging Poppy to splash towards her. But Louise had felt differently: the girls were too slapdash, too cheeky, stayed out too late on their nights off. Even the ones who behaved impeccably had to leave as soon as Louise noted her daughter growing too fond of them, because it wouldn't do to get too attached.

With each departure Poppy wept bitterly. The girls all felt wretched and swore they'd keep in touch with the sweet blonde girl with Caribbean-blue eyes, but after a couple of postcards, communication slowed and eventually halted, as they found new families, boyfriends, proper jobs and got on with their lives.

In the end, Louise decided the best thing by far for Poppy was boarding school, which, thanks to her thriving

business she could now afford. She sold the semi in St Alban's, bought herself a bijou two-bedroom flat in Clapham and rung round for the prospectuses. Everyone gasped when they heard Poppy had been sent to Watershead when she was only nine, but actually it had been great. Matron was kind, the headmistress was lovely, she'd had lots of little friends and Gran came to visit every other weekend.

It was at Brettenden House that the misery had kicked in. That was a really snobby place – all the other girls seemed to live in huge country piles and own at least four ponies and their mummies had all been to Brettenden too. Poppy was aware that behind her back most of the girls called her 'noov' short for 'nouveau', which in their limited world was one of the cruellest insults. She only had one real friend, Meena, whose dad was an accountant from Wembley by way of the Punjab, who'd slaved to send their daughter to a smart school only to find she was mercilessly dissed for being lower middle class. 'Does your dad do my dad's tax returns?' landowners' daughters would ask, sniggering. To make it worse, Meena had no interest in academia whatsoever and kept begging her parents to arrange a marriage for her to the richest man they could find.

On Saturday nights when most of the other girls had gone home to their country estates, Poppy and Meena would curl up together in the common room and watch a DVD of their favourite film, *Pretty Woman*. The idea of a world where a Richard Gere type hero solved your problems with a flash of his credit card was incredibly appealing.

‘That’s what we want,’ Meena sighed. ‘If you were married to a man like that you wouldn’t need to worry about exams.’

Poppy agreed. ‘Much more fun than being my mum and working all the hours God sends and always being exhausted.’

The Richard fantasy became even more pressing when, just a month before GCSEs, Gran died. Poppy’s prospects had been poor anyway but, griefstricken, she only obtained two passes: a C in art and a D in English. Brettenden suggested that perhaps the sixth form was not the right place for her and Poppy wholeheartedly agreed. Happily, Meena was ousted too, so the pair of them found a flat together in Kilburn. Meena got a job in a Starbucks on Oxford Street and Poppy found one selling swimsuits at Harvey Nichols.

In retrospect Poppy realized that was the happiest period of her life. Work was a laugh: there was a nice crowd available for drinks most evenings, and watching rich women squeeze themselves into five-hundred-pound bikinis every day was very entertaining. But a few months later a woman with a face like a hawk had begun quizzing her about Eres versus Missoni, then suddenly diverted into asking if Poppy had ever done any modelling and would she like to come to her office for a chat?

And so, at eighteen, Poppy Price had found herself persuaded to hand in her notice at Harvey Nicks and set off pounding the streets of London with an *A-Z* and a book full of pictures of herself to be studied by hard-faced women in tiny dark offices, who turned to each other and said things like ‘Pretty face but needs to lose at least a

stone' as if she didn't even exist. Poppy wasn't at all sure about her new career, she was naturally a size eight, but the pressure was on to be a size six or a four. It was generally agreed that she was not edgy-looking enough to appear on the catwalk, but had a more 'commercial look', which meant she appeared in a couple of adverts for bathroom warehouses and detergents. She also did some shoots for teenage magazines that involved standing on a street corner wearing a sweater dress and stripy tights, arms linked with another (prettier) model, pretending to laugh, even though the cold wind was biting her face, while passers-by sniggered at her, and a photographer yelled they were supposed to be going out on the razz not to a funeral. But her friends, Meena especially, were so excited at the idea of knowing a real-life model that she decided to stick with it for a couple of years before going back to swimwear. Then Luke and love entered her life, and their arrival seemed to sprinkle fairy dust into every cranny of her existence. After her rocky start, modelling jobs suddenly started to rush in: a shoot for *Elle*, the cover of *Cosmo*, a shoot for *Glamour* (in Cuba), another for *Harper's Bazaar*.

Poppy and Luke's relationship had lasted nearly a year. She adored him with every ounce of her being. She worried increasingly about the fact he still hadn't left Hannah, but she was sure it was just a matter of biding her time. She saw him usually two nights a week and occasionally for a stolen hour or so at weekends. They didn't go out as much as they used to, they mostly stayed in bed, but that was enough.

Then came that terrifying yet amazing day when Poppy's period was so late and she'd been feeling so weird and off the booze that she decided to buy a pregnancy test. She peed on the stick and saw the line turn blue. It wasn't a massive surprise. Even though Luke had asked her frequently if she was on the pill, and she'd frequently assured him she was, she'd never actually picked up her prescription. After all, Meena said the pill made you bloated, and Poppy kept reading in the papers how it was virtually impossible for any woman to have babies these days, except by expensive and painful IVF. And – although she could hardly admit it even to herself – she wanted a baby to love more than anything else, plus Luke would *have* to leave his wife, so she didn't see how getting pregnant could really be a bad thing.

She toyed with the idea of calling Meena who was surfing in Cornwall for the week in the hopes of picking up Prince William or at least one of his friends. Then she decided Luke had to be the first to hear the news. She had to wait forty-eight hours until he came round after the show. She meant to tell him straight away, but he was feeling very frisky and steered her straight to the bed before she could even open her mouth. After a session which hadn't been quite as vigorous as usual because Poppy was terrified of hurting the baby, whom she had already christened Isabelle, she took a deep breath.

'Luke,' she said, stroking his chest, 'I've got something to tell you.'

'Mmm?' Luke's eyes were closed; he was drifting off to sleep.

‘I’m . . . we . . . we’re having a baby.’

‘What?’ Luke sat up. He looked horrified. ‘You *are* joking?’

‘No,’ Poppy said, confused.

‘Fucking hell, Poppy! How the fuck did this happen? You’re on the pill.’

‘I . . . Yes, I am, but I guess it didn’t work.’

‘The pill *always* works. Shit. Well, we’d better get you to the doctor quickly. How far gone are you?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe a couple of months. I didn’t want to go the doctor until I told you. I thought we could go together.’

‘Fucking hell,’ Luke said again.

Poppy started to cry. This was not the overjoyed reaction she’d expected.

‘I thought you’d be pleased.’

‘Pleased? How could I be pleased? I don’t want you having an abortion, but I don’t see what bloody choice we have.’

She gasped. ‘An abortion?’

‘Well, what else were you going to do?’

‘Have the baby of course. Little Isabelle.’

Luke’s face turned a shade of plum. ‘Isabelle? You know it’s a girl?’

‘No, I just have a feeling. I—’

‘My middle daughter’s called Isabelle. Christ, Poppy.’

Poppy cried a lot. She said there was no way she was going to have an abortion. She said, not very convincingly, that she’d be fine as a single mother, that her mum had coped and she would too. Luke had snapped back that, of course, she couldn’t go it alone, he’d support her, but

he couldn't leave Hannah and the children, she had to understand that.

'But why not? You don't love *her*.'

Suddenly, Luke looked all of his forty-nine years. 'I'd forgotten how young you are, Poppy. Of course I love Hannah. She's my wife. The mother of my children.'

'But you love *me*.'

'I love both of you,' Luke said, looking very agitated, 'but in different ways. I mean, if things had been different, if I'd met you at another time, I would have married you. But I'm married to Hannah; I can't leave her. You must see that.'

'But men leave their wives all the time. What's the problem?'

Luke looked aghast. 'You really can't see what the problem is?'

'You could still see your children.'

He got out of bed and started getting dressed. 'It's not that simple. I'm a public figure, you know. The papers would have a field day if I left my wife for a younger woman.'

'No, they wouldn't,' Poppy said. 'You're not *that* famous.' After all, since Mrs Angry on day one, the only person who'd recognized Luke had been the waiter in the Indian round the corner, and it turned out as the conversation progressed he'd thought Luke was one of the contestants in the *X Factor*.

It was the wrong thing to say. 'Your little friends may not know me but, believe me, I'm a household name.' Luke knotted his tie. 'I have to go now. Don't cry. We'll

sort all this out. I'll find you a doctor, the best doctor. But you can't have this baby.'

She cried all night, finally falling asleep as dawn broke. She completely forgot a car was coming at nine to pick her up for a shoot for a new low-calorie chocolate bar and was in such a deep sleep she didn't hear the doorbell. Her phone's battery had died, so when she did rise at eleven, it was to a barrage of irate messages from Elsa at her agency. But no messages from Luke. Nothing.

The car came back for her, she went to the shoot, where the make-up artist tutted over her red eyes and blotchy skin and told her not to be such a naughty girl in future. Between every shot she checked her phone for messages.

Nothing.

She left messages all day for Luke, but his phone was switched off. She texted him continuously. In the end, he rang her shortly after eight when she was howling on the sofa, while spooning her way through a tub of Skinny Cow ice cream.

'Sorry I haven't been in touch,' he said, sounding as distant as if he was calling from the moon. 'It's been frantic at work, but I will find you a doctor.'

A large rock was lodged in Poppy's chest. 'I told you, I'm not getting rid of this baby.'

He sighed. 'Well, just think about it. I have to go now, Poppy. I'll call you tomorrow. Bye.'

Poppy had known unhappiness before, but now she was becoming acquainted with true misery. That night and

the following day passed in a blur of sobbing and sleeplessness and fruitless attempts to call Meena, then Luke, then Meena again. Neither returned her calls (later, she discovered that Meena couldn't get a signal at the seaside). But then at nine the following night something miraculous happened. The doorbell rang and when Poppy answered it, expecting the Chinese food delivery man, she heard Luke's voice on the crackly intercom.

'Poppy, it's me. Please let me in.'

She opened the door to see him climbing the stairs, carrying a large suitcase.

'I've left them,' he called up to her, stopping for breath on the first-floor landing. 'I've come to live with you, Poppy. You're going to have the baby. I'm going to make you my wife.'

My Husband, the Bimbo and Me

BY HANNAH CREIGHTON

Hannah Creighton was devastated when her husband, Luke Norton, anchorman of *SevenThirty News* on Channel 6, fell for a 22-year-old model. With Luke now married and expecting a baby, Hannah is rebuilding her life with children Matilda, 14, Isabelle, 13 and Jonty, eight. Here with heart-searing honesty, she writes about the most painful period of her life.

It was a bright late-summer's afternoon when the news came that would change my life for ever. I was sitting in my study, looking out over the garden of our glorious family home in Hampstead, North London, sipping a cup of Earl Grey, enjoying the sound of the birds singing and watching sunlight play in the leaves of the willow tree. It was a brief lull between putting an organic chicken to slow cook in the bottom of the Aga for a family dinner and getting in the car to pick up Jonty from school then heading on to meet Isabelle from lacrosse practice.

I jumped as my computer announced I had email. Without much curiosity, I turned to the screen. I expected a message from our dear friend Cheryl, thanking me for picking up her daughter from school the previous day, but I saw Luke's name at the top. Probably him warning me he'd be late home. Annoyed, because getting all five of us round the table was as rare in our house as coconuts in Antarctica, I opened it, read it, then blinked in confusion.

Darling Luke

I'm emailing u becoz ur not returning my calls or texts and I'm desprat. I'm sorry u had such a shock about the baby but we need 2 talk. I'm going to keep it whatever and I understand if u don't want 2 b involved but we just need to talk some more. I love u, I love u so much and I thought u loved me 2. Please, please, please get in touch.

Again, I love u with all my heart

Your, Poppy xxxxx00000

Blood pounded in my head. I thought my eardrums might be about to burst. Forgetting to put the potatoes on, I googled Poppy Price, the name attached to the email. Thanks to modern technology, within seconds I knew my enemy. A picture of a gangly, doe-eyed blonde, barely older than Matilda, smiled out at me. This bimbo, I read, was 22 and a model. Everything took on a surreal tone, as if events around me were happening in slow motion. Surely this could not be true.

When Luke and I met in a bar in Israel, eighteen years ago, it was like a bolt of lightning for both of us. I was a newspaper journalist, he was an up and coming foreign correspondent for the BBC. At first I was wary of his advances. I knew all about his womanizing reputation, but gradually his charm wore me down. Back in England, we started seeing each other and within a few months we were inseparable. Eighteen months after we met we were married in a village church with our friends and families weeping as my husband held my hand and pledged his troth, promising to forsake all others. Fool that I am, I believed him.

A year later came the first of our three children. Of course, as with every relationship, life seemed a bit more humdrum now we were being woken by crying babies in the middle of the night. There were times when both of us, no doubt, felt like running for the hills. But, somehow, we continued to love each other and our children. With Luke still jetting all over the world, I soon realized the best way to maintain a happy home for my family was to abandon my beloved career to provide a stable base for everyone. I missed the buzz of the office, of foreign travel and meeting celebrities, but most of the time I was more than content to be nest-building for my ‘team’.

For the past few years I’ve had to hold my head high and ignore friends’ ‘concerned’ comments about Luke’s ‘friendships’ made on long trips away from home, or his ‘closeness’ with various girls in his office. Mostly, I’d ignored such hints, desperate to sustain a happy home. Once or twice I’d tackled Luke, but he’d laughed off my suggestions as paranoia, saying his family was his world.

But this was different. A baby – if it was really true – was something else altogether. I felt as if someone had put a knife in my stomach and was twisting it round. I ordered Luke home. Over the next few hours we had a lot of conversations straight out of Mills & Boon along the lines of: ‘How could you do this to me?’ ‘It was a mistake. She means nothing to me.’ After an evening of this, I told him to leave. ‘Where shall I go?’ he asked. ‘To that bimbo,’ I replied. And so he left.

For the next few days, he called, emailed and texted repeatedly begging me to have him back, but something inside me had snapped. After so many years of tolerance, the wife had turned.

Gradually, over the weeks and months that followed fury gave way to despair. As my anger diminished, I found that –

despite myself – I couldn't help missing Luke. I loathed being a single mother. I wondered if I had been too quick to kick him out and if there was any way back. But the fact remained: the bimbo was pregnant.

Misery threatened to engulf me. I considered anti-depressants, but I decided the only way long term to get back on track was to start enjoying myself again. At first I didn't feel like seeing anyone, but I forced myself. I organized dinner dates with girlfriends, started swimming at the local baths and even joined a wine-appreciation society. Slowly, I started to have fun, and every time I heard myself laugh, I knew I was one step further towards dealing with my emotions.

Little by little, I began to see light at the end of the tunnel. Having found the courage to kick Luke out, my new confidence affected other areas. Although many of our old 'couple' friends drifted away, others came to the fore. What really changed things for me was resuming my writing career – the one I had abandoned to be a perfect wife and mother. Hands trembling, I lifted the phone and called a few old contacts. To my everlasting gratitude, it transpired many of them had been where I had and were happy to give me a hand restarting my career. Seeing my name in print for the first time in decades gave me a buzz similar – I imagine – to the Viagra I discovered about the time Luke moved out that he had been ordering on the internet.

Despite such moments of sunshine, there is still no denying that the break-up with Luke has been unbelievably traumatic, not only for me but – worse – for our children, who worship their father. In those first few months, Jonty got into trouble at school for hitting other children. The girls became sullen and withdrawn. They vowed never to see their father again, something that caused me both intense pain and deep satisfaction.

My jealousy was overwhelming. I knew that Luke had moved his little strumpet into a palatial apartment overlooking the canal in one of the swishiest parts of London. How different to the start of our own married life in a poky one-bedroom flat in Willesden, where Tilly slept in a drawer and the boiler was constantly on the blink. No penury for his new trophy-wife; she'd stolen my husband once he was famous and well-off. What would she know of stress and struggle?

But much as I hate him, there are still many times when I miss Luke as I might a limb. I married him because he was a clever, funny, handsome man but I have to remind myself he was also a liar and a cad. I can't bring myself to take down the family photos – some from our early days together before his hair started thinning and his paunch developed. Friends have told me this is unhealthy, that it will keep new lovers away. But I don't feel I can adopt a scorched-earth policy. It is the children's home, too, and why should all traces of their dad suddenly be deleted?

Apparently he and the bimbo have just had a baby girl. I have to swallow my vicious feelings and hope my children will learn to love their new half-sister. Some people have found themselves permanently excluded from my Christmas-card list for informing me I should count my blessings that Luke has granted me a generous divorce settlement and 'allowed' me to stay in the family home by paying the mortgage. The implication that I should somehow be grateful to stay in the house I have lovingly restored, cared for, brought up our babies in, sends me virtually to boiling point.

Nonetheless, I keep telling myself, I have no choice but to move on. I must find a way of coming to terms with my new situation. Thousands of families endure this same pain every year and – though I find it near impossible to do – we have to

be forgiving. If my children, and I, are to be happy, then we all need to believe in a rosy future, just rather different from the one I dreamt of when I pledged my troth.

The month after Luke arrived on Poppy's doorstep was a whirl. They spent a week in her flat, before Luke said he couldn't stand any more of this student lifestyle and not being able to get into the bathroom in the morning when Meena was doing her make-up. He rented a large flat in Maida Vale right next to the canal. It was in a handsome white stucco building, based over two floors. It had two bedrooms, a study for Luke, a high-ceilinged living room and a Poggenpohl kitchen/diner.

'It's lovely,' Poppy breathed unable to believe how quickly she'd moved on from Kilburn. She'd known Luke was rich; he was obviously well paid by the network, plus he'd inherited a lot from his father who had been something in the City. Only now, however, did she begin to realize how rich. 'Do we need such a big place?' she added.

'Well, the kids will be coming to stay,' Luke said.

'Oh,' Poppy said. 'Of course. I can't wait to meet them.'

In a weird sort of way she was quite looking forward to it – after all Luke's daughters weren't that much younger than her. But in the end, they never came. They said they had no desire to meet the woman who had ruined their and their mother's lives, so Luke was obliged to spend every other weekend taking them to Pizza

Express and – they scornfully dismissed his suggestions of the zoo – on shopping trips, which he complained bankrupted him. Poppy had dreamt of spending weekends strolling hand in hand along the canal, but instead she was left all alone for forty-eight hours with a pile of DVDs and a growing bump.

Even during the weekends he was with her, he was busy working on his book about the Balkans and spent nearly all the time secluded in his study. Poppy would bring him snacks and offer him head massages, which he gratefully accepted but then he'd wave her out again.

No one had reacted to her news in the way she'd hoped.

'You're up the duff!' Meena had screamed. 'Poppy, you idiot!' She paused and then added, 'I mean, congratulations. I suppose it's one way to get a ring on your finger. But, Poppy, you don't want a baby, you'll get all fat and then you'll have an agonizing birth; you'll never sleep again and spend the rest of your life covered in puke and poo.'

'I love babies.' Actually, Poppy loved the idea of babies, crooning softly to them wrapped in pink fluffy blankets. She'd never spent any time with a real one.

'Then go and be a nanny. Don't have one of your own. You're not twenty two yet. You've got the rest of your life for all that. Plus,' Meena paused for a second, 'plus I know Luke's on telly, but it's boring telly. Couldn't you hold out for someone from *Hollyoaks* or something? I mean I'd never heard of him, and you're so pretty, Poppy, I reckon you could do better for yourself.'

Poppy decided it was sour grapes. After all, Meena made no secret of the fact that her game plan was to bag a member of the royal family or, failing that, a Bollywood mogul and spend the rest of her life shopping. To help achieve her goal, Meena worked as a receptionist at a ludicrously swanky health club in St John's Wood where she could get discounted manicures, facials and hair cuts, plus meet plenty of potential husbands. So the fact Poppy had managed to net a rich husband first had put her nose seriously out of joint.

Her mother, who was in a bad mood anyway after yet another romance had fallen through, was even less delighted.

'I can't believe you've been so stupid, Poppy. You're making exactly the same mistake I did.'

'No, Luke is standing by me,' Poppy said, then realized too late that as usual she'd said the worst possible thing.

'He may be standing by you, but he's leaving a wife and three children. What kind of man is that? Do you really want him to be the father of your child? Poppy you're so pretty. I've always thanked God for your looks because heaven knows there isn't much else to recommend you. I always hoped you'd marry a lovely guy, not shack up with some shit.'

'He's not a shit.'

Louise sighed. 'Poppy Price, how did I raise such a clueless child?'

'You didn't raise me, the au pairs and Gran did.'

'I was doing my best,' Louise hissed. 'You have no idea how hard being a mother is. Well, you'll soon find out.'

She put her hand to her brow. ‘Now I can feel one of my migraines coming on. I feel nauseous. I’d better lie down.’

Poppy didn’t bother saying that she felt permanently nauseous herself. After four months her ballooning belly meant she had to stop working. She greeted her new life as a stay-at-home mother-to-be with enthusiasm, but it turned out to be a lot lonelier and a lot more boring than she’d expected. She had found modelling scary, but at least it had given her something to get up for in the morning and there had been people to chat to all day. In contrast, Luke was almost never at home – sometimes she thought she’d seen him more when he was her lover. He went out early and returned often about midnight, tie askew, the smell of Chianti on his breath and his Black-Berry still buzzing.

‘Entertaining contacts, darling,’ he’d say, crawling into bed. ‘That’s what my job’s all about. That’s what enables us to live in this beautiful flat.’

‘But I don’t care about a beautiful flat. I’d rather just see more of you.’

He shrugged. ‘This is my life. I’ve lost my family because of you. You can hardly expect me to give up my job as well.’

In the dark, tears stung Poppy’s eyes. She was learning not to cry in front of him, because it only made him angry.

‘I didn’t ask you to lose your family. You left them; I didn’t make you.’

‘Didn’t you?’ he muttered and rolled onto his back.

There was a brief silence.

'I felt the baby kick today.'

'Did you? Poppy I'm really tired. I'm going to sleep now.' And within seconds she heard him snoring.

So Poppy spent her days and nights in front of the television, waiting to hear Luke's key in the lock, gently stroking her growing stomach and flicking through her pregnancy book to see what her foetus was doing this week (somersaulting, kicking, possibly sucking its thumb). She did ask Luke if she could attend some of these work dinners with him, but he sighed and said he hardly thought it would be suitable.

'Most of these people know Hannah from way back. I can hardly just wheel up one day with you.'

Hannah rushed through a divorce on grounds of adultery. Poppy didn't know many of the details, but she gathered Luke had made her a huge settlement. When Poppy was eight months pregnant, she and Luke married.

'We don't have to do this, you know,' Poppy said as they sat in the back of the taxi en-route to Marylebone Register Office. Of course she wanted to more than anything else, but Luke looked so bleak you'd have thought he was on his way to a funeral, not his own wedding.

'Don't be silly,' he said, trying to smile, 'of course we do.'

And so they plighted their troth in a small room that reeked of Pledge, with Poppy in a blue and white maternity dress from Top Shop rather than the Princess Diana meringue she'd always envisaged. There were two witnesses: Meena and Gerry, an old war-correspondent

friend of Luke's, who had a red nose from too many nights in bars and a scar on his cheek where a melanoma had been cut out. Luke's parents were dead.

Louise said she would have loved to attend but she was chairing a huge conference in Glasgow that week. 'You understand, don't you, cherub?' As usual, she hadn't waited for a reply. 'Got to go, sweets. Hope you have a lovely day.'

Afterwards they had lunch at Orrery in Marylebone High Street. The food was probably delicious but Poppy didn't really notice so awkward were the vibes between the four of them. The others got very pissed until Meena eventually threw up in the loo and had to put in a taxi and sent home. Gerry stumbled off into the afternoon. She and Luke got in their own taxi and went back to Maida Vale. To Poppy's relief they made far more passionate love than they had for several weeks, after which Luke fell into a deep sleep. When he woke up they ordered an Indian and ate it on the bed, giggling and feeding each other bites of naan almost like in her early coffee-ad fantasies. So Poppy had gone to sleep on her wedding night reassured that now the fairy tale was about to begin.

The Demise of the Trophy Wife

Goldiggers who take their rich husbands for a ride are on the verge of extinction, says HANNAH CREIGHTON.

Not so long ago it was a truth universally acknowledged that a man with a kick-ass job must be in want of a trophy wife. These divine, docile brood mares were the perfect addition to the mansion, the Maserati and the holidays in Mauritius.

But how times have changed. According to recent research the earnings gap between married couples is narrowing. These days men are bored with stay-at-home parasites and are looking for high fliers. To paraphrase Jerry Hall, whores in the bedroom, masterchefs in the kitchen – but also queens of the boardroom. Some have interpreted this as a victory for the feminists, along with burning our bras. Sadly, however, the truth says something much less appealing about our sex. Powerful men, I believe, have only just latched on to the downside of the stay-at-home wife. Either marry a woman prepared to pay her own way, or end up spliced to a spoilt, lazy, bloodsucker.

I can feel the finger pointing at me. OK! I put my hands up. I, too, used to be one of those stay-at-home wives I am laying into. My husband, Luke Norton, was a distinguished foreign correspondent who, in the dying days of our marriage, became the anchorman for Channel 6's *SevenThirty News* and consequently a household name.

We lived with our three children in our glorious family home in Hampstead, North London and I didn't go out to work. But there the resemblance between me and the trophy wives ends.

I was of a different generation, you see, the *Cosmo* generation who believed in 'having it all'. We children of the 1970s were brought up to understand this meant running a home, entertaining regularly, raising charming children, keeping our husbands happy and having some sort of career to keep our brains ticking over and our finances fresh.

I confess I failed at the last hurdle. Although I had a high-flying journalism career before I met Luke, I found the challenges of three small children too difficult to combine with the logistics of a job. But, feeling guilty I had not managed to be a ball-busting career girl, I worked doubly hard to make sure I raised happy children, who lived in a beautiful house, played in a glorious garden and who sat down to eat nutritious meals every night. When my husband came home there was an equally nutritious meal waiting for him, plus a large glass of wine. I listened to his tales of office in-fighting and *Boy's Own* derring-do and told him how brave and clever he was. I never shared my own anxieties about arguments with builders or changes to the school run. I thought this was part of the pact: I kept the home fires burning while he earned a wage.

How naive I was. When the last of the children were finally old enough not to need one full-time and I began to explore plans for some kind of part-time work, my husband announced he was leaving me. For a 22-year-old model. Who was pregnant with his fourth child. The years I had put into creating a stable home environment counted for nothing. The story of my anger and my recovery have been documented. Suffice to say, I was devastated but I got over it, and today I am happier than I have ever been.

But what interests me is the trophy wife my husband seemed to think it was his right to acquire, much as a man of his

position might crave a chauffeur-driven Bentley or membership of the Garrick Club. Of course I can't speak for the second Mrs Norton, but what I have observed in general, is a fascinating new breed of trophy wives, women who seem to think their whole function is to be provided for, while giving their husbands nothing in return.

If they are rich enough, they employ a chef, if not the poor husband must make do with TV dinners. Ditto a cleaner. If they can't afford one, then the husband must simply live in squalor. The children are dumped in nurseries or looked after by nannies. This does not stop the new breed from constantly complaining how exhausted they are and demanding the husband spends every moment of the weekend taking the brats to the park, so they can enjoy their 'me time'.

More and more I bump into men my age who are bitter and disappointed at the non-working wives they have acquired. 'I wouldn't mind providing for her and my daughter if she just occasionally did something for me,' whispered a shattered husband to me recently. 'But she doesn't clean, she can't cook and she can't even seem to get our child potty-trained. I thought relationships were meant to be about give and take, but I do all the giving and she does all the receiving. I'd divorce her, but I've already lost one wife and I just can't face doing it again.' 'My wife's so vacant, not only does she never throw dinner parties, she never wants to meet anyone outside her little circle of other pampered wives,' said another. 'She's boring and completely self-obsessed.'

But now, it seems, the tide is turning. I couldn't possibly speak for my own ex-husband, but from other twice-married men I hear rumblings of discontent as they realize the price attached to their decorative little trophies and how well off they

were with their first hard-working spouses, who either laboured at home or in the office, or both to provide them with the standard of living they deserved. So take heed you leeches, you parasites! Your time is nearly up. There's no such thing as a free ladies' lunch.