

CAN YOU GUESS THE AUTHOR?

Day 3 clue:

**She has sold over
twenty-five million
copies of her novels
worldwide**

'A constant reminder that women are
strong, resilient, wonderful' —
Tiffany, goodreads

3.

The Woman Who Was Kept on the Shelf

It began shortly after their first date, when she was twenty-six years old, when everything was gleaming, sparkling new. She'd left work early to drive to her new lover, excited to see him, counting down the hours until their next moment together, and she'd found Ronald at home in his living room, hammering away at the wall.

'What are you doing?' She'd laughed at the intensity on his face, the grease, the grime and determination of her newly DIY boyfriend. He was even more attractive to her now.

'I'm building you a shelf.' He'd barely paused to look at her before continuing to hammer a nail in.

'A shelf?!"

He hammered again, checked the shelf for balance.

'Is this your way of telling me you want me to move

in?' she laughed, heart thudding. 'I think you're supposed to give me a drawer, not a shelf.'

'Yes of course I want you to move in. Immediately. And I want you to leave your job and sit on this shelf so that everyone can see you, so that they can admire you, see what I see, the most beautiful woman in the world. You won't have to lift a finger. You won't have to do anything. Just sit on this shelf and be loved.'

Her heart had swelled, her eyes filled. By the next day she was sitting on that shelf. Five feet above the floor, in the right hand side alcove of the living room, beside the fireplace, was where she met Ronald's family and friends for the first time. They stood around her, drinks in hand, marveling at the wonder of the new love of Ronald's life. They sat at the dinner table in the adjoining dining room table and though she couldn't see everybody she could hear them, she could join in. She felt suspended above them — adored, cherished, respected by his friends, worshipped by his mother, envied by his ex-girlfriends. Ronald would look up at her proudly, that beautiful beam on his face that said it all. *Mine*. She sparkled with youth and desire, beside his trophy cabinet, which displayed the football victories from his youth and his more recent golf successes. Above them was a brown trout mounted on the wall on a wooden plate with brass plaque, the largest trout he'd ever caught, while out with his brother and father. He'd moved the trout to build the

shelf and so it was with even more respect that the men in his life viewed her. When her family and friends came to visit her they could leave feeling assured that she was safe, cocooned, idolized and more importantly, loved.

She was the most important thing in the world to him. Everything revolved around her and her position in the home, in his life. He pandered to her, he fussed around her. He wanted her on that shelf all of the time. The only moment second to the feeling of being so important in his world was Dusting Day. On dusting day, he went through all of his trophies, polishing and shining them, and of course, he'd lift her from the shelf and lay her down and they would make love. Shiny and polished, renewed with sparkle and vigor, she would climb back up to the shelf again.

They married, she quit her job, nursed her children, cuddled them, spent sleepless nights caring for them on the shelf, then watched them sleep, gurgle and grow on the rug and playpen beneath her. Ronald liked for her to be alone on the shelf, he employed childcare so that she could have her space, so that she could stay in the place he built for her, so that he wouldn't lose a part of her to the children, or that their special relationship wouldn't be altered. She had heard of couples who were torn apart after having families, husbands who felt left out when babies arrived. She didn't want that to happen, she wanted to be there for him, to still feel adored too.

The shelf was her place. She cared deeply for everyone from there, and because of her position in the home, everyone always looked up to her. It was twenty years later from the day that she first climbed on to the shelf, when the children had grown up and left the house, that the loneliness started to creep in.

An alarm bell, in fact.

It was the angle of the TV that started it. She couldn't see what Ronald was watching. It never bothered her before because she was always more content to see the faces of her children watching television than the actual TV itself. But it was now an empty couch, a quiet room and she needed distraction, escapism. Company. Ronald bought a new television, a flat screen that went on the wall, which meant that it couldn't be tilted, and it was suddenly out of her view, just as her children were. And then the gatherings Ronald had, without inviting her or telling her, would go on around her, some people she had never met, some women she wasn't sure of, in her own home, right under her own nose. She watched from above as his life carried on beneath her, as though she wasn't in the room, as though she wasn't a part of his life. Beneath her smile was confusion. She would try to cling on, she would try to join in but they couldn't hear her from so far, they'd grown tired of looking up, of raising their voices, they'd moved on. He'd forget to top up her drink, to check on her, to introduce her. It

was as though he'd forgotten that she was there. And then he'd built the extension, it had taken months, it extended from the kitchen out to the back garden and suddenly all of the gatherings and dinners had moved in there. The TV room that had been the formal room, the centre of their home was suddenly the small, comfortable den. It had lost its grandeur. She felt like she wasn't a part of his life anymore.

'Ronald,' she said, one Saturday night after she'd been alone all day while he'd been out golfing, the children were busy with their lives, and he was on the couch watching something that she couldn't see.

He made a sound, a response, but he didn't look up at her.

'Something doesn't feel right up here.' She heard the tremble in her voice, felt the tightness in her chest. *When you put me up here it was for everybody to see me, to be the center of everything, but now...now everything is carrying on beneath me, without me. I feel so disconnected.* She can't say it, the words won't come. Even thinking this way is scaring her. She likes her shelf, she is comfortable on her shelf, the shelf is her place, it's where she has always been, it is where she should always stay. He had removed all the concerns and responsibilities of life from her, *for her*.

'Do you want another pillow?' he asks. He chooses a pillow beside him and throws it to her. She catches

it and looks at it and then Ronald in surprise, heart pounding, things inside her hurting. He stands up then.

'I can buy you a new one, a bigger one,' he says, silencing the television with the remote control.

'I don't want a new pillow,' she says quietly, taken aback by herself, as usually she loved them.

It's as though he doesn't hear her, or perhaps he does and he ignores her. She can't figure it out.

'I'm going out for a few hours, I'll see you later.'

She stares at the closed door, listens to the car engine start up, in utter shock. It had happened slowly over the years but this was her moment of realization. All the little signs hit her now, almost knocking her from her shelf. He'd placed her on this shelf, a cherished woman whom he adored and wanted to protect and showcase and now that everyone had seen her, had admired her, had congratulated *him* on his achievements, there was nothing left. Now she was nothing but part of the furniture, a shelf adornment just like his trophies, in an old comfortable den in the house. Ronald's achievement long ago celebrated. She can't even remember the last Dusting Day when he'd taken her down to polish her. She sits here on this shelf as an extension of Ronald. But what is she to herself?

She is stiff. She realizes this for the first time. Her body needs to move. She needs to stretch. She needs room to grow. She can't blame Ronald for this, she climbed

up onto this shelf all those years ago. She was selfish in lapping up the attention, the praise, the envy and the admiration. She liked being new, being celebrated, being his. But she was foolish. Not foolish to think it was a beautiful thing, but foolish to think it should be the only thing.

As her mind whirs, the pillow that she has been hugging for comfort falls from her hands and lands softly on the floor. It makes a soft *pfft* on the plush carpet. She watches it on the floor and then has another realization.

She can get off the shelf. She can step down. She could always have done that, of course, but somehow it seemed her place, the natural place to be, and nobody leaves their place to become displaced. Her breath quickens at the dangerous new thought, dust catches in her throat and she coughs, hearing a wheeze in her chest for the first time.

She has no place gathering dust. She lowers herself down. One foot on the armchair beneath, where Ronald used to sit before installing the new flat screen, holding her feet in his hands. She reaches out to the wall to steady herself. The brown trout is the only thing she can grasp. Her stockinginged foot slips on the armrest of the chair. She quickly reaches out for something to cling to and her hand finds the open mouth of the trout for a firmer grip. Under her weight the trout swings on the wall. It had only been hanging on by one nail all of these years.

So precarious. For something of such importance, her husband should have secured it better. She smiles at the thought. The trout swings off the nail and as she places faith in the armchair, falling into it, she watches as the trout falls from the wall, to the cabinet beneath. It smashes the glass cabinet, home to the football and golf trophies. Crash, smash, it all comes tumbling down. Then there's silence.

She giggles nervously, breaking the silence.

Then she slowly lowers her foot to the floor. And then the other. She stands up, feels her stiff joints crack. The floor she has watched for so long, that is so familiar to her eye is unfamiliar beneath her feet. Wriggles her toes in the plush carpet, plants her feet in the fibers of the carpet, truly roots herself in what feels new beneath her. She looks around the room that feels so alien to her now that her view is different. There is only one thing she feels compelled to do with her new life.

When Ronald returns from the pub he finds her with a golf club in hand, his best driver, his football and golf trophies on the floor covered in broken glass. The brown trout looks up at him from the mess with its dead eyes.

'It was too dusty up there,' she says, breathless, as she swings again at the wooden shelf. It feels so good, she swings again.

The wooden shelf splinters, bits fly everywhere. She ducks. He covers.

Ronald slowly peels his arms away from his face and she can't help but laugh at his shocked expression.

'My mother used to keep all her fancy purses in dust-bags, she stored them in her wardrobe, saving them for special occasions but they stayed there until the day she died, all these beautiful cherished things not seeing the light of day, because even the rare special occasions in her life weren't deemed special enough in her eyes. She was always waiting for something more extravagant to come along, instead of wearing them on her arm to brighten her every day. She would tell me I didn't appreciate things enough, that I should cherish my possessions more, but if she was here now I would tell her that it is she who didn't appreciate the every day things that she had. She could have made daily regular life more important, but she didn't, she locked the potential away.'

Ronald's mouth opens and closes without any words coming out, he looks like his framed trout that has smashed to the floor.

'So,' she swings at the wall again, firmly declaring, 'I'm staying down here.'

And that was that.