

Chapter One

He is a very lucky man.

It's a good thought. When he allows himself to believe it, it's as though the clenched fist of his heart relaxes, splaying its warm, tingling fingers slowly through his chest. And of course, it's true: there are many ways in which he is lucky. He's young and in good health, for one thing, especially given his size. For another, he has a good job. Not only does he have a roof over his head, in fact, but in these difficult times he owns his home outright. No mortgage. No hassles or worries.

And most importantly of all, of course, he has Julie.

He listens to her gentle snoring now, and feels that warmth inside him spreading further, just from the *presence* of her, lying so close to him. Julie Kennedy is a marvel, and whenever the thoughts of suicide rise up, he reminds himself how deeply in love they are. There is no way any man couldn't fall in love with her. She is twenty-three years old – considerably younger than him – and exceptionally attractive, in the sort of way that even people who dismiss or deride conventional beauty would be forced to acknowledge, however grudgingly. Her hair is long and thick, the colour of butter or sunshine, and her skin is smooth and gently tanned. A slim figure allows her to look good in anything, but she is – endearingly – unaware of this. In another existence she could easily have been a model or a film star, although in this one she does low-key admin in an office. She deserves better, of course, and it's surely not what she dreamed of growing up. But she never

complains. And anyway, she's still so young; there's more than enough time for her to figure out what she wants to do with her life.

He met her through work. What struck him in the first instance was not her physical beauty, which is almost too intrinsic, too *obvious*, to be something you'd notice, but the kindness that accompanied it. Her manner surprised him; she was gentle and shy, and not remotely arrogant or dismissive in the way he's found some comparably attractive women can be. From the way she presented herself and talked to him, it was clear she didn't see herself as a prize, even though it was equally clear to him that she was one. And now, however many months later, here they are.

It's hard to believe, how lucky he is.

But then they do say that fortune favours the brave. He remembers his mother saying that, knitting needles clattering together: *shy boys get no toys*. His father was the same. At school, despite his size, he would find himself paralysed with fear on the rain-swept rugby pitch, terrified by the thought of the hateful contacts and collisions. He despises violence, and slightly fears other men; he always has. *You have to go in hard*, his father told him bluntly, with little patience for his snivelling son; *that way it hurts less*. A punch always feels harder if you're flinching when it lands, whereas if you're angry and throwing one back, you hardly notice. It's easier said than done, but he's found there is some truth in that. Hesitate, and you're lost. Drive forward, and you make the world hesitate instead, as though it's suddenly unsure what to make of you.

It's not totally within your control, of course, but to a large extent it's true. He's a lucky man – but then you really do make your own luck.

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It hasn't always been like this, of course. In fact, the contrast between his relationship with Julie now and one he had only last year is marked. Back then, he wasn't half so brave. It pains him, actually, to remember how timid he used to be, and how that whole awful affair ended.

Her name was Sharon. She was the same as age as Julie is now, and also very beautiful. Sometimes he finds himself attracted to unconventional-looking women, but he is always aware that it's a defence mechanism: a hangover from his schooldays, when the pretty girls would never look at him, and it was far better to concentrate his mental energies on someone he might stand a chance with. When he first set eyes on Sharon, it was like seeing one of those schoolgirls grown up.

She worked in a beauty store, surrounded by fingerprints of soft dust in the air and the swirling aroma of fragrance. She wore tight dresses that showed off her figure, and kept her long black hair tied up in firm, glossy coils. He told himself that she was out of his league, and a part of him wanted to hate her for that. Perhaps a part of him even did. And yet, despite his best intentions, and the knowledge that she was unattainable, he found himself engaged in a careful pursuit. Over the course of a month, he gently courted her. It would happen almost by accident. He would find himself in town, for some reason, across the road from the shop as she emerged from work. Excuses would be found to drive past her house. After Sharon came into his life, his day-to-day actions became like trains, running on tracks and timetables that were increasingly outside of his control.

Deep down, of course, he knew this was dangerous behaviour, and that he needed to change it. Lying in his cramped bedroom at night, he felt ashamed and worthless. But he couldn't stop, and actually, it seemed like something in the world didn't want him to. He discovered she was single. While he had been elated at that, he had also placed his head in his hands and felt the addict's low wail: *why won't it stop being there for me to take?* Even in those early days, it felt like there was a kind of inevitability to their coming together.

And so he continued to circle her, moving closer by increments. He knew he didn't have a relationship with Sharon *as such*, but he did have something. A genuine connection existed between them, and just because she was unaware of it, that didn't make it any less real. He would wake from the bad dreams, and thoughts of her would make him smile. *You are lucky.* He came to anticipate the brief contact they would have. In his head, tentatively, and without her knowing, she made love to him.

Like her life, he knew her house very well from the outside. It was a neat semi-detached property in a warren of curling, leafy streets. Out front, there was a sprawling field, with pairs of old skewed goalposts dotted about at angles, and a thicket of thick woodland beyond. To the rear of the house, a rectangular garden stretched down to a low picket fence and another road. A triangle of washing lines hung loosely from three metal posts. But the field was the easiest place to watch her from.

When reality encroached, he would thrash back and forth across the bed at night, disgusted with himself. In those moments, he blamed her and hated her, and he vowed to stop, to improve, to put this behind him and

become better, normal. Yet whatever he promised himself, he was still faced by that addict's curse, and days later, he would find himself close to her work again, or her home, or the leisure centre where she swam three nights a week. Just wanting to see her again. No harm in that, surely? Except there was, because the longer it went on, the more unsatisfying it became. Because addiction always escalates.

One day, he had an idea for something else he could do.

It was dangerous, but thrilling, and he stayed up late that night almost by accident. All evening the excitement kept rising in his chest, even as he refused to acknowledge it. By not preventing what was going to happen, he allowed it to. And at two o'clock in the morning, his heart thrumming in his chest, he walked outside into the cool night air and drove to her house, still telling himself he wasn't going to do anything.

He parked on the road behind, in the shadowy space between two street lights. Sharon's garden gleamed with night-time frost, but her house, along with all the others, was black and still. When he turned the engine off, the world was suddenly heavy with silence, and every nerve ending in his body was singing with anxious life.

In the garden, washing hung on the lines: a triangle of tattered grey flags in the darkness. And once again, there was that feeling of inevitability. If he wasn't meant to do this, why did the world keep making it possible? It had only been a fantasy, after all. An idea, until now. But if the universe kept leaving its doors ajar, who could really blame him for pushing them open and stepping inside?

Outside the car, his nerves made the night air shockingly cold. He left the door slightly open behind him. Her back fence was only three feet high – the most cursory of nods to marking a boundary – and he simply stepped over it.

Move quickly.

He did so, alarmed now by the danger he was placing himself in. Everything else he'd done could be justified, but being in her garden was a clear intrusion. In a sense, it was ludicrous. If he were caught, he would be the one judged a threat, when in truth, she held all the power. Even though he was the one exposed and vulnerable, running hunched up her garden, taking this risk for them both.

He reached the lines and hesitated, trying to make out the details of the washing that hung from them. Dresses. Jeans. Blouses. Tea towels. He'd told himself he'd settle for anything – just something that was *hers* – but now that he was here, he knew he wanted something more intimate. He crept slowly along the line, checking items between finger and thumb, moving closer to the house. That was when the security light came on.

It was so bright it might as well have been a torch shone directly into his eyes. His shadow stretched back across the grass, elongated to monstrous proportions. The sudden light was like a stranger clicking fingers in front of his face, and he literally froze where he stood. It was even a heartbeat or two before the panic set in.

The light was just above the back door. In all his visits here, how had he not noticed that before? The answer would come to him later. It was because he hadn't allowed himself to acknowledge that she might want to

protect herself from him, or someone like him. But for now, his thoughts were startled silent, and he simply stood where he was as the figure of a man appeared in her kitchen window, leaning on either side of the sink and staring out at him.

Staring right into his face.

And then – finally – he turned and ran.

All in the past now, of course, but remembering it still sends a spread of panic through him: cold fingers lacing over the warm. Even lying close to Julie, and with everything between them going so well, he wants to reach back and shake that earlier version of himself for being so timid. It wasn't just the security light. It was the fact that he'd wasted time, and failed to realise that he'd missed his opportunity with Sharon. A girl as lovely as her was hardly going to stay single for ever.

The important thing is that he is no longer half as timid now, and he won't let an opportunity like that slip through his fingers ever again. Now, he is a very lucky man indeed. So he lies there thinking about Julie, and listening to the soft, gentle sound of her snoring. And after a few peaceful moments, he reaches up and lovingly touches the underside of her bed.