

MY WIFE JODIE

V. A. Rudys

BLINKENLIGHT

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First paperback edition published May 2021

Book design by Ignas Zurumskas
Cover Photography by Patrick Coleman

ISBN 978-1-8383911-0-2 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-8383911-3-3 (ebook)

www.mywifejodie.com

Author's note

I have been battling dyslexia my entire life. The thought of me writing a book was always met with laughter by my friends and family. I don't blame them, I laughed too. But the day comes that, even if the path ahead seems much more difficult than to others, you have to stand up and do it anyway. Because it has nothing to do with others. It is your own battle. A battle which I won.

To Justina,

PROLOGUE

Jodie

SATURDAY 17 JANUARY 2015

A snowflake landed silently on Anneli's nose, mixing with a tear. She lay where she had fallen, staring down the mountain at the impossible stretch of slope beneath us.

'You have to keep trying - it's the only way you will get better.' I brushed the snow from her tiny, child-sized helmet and took her hand to help her up. 'Uncle Ethan and your dad will catch up with us, but let's make a head start, shall we?'

Slowly we moved down the mountain, manoeuvring cautiously around the corners. Anneli balanced herself well and learned quickly from her mistakes, her movement becoming more fluid with each turn. I lifted my eyes to look at the view, the morning sun lighting up the whole valley. It was a perfect day.

Suddenly, Anneli fell again, sliding down the slope with her gear scattered around her. I turned quickly and

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intercepted a wayward ski as it made a bid for a free life in the valley. Anneli turned around to face me and burst out laughing as she spat the snow out of her mouth.

‘I’m doing it, Aunt Jodie!’

‘You are, honey!’ I lifted her small body, placing her upright, reattached a ski and brushed off some of the snow. ‘Let’s try again!’ I said. She nodded with determination.

Now she seemed to have even more confidence, her hands no longer awkward, and her hips sweeping from side to side in sync with her skis. We were approaching the intersection with the red track, and I shouted to Anneli to watch out for skiers coming fast from above us.

An excited male voice shouted from behind, and as I turned to look up the mountain I saw Ethan flying by. He was so good at this, no fear at all. I was proud to have married this man.

Moments later, Anneli cheered for her father who was trying to catch up with Ethan, trying to compete with his best friend. But none of us - even Theo - were close to Ethan’s level.

After they had passed, Anneli and I continued our slow descent. Fifteen minutes later, with plenty of stops, we finally reached the bottom of the slope. I saw a group of people blocking the path. I directed Anneli to the side of the slope, and I saw Theo standing, alone and still on the edge of the crowd.

‘Look, it’s daddy!’ Anneli shouted happily, but something wasn’t quite right with the scene. Theo had taken off his skis, his helmet and his goggles. He was just

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standing there, staring at nothing I could see, until he noticed us approach.

We slowed to a stop, and he staggered towards us, fighting through the snow in his clumsy ski boots. I was a couple of meters away from him and I could see his face was red, his eyes full of tears.

'Jodie, it's Ethan. He... he fell.' Theo's entire body was shaking.

I was staring at the crowd now, and I could just make out Ethan's legs in their bright ski pants. They were twisted horribly, and completely still.

'People are... they said, he's...' Theo didn't finish his sentence. Then Anneli screamed, and I closed my eyes.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

Ethan

SATURDAY 20 AUGUST 2016

I held Jodie's new canvas in front of me, balanced on top of the stepladder with one hand on the wall. The scene was a snowy forest, a dead leopard, and a splatter of blood. I was spreadeagled like spiderman, halfway up the wall of our apartment, hanging the painting right in the centre of the hall.

I lunged again for the hook, and the ladder wobbled. Jodie appeared from nowhere and put her foot on the bottom rung.

'Careful, old man.' she said, tilting her head slightly. Her blonde hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her back.

'I'm always careful, babes!' I chuckled as she rolled her eyes. I looked back up at the canvas I was holding up against the wall. 'I'm not going to lie - this painting is a bit disturbing.'

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'It's just life. Life doesn't last,' she said.

Hanging her painting, I stepped down from the ladder. 'Well, maybe next time you should paint a BDSM dungeon... or a rapist in the act.'

She shook her head. 'You're disgusting.'

I let the subject drop. 'So, twenty more paintings and you might be able to open your gallery?'

'One day,' she smiled, admiring her latest piece, and then she came closer to me and wrapped her arms around my waist. Her forehead gently touched my clean-shaven face and I kissed her hair, inhaling her sweet perfume.

'Well, this one's a beauty, *babes*.'

She untangled her arms and slapped my bottom - hard.

'How about I make a nice anniversary lunch for us today? Something naughty?' I grinned at her.

'...lasagne?' She raised an eyebrow.

'Yes!' I picked Jodie up by the waist, and we spun together like they do in cheesy romantic comedies, her hair flying behind her.

After I had cleaned up, I followed Jodie into the bright and spacious living room that stretched right through our apartment. At one end, we had a miraculously tidy kitchen with marble worktops and, on the other, a dining room with windows looking out over Tower Bridge, Jodie's new detective thriller lying discarded on a corner sofa. She was such a fast, prolific reader, sometimes finishing five books in a week.

Jodie reminded me of my mother, who was also

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a bookworm - but after my father died of an insidious immune disorder, she had no time to read. Money had always been tight, growing up, and I craved independence and a life in London.

Today, in the dining room of our apartment, in a small frame amongst a jumble of holiday photos, hung a lottery ticket. The faintly printed numbers were still visible today: 9, 12, 13, 15, 21, and 33.

Jodie had bought it for me on my birthday, as a joke - but on the 12th of July, 2003, those numbers won me the National Lottery's jackpot of four and a half million pounds.

I assumed I would never need to work again, but after investing most of my money in Kodak a few years later, I lost almost everything. My degree landed me an entry-level job as a law clerk at a firm in Liverpool Street. From that, I built a career as a high-profile defence lawyer in the city, defending the rich and famous from their misdemeanors.

My phone rang, the screen blinking impatiently on the dining room table. It read 'Other Boyfriend.' I looked at Jodie, who was struggling to hide a smile. She gave me a cheeky wink as I answered.

'Hello, Ethan speaking.'

'Well, that's a very formal way to pick up your phone.' I recognised Theo's voice instantly.

'Hey, sorry! What's up.' I turned back to Jodie, who was now giggling silently, eyes fixed on her book. She had

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this thing where she would rename contacts on my phone to something ridiculous. Once, she'd renamed my mother's contact to The Psychic. Another time she had changed it to Angelina Jolie. It was pretty funny.

'Free for some quick Saturday shopping?

'I'm free, though I promised Jodie a lasagna for lunch.' I could hear a loud, electrical buzzing through the phone. 'Theo?'

'Excellent, I'm just putting the finishing touches on my internet-connected microwave; it is so cool—'

Theo is the world's biggest geek, and if I didn't stop him, he'd go on for 15 minutes about his new toy.

I interrupted - 'Theo, how about you tell me everything when we meet? Outside Tesco in half an hour?' I imagined him rolling his eyes. He knew what I was doing, that I wasn't interested in his tech.

'Fine ... don't be late,' he said in mock outrage, hanging up his phone, making me smile. I adjusted the name of the contact back to Theo as Jodie started to speak, still holding her book.

'How is your boyfriend doing?' I turned to see her cheeky smile.

'He's fine ...' I replied, smiling and slowly approaching her. 'How are you doing, you naughty girl?' I jumped on her lap, growling like a dog and knocking the book out of her hand with my head; she burst out laughing.

I looked up at Jodie's beautiful diamond-shaped face, how her perfectly smooth skin glowed in the sunlight. Her cool hands stroked my forehead, pushing my hair back. She

Ethan

liked playing with it. I traced a line from the top of Jodie's shoulder down her arm, slowly, barely touching her. She smiled, probably thinking I was trying to tickle her. Her hand moved up to my ear. She opened her fingers, cupping my ear, and massaging it. I closed my eyes, the furrows in my forehead slowly relaxing. Then softly, as if plucking a grape with my mouth, I touched Jodie's lips with mine. For a moment, we shared the same breath. Her nose lightly brushed my skin as it moved up my face. As soon as I could no longer feel it, I opened my eyes, and Jodie's smile greeted me.

'I like you,' she said.

'I like you too... *babes*.'

Her smile widened. 'I got you a little something...'

'Jodie! We said no anniversary presents this year!'

Jodie dropped down onto her knee and opened a shoebox that was tucked under the couch. The box held a new pair of running shoes.

'Wow, they look great, but you know how hard it is to find shoes that fit me. Can I exchange them?'

'Trust me, darling. I *know* you'll love them.' She held one shoe up, triumphantly, like it was a glass slipper. 'Come on, Cinderella.'

I grabbed a few cotton shopping bags from under the sink, and ran out the door. If I kept a good pace I probably wouldn't be late to meet Theo. The shoes were perfect, like

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they were moulded for my feet. How did she do it?

The vibrant blue sky and contrasting white clouds looked just like Instagram; it was a perfect summer day. A little cold, but refreshing after a recent heatwave. I walked between beautiful old brick buildings, looming over tiny crooked lanes. The Shard pointed gracefully upwards, interrupting the skyline. Bermondsey had to be the best place to live in London.

We could have afforded a much more expensive place in Kensington. Jodie had wanted to move there for a long time, but I always preferred the great sense of community in Bermondsey, and how close it was to the centre. And on top of all that there was nothing to attract noisy tourists; no monuments of any sort. In the end, she gave up trying to convince me to move.

I turned the corner, and there were Theo and Anneli holding hands, waiting for me. Theo had changed a lot since he moved to London. He's much scruffier now, with patches of grey hair creeping down from his beard and head. He made no effort to cover them. His large framed glasses hid the bags under his eyes, which were getting darker and more pronounced with each passing year. He didn't care much about his clothes, either; jeans, a t-shirt, and a hoodie, and his dark skin and rough appearance contrasted vividly with Anneli, pale in her red polka-dot dress and a denim jacket. The shade of her slippers perfectly matched her dress. I wouldn't have been surprised if her outfit all came in one box. Theo lavished Anneli with attention; he loved her more than anything in the world.

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Anneli saw me and dashed forward. She ran so fast that her hands flailed wildly in the air, almost seeming not to be attached to her torso. I knelt and opened my arms, waiting for that hug. She slammed into me full force, almost making me fall back.

‘Ethan!’ she screamed in my ear.

‘Hello, my darling!’ I gave her a big hug as I tried to stand up, playfully trying to shake her off. She laughed. Theo was standing beside us smiling. I was still shaking my shoulders, Anneli dangling from them. Slowly, we made our way to the shop.

Anneli was admiring the basil plants as Theo and I stood near the onions and potatoes, occasionally glancing at her.

‘What are you planning for your wedding anniversary?’ Theo asked, comparing two bags of red onions.

‘I want to have a picnic in Southwark Park this afternoon. Then I have a reservation for a classy dinner at Clos Maggiore in Covent Garden, and after that, I guess I’ll take Jodie for a romantic walk down the river.’

‘Good effort, mate. She’ll be thrilled.’ He looked down at his feet, probably remembering how he used to spend his anniversary with Laura. ‘Jodie is an amazing woman.’

‘What are you planning for *our* anniversary?’ I narrowed my eyes half smiling.

‘They’re releasing Resident Evil 7 in a couple of months.’

‘Nerd.’ I nudged him with my fist and Theo moved

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down the aisle. Anneli followed us with a small, half-dead basil plant.

'I'm taking Anneli to Brighton tomorrow. We can swim if we feel brave enough.' He looked at her. 'Will we be brave enough to swim?' She aggressively jerked her head, making him laugh.

'She's so funny,' I said. 'And very smart for a 6-year-old!'

'Six and a half!' Anneli corrected me. 'Daddy, can we take this plant home with us? It's sad.'

'Sweetheart, we already have two basil plants at home; leave this for the other people, ok?' Anneli lowered her head.

'I wonder if I'll look back at my life one day and regret not trying harder to have children,' I said, turning to Theo. He was brandishing an amusingly-shaped potato. 'I'm so happy for you, you lucky fuck.'

Theo dropped the potato in his basket and moved to a box of aubergines. 'Lucky?' he frowned. 'Depends on who you're comparing me with.' He picked up the biggest aubergine from the crate and looked at me.

I shrugged. 'People like you?'

Theo narrowed his eyes. '*You're* the definition of luck, mate.'

'Come on.' I nudged him again with my fist.

'Ethan, please.' He looked mildly irritated now.

'I'm not lucky! Privileged - yes. But not lucky.'

He exhaled deeply before speaking. 'You met the love of your life when you were 16. You're the one Jodie helped

Ethan

with the rent all through university - you didn't need to work 30 hours a week in Wetherspoons serving beer to people who don't know when to stop.' I raised my finger to interrupt, but he continued. 'You won the lottery and then you used that money to travel the world!' He laughed, but now there was a bitter edge to it. He dropped his voice to a low, angry hiss. 'You've never had to deal with racist remarks. People eyeing me like I stole Anneli from a white family. You've never been really ill; you've never spent a night in hospital. *You think you're unlucky just because Jodie can't have kids?*'

I crossed my arms, angry now, as Theo continued to speak. 'You go skiing every winter, and yet you haven't broken a single bone. *Not even one injury!*' He sighed dramatically.

'I'm a good skier! What do you even want me to say?'

'Even professionals have more accidents than you, Ethan.' He waved his hand ambiguously and moved down the aisle. I followed. 'You've never been robbed, mugged, attacked, or scammed. You've never had a car accident or missed your flight. You've never lost your job. In fact, you were promoted faster than most of the other lawyers you work with—'

'Ok, but you can't say that me winning my cases is luck; it means I'm a good lawyer, a better lawyer than—'

'None of your family has died.'

'My father has.' I said it so quickly, as if I was proud of it, trying to win the argument, not thinking. My father died when I was eight. Laura died less than six years ago shortly

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after she gave birth to Anneli, and I instantly regretted my words. Theo recoiled in mock shock, pressing his hand to his heart, then grabbed a tub of hummus, tossing it angrily into his shopping basket and turning away.

I shouldn't have said anything. It hasn't even been six years since Laura's death, and it was still raw for Theo. He might never be okay with it. She was Theo's true love, as Jodie was mine. He first introduced Laura to Jodie and me back in university. He asked us both out for dinner and brought Laura along. I told him back then that she was totally out of his league. He agreed.

'I'm going to the deli section. Can you please stay here and watch Anneli?' Theo didn't wait for my answer and disappeared into the next aisle. Anneli came closer to me and took my hand.

'This plant is unhappy, Uncle Ethan.'

I crouched to meet her eyes. 'How about I take this to Aunt Jodie? She loves gardening, and I am sure she would be delighted to make it happy again. Then you can come and visit us!' I gently stroked her mop of curly hair. Anneli smiled and hugged me with one arm as she carefully held the plant with her other hand, looking more like her mother every day.

I missed Laura so much. After Anneli's birth, she and I had become even better friends. Our interactions had mainly involved picnics at Hampstead Heath, ski trips to Austria, or board game nights at Theo's. After Anneli was born, I would often visit them even when Jodie wasn't around. Sometimes Theo would be working late and it would just

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be the two of us playing games and nursing Anneli. We would stay up late, have dinner, and watch a movie. Theo and Jodie would laugh at us - asking if I wanted to adopt Anneli. I didn't mind it. I loved Anneli very much.

Then one day, to celebrate Theo's promotion to Chief Engineer, and head of the on-site engineering team, Jodie and I took everyone out to see 'Wicked'. Theo was working late and told us he would meet us at the Apollo Theatre. Jodie and I would meet Laura at 6:30 at our usual spot - by the Tesco, at the T junction. Jodie was running late, blaming an old mascara, and when we left home, it was already past the meeting time. We rushed, skipping every other step. The sun was almost down, just a faint light glimmering on the horizon. The first thing we heard was the siren of an ambulance. Then saw the blue lights flashing, getting brighter as we approached the T junction. Cries of despair louder than the siren itself echoed in the heavy, evening air. I let go of Jodie's hand and ran towards the voices and the lights.

My heart raced; my legs carried me much faster than I ever thought I could run. As I turned the corner, a paramedic was giving CPR to an older man on the pavement. Another was wheeling a child to an ambulance. The small body didn't move, not a single sound. A lady, maybe his mother, was running next to the trolley, shouting at him in vain. Another young man was hugging his boyfriend or younger brother by the side of the road. A few police officers were scattered and overwhelmed, trying to keep people away from the scene. The whole pavement had been destroyed,

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chunks of earth scattered everywhere, concrete pavers strewn over the road. A tree had been split all down one side. A stop sign had been knocked down. The benches were gone from their usual spot alongside the brick wall and the lamp post. At the end of the wall, I could see a truck turned sideways, partly on the road, its back wheels still on the pavement. It had driven into a group of pedestrians. The truck driver sat on the ground, gripping his head in despair, police standing close to him, trying to move him away from the scene. It had happened a few moments ago, we had barely missed it.

I shouted Laura's name again and again before my eyes finally found her. Jodie caught up with me. She grabbed my hand, but I tore away and walked towards Laura. She was lying on the pavement, her arms and legs straight, looking a bit like she was about to go down a water slide. Maybe it was the darkness, maybe the flashing blue lights, but I couldn't see any blood. She looked unharmed, just a couple of bruises, no more than if she'd fallen from a bike. Only after taking few steps closer I saw a small amount of blood, which lay delicately around her head. Her eyes stared into the sky. I knelt, lifting her shoulders; her head dropped back. I let out a cry. Laura was gone.

The rest of the night was a blur; I don't remember how I told Theo that his wife was dead. Maybe it was Jodie who called him. I can still hear his hysterical sobs and the next two years of pain and struggle. He didn't want to keep going. *What's the point?* He would ask me. *Do you think it would hurt if I jumped?* Listening to him talk that way broke

Ethan

my heart. At the same time, I understood him and his pain, his grief. I felt it too. I never let him see just how much Laura's death affected me; instead, I had to be there for him because he would have done the same for me. In a way, I also felt responsible for checking on Anneli. Laura would have appreciated it. Now, looking back, I'm almost positive that it wasn't me, or Jodie, or his family who helped him get through this. He lived only for Anneli.

I did have a wonderful life. I can't imagine how I would feel if Jodie died. Compared to Theo, my life was a walk in the park. Even six years later, his pain felt fresh.

Next to the entrance of the shop, Anneli kissed me, and Theo waved goodbye.

'I'm sorry, Theo.' I said, but he was too far away to hear it.

Anneli ran to catch up with her father and grabbed his hand. I prayed that nothing bad would ever happen to Anneli.

CHAPTER 2

I walked home, thinking about Theo. He knew I didn't mean any harm, but he'd probably say I deserved at least three dickhead points.

The weather had turned. Clouds blocked the sun, and the morning breeze had grown cold and uncomfortable. The chances of having a quiet picnic before our anniversary dinner were getting slimmer.

My phone vibrated. Jodie had sent a picture of herself, naked, stepping into the shower. Her breasts exposed and an angelic expression on her face. She followed a few seconds later with a message -

Ignore, wrong person.

I let out a huge laugh. She loved teasing me.

I turned the key in my front door and headed straight to the kitchen. The sounds of a shower running came from the bathroom, and I imagined Jodie's naked body, the water running over her breasts.

Dropping the groceries on the kitchen counter, I went out on the terrace. The wooden decking was soft on my feet, creaking ever so slightly as I moved across. I carefully placed the basil plant from the shop next to Jodie's garden. She had turned this small outdoor area into a cosy spot where we both enjoyed spending our time. I liked lying on the hammock, watching as Jodie carefully measured out plant food and the soil's moisture level. She would pinch dead leaves off before they had a chance to fall, watching for any sign of disease. Once, shortly after starting her garden, Jodie had missed a scale infestation. By the time she had realised what had happened, most of her plants were dead. She was so angry that I thought she was going to launch the whole garden straight over the railing and into the Thames, five stories below.

With the shopping out on the kitchen counter, I ran about the kitchen, placing groceries where they belonged, my mouth filled with chocolate pastry. I grabbed the frying pan and started heating it over the flame.

In the top drawer, Jodie had neatly arranged our set of kitchen knives, and I spent a moment admiring them. I grabbed my favourite - *The Killer*, as Jodie called it. She had

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cut herself so many times when using it. I loved it because it was big and super sharp. Once, after she had cut herself again, she had wanted to replace it with something smaller. 'Don't worry, the man in this house knows how to use his weapons. Leave it to me' I'd laughed. She rolled her eyes, called me a dick, and stormed out of the kitchen.

Grabbing an onion, I peeled and diced it. Having no idea how long Jodie would be in the shower, I thought that if I moved quickly, I could get most of the food ready by the time she came out. Splashing some olive oil into the pan, I diced a second onion and added it to the first as the oil spat and sizzled.

Prepping the beef mince, breaking it down with my fingers, and kneading in chives, I remembered how Jodie and I would divide the housework back in university. She would pay for the groceries, and I would cook. It was my way of saying thank you. Over time, I became the cook in our family.

The onion was already burning. I grabbed the spatula and mixed it up. Garlic next. Three cloves, crushed with the side of the knife, and I started to slice them into thin slices. One. Two. The water in the shower stopped running. The onion was burning again. Not my best effort. I had to pick up the pace. I moved the onion around and went back to the garlic. Just before I finished slicing it, my hand jerked slightly.

My eyes dropped to the chopping block and saw red-like-tomato-juice blood running from the tip of my ring finger on to the garlic. There was a deep cut, just below the

nail.

‘Jesus Christ.’ I inhaled deeply, put down the knife, and squeezed the cut with my right hand, slipping off my wedding ring before it got covered in blood. Did we have any plasters? When was the last time Jodie or I had needed them? We might not have any in the flat. ‘Shit,’ I mumbled, rummaging around the kitchen for alternatives with one hand.

‘What’s that smell?’ Jodie shouted from the bathroom enthusiastically. Onions, and they were getting seriously crispy. I turned off the hob. I knew I’d be able to make the lasagna later. It was my fault for trying to rush things.

‘Just some onion!’ I shouted back, more cheerfully than I felt, still opening and closing kitchen cupboards.

‘Do you need any help?’ I heard the sound of the bathroom door opening.

‘No, no, I’m fine.’

‘It smells weird.’ She laughed as she went into the bedroom. Her voice sounded sweet and happy.

I was still squeezing the wound to keep it shut, but the cut was much deeper than I had initially thought. Blood dripping from my hand onto our grey kitchen tiles, the deep red splashes contrasting nicely with the minimalist pattern.

‘What are you cooking?’ Jodie wandered into the kitchen looking blank, drained. She sounded so different and happy before. When I lifted my head, she was standing there, staring blankly. Had something changed? Her wet hair rested on her red t-shirt. She was wearing her favourite

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pair of white sweat pants.

'Lasagna,' I said, unsure if she'd already forgotten. Blood was running down my elbow in a steady stream. Jodie noticed.

'What happened?' she said, with an eerie calmness.

'I cut myself.' I said, lifting both of my bloody hands. 'Do we have any plasters anywhere?' I wasn't hopeful, but maybe she had a secret stash somewhere.

Jodie looked disappointed, shaking her head, almost angry.

'You cut yourself?' she asked. 'With *that* knife!' She pointed to *The Killer* resting on the kitchen counter, lying in a pool of light shining through the window. If we'd been in a video game, it would have been an interactive object.

Jodie shook her head, muttering, '... again.' Again? I frowned, confused.

She quickly stepped towards me and, without warning, slapped my face. Hard. The sharp pain in my cheek woke me up, and my face felt hot. I was speechless, not sure how to respond.

'Damn you!' she screamed. 'How many more times are you going to cut yourself with that knife?'

Instinctively, I hunched my shoulders against her sudden wrath, standing silently, entirely focused on Jodie. My face and my hand no longer hurt, even though it was now bleeding more. My heart started to pound, but I was frozen in place, still shocked. She picked up the knife and turned, throwing it across the dining room.

'Fucking knife!' It flew, hitting the wall, and, to my

Ethan

utter surprise, it stayed there. It had landed, literally stuck in the wall, in between Jodie's canvas and the photo collage we'd made of our friends and us.

The whole scene seemed to drop into slow motion. My brain was trying to understand what was going on, and failing. Was it some sort of joke I wasn't quite getting? Was I missing a punchline?

She took a small step towards me and I reflexively took a step back. Then she followed with another step while raising her voice as if talking to a child.

'Sure... I guess *Jodie* should take care of everything, shouldn't she?' She still had that angry glare. 'Fine!' She spat the word at me. 'Jodie will fix everything!' She threw her hands into the air. 'Again!' she shouted.

I didn't understand what she was trying to say. I didn't recognise this Jodie. Surely a cut wasn't that big a deal.

I held onto the kitchen chair, now covered in bloodstains.

Jodie closed her eyes, her face relaxed, and all the anger disappeared from her face. I stood and waited, confused. She opened her eyes, and I could see something was wrong - she just stared at me, her face changing again. Her eyes traced around the kitchen, into the dining room, at me, and then out the window to the street. She reminded me of someone who had lost her friends in a crowd.

'Jodie? What's going on?' I said softly, as though I was talking to a wild animal.

She continued to stare *through* me, as if I wasn't there. Like she was looking at something I couldn't see. As my

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finger continued to bleed, still dripping onto the floor, Jodie moved her eyes to my hand.

'Jodie.' I repeated her name quietly. She still didn't respond, her skin grew paler by the second, the life literally draining from her face as I watched. I took a step forward and reached for her.

'No!' She screamed so loudly I leapt back. Jodie waved her hands in the air as if waving off a bee, backing into the dining room. I followed slowly, making sure to keep the same distance between us.

'What is going on?' I asked firmly, her mouth hung open, hands pressed to her stomach as she backed away.

'No, no, no.' She repeated over and over, pulling away from me until she was against the wall. As she looked around, she seemed to be seeing the apartment for the first time, seeing me for the first time.

Our bodies were trembling. I reached for her shoulder but she put her cold hands on mine instead - her hands were always freezing, no matter the weather - and gently pushed me away. She took another few steps back, avoiding the wall this time, reversing deeper into the living room.

And then almost like something passed through her, she stopped. 'Oh my god,' she whispered 'Laura.'

Suddenly, she let out a cry as loud as a mother might cry on discovering that her child had died.

'No!' She screamed again.

I started walking towards her, but she screamed, again and again, thrashing wildly against me as I tried to hold her. She grabbed our new picture frames and threw them at me.

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They landed on the floor instead, shattering the glass.

‘Jodie, stop!’ I was shouting over her cries, no longer hiding the panic. My hands shook uncontrollably. The oozing blood no longer bothered me; the only thing I cared about was Jodie. I wanted her to stop, but she wasn’t listening to my pleas. She kicked the armchair, still moving away from me. I followed her, not knowing what else to do. Should I call an ambulance?

I tried to say something, but I couldn’t. Finally, I just froze, like I was watching a movie, like none of this was happening to me. I was just an observer. My vision narrowed. I could almost make out Jodie’s shape in the living room. Her crying had quietened, as if it was coming from a long way away. Strange. Her ghostly figure moved from one side of the room to the other, occasionally throwing something at the wall. All my senses were slowly disappearing. The only thing present in this moment was a voiceless question: ‘why?’

The sound of the bedroom door slamming into the door frame broke my trance. Jodie was no longer in front of me. Her cries now echoed from the bedroom, strangely muffled by the bedroom walls.

I had to do something. I ran back to the kitchen and grabbed my phone from the counter, smearing it with blood. I dialled 999. As I waited for the call to connect, I realised I had no idea what to say.

‘9-9-9, which service do you require?’ The operator had a deep, rich voice. I tried to collect my thoughts. I had

My Wife Jodie

the phone pressed to my ear, but I couldn't speak.

'Hello, is there someone there?' the operator sounded concerned rather than irritated. Perhaps he was able to hear Jodie in the other room.

'I—'

The sound of breaking glass echoed through the apartment, followed by a deathly silence. My hands stopped shaking briefly. There was a ringing in my ears, and it was getting stronger. I placed the phone on the counter and slowly walked to the bedroom door. In my heart, I knew what had happened. My entire body was shaking. I was almost at the door, but I didn't want to go inside. I didn't want to see what I feared. I told myself that my wife was in the bedroom, asleep and safe. I touched the door handle and pressed it down slowly, as if I was trying not to wake her.

The first thing I noticed was the windows - they were intact. Both of them. I had been sure that Jodie had jumped, and my knees weakened as relief flooded through me. My eyes followed the fragments of glass scattered across the carpet to the middle of the room and a bigger shard. It was just a drinking glass. There was Jodie, still as a statue, in the corner of the room. Her sad eyes were fixed on the floor like a guilty child's. She was no longer hysterical or disoriented. The relief of seeing her unharmed rushed through me. I couldn't remember the last time I was this happy to see my wife.

Ethan

I don't know how long I stood by the door, neither of us moving. I was afraid to set her off again, but at the same time, it seemed the storm was over. I had no clue what had happened; it was simply up to me to help her. I slowly stepped into the bedroom. My foot pressed into something very sharp under the soft, deep-pile carpet, reminding me there were shards all over the floor. Luckily Jodie seemed unharmed; there was no visible blood.

Finally, I broke the silence. 'Sweetheart, please don't move; there's glass all over the floor.' She didn't. Not her body, not even her eyes.

I stepped carefully around the room, trying to avoid all the visible shards. With my hand on her shoulder, I couldn't believe how cold she was; she shivered under my touch.

'Jodie, you're freezing; let me put the duvet on you.' I tried to make eye contact, but there was still no reaction. I nudged her in the direction of the bed, and to my surprise, she didn't resist. She followed my lead and slowly sat down on the edge of our bed. I tucked the duvet around her shoulders, hoping she would feel a little warmer, a little safer, happier. I placed a hand on her thigh and the other around her waist.

Our flat was eerily quiet now. Raindrops began to fall gently against the bedroom windows, with a soft pitter-patter. It had all the hallmarks of a romantic moment, aside from the utter destruction in the room around us. And the

My Wife Jodie

blood on my hands.

Trying to find the words, praying this time she would hear me, 'I love you. Let me help you.'

Jodie moved her head towards me, putting her hand on top of my knee. Then she lifted her eyes to face me. She was as still and as pale as a ghost, looking up at me with big, sad eyes.

'It's ok, Ethan. I'll fix it.' She sighed, and said again, 'I'll fix it. I promise you that.'

Fix what? I wanted to ask, but she had already pulled away from me. She shook off the duvet, stood up, and gracefully stepped through the minefield of glass before disappearing into the flat.

I tried to talk to her that day, but she would just say 'leave it, please' or 'it doesn't matter, it won't happen again.' I was stunned.

Before clearing the glass from the bedroom, I went back to the shop to buy a first aid kit to fix up my hand properly. On the way home, I stumbled on a ridge in the pavement and sprained my ankle, a nice complement to my injured finger. By the time I'd returned, Jodie had already cleared up the living room, so we sat to have lunch. Of course, neither of us was in the mood for lasagna, so I made us cheese sandwiches.

As we ate, she seemed to be somewhere else entirely. Her eyes moved from side to side as if she was solving

Ethan

complicated mathematical problems in her head. When I asked her again about what had happened, she said, patronizingly, 'You wouldn't understand. Drop it, please.' It made me furious. I couldn't remember the last time - if ever - I had been so angry with her. I stewed in silence.

She moved around the house, avoiding any interaction; if we happened to be in the same room, she didn't acknowledge me. At one point, I watched her biting her nails, something I hadn't seen her do in almost eighteen years.

By the end of the day, I was no longer making any effort to speak with her, and she seemed almost relieved that I'd stopped trying. I went to bed early, wanting the day to end, but I couldn't fall asleep. My heart pounding, I lay counting hours, staring at the bright light seeping in from underneath the door. I wondered what Jodie was doing, and more importantly, what she was thinking.

I watched my wedding ring resting on the nightstand, the symbol of our marriage and our love. It wouldn't fit over the bulky bandage.

I don't remember how long I lay there before sleep finally took me.

CHAPTER 3

SUNDAY 21 AUGUST 2016

I opened my eyes to grey light, filtering in through the window. Heavy, dark clouds hid London from the sun. I lay in bed, not moving, still annoyed with Jodie and how she had treated me the day before - but my anger was less raw. My mother had often said that a good night's sleep puts things into perspective. I hoped Jodie felt better too; she rarely cried and I never seen her so distraught - not even when Laura died.

Not even when the doctors told her she couldn't have a baby. We tried for four months - special diets, looser underwear, careful timing. Then, one day, returning from work, I found her sitting motionless on the couch, gazing off into space. She looked up the second time I said hello.

'The doctor called,' she said, her voice flat as she explained that her fallopian tubes were completely blocked. An infection as a child.

Ethan

‘An infection? That’s all it takes?’ I’d asked in disbelief.

Her parents hadn’t cared much for her. She’d been very sick before they finally took her to the hospital. *Your treatment was started too late*, the gynaecologist had told her. Jodie had only just found out because our doctor had suggested an ultrasound, and I knew she hated her parents for what they had done to her.

I told her that there were still options, that maybe we could extract eggs and try IVF. Money wasn’t an issue, but she had said no. Jodie hated pain, and she preferred to accept that she couldn’t give birth. I tried to reassure her, to persuade her - I didn’t understand why she would just give up - saying that the procedure wouldn’t be so bad, but hell, what did I know?

I was devastated, but not Jodie; she coped through her art, and a few months after the news, I came home after an intense day in court to see that she’d finished a new painting. Two children, a girl and a boy, both looking out over the landscape on a bright sunny day. The girl was slightly taller, with a pink headband, holding the boy’s hand by her side as he clutched a small toy robot. We hung the painting in the middle of the dining room, and sometimes I would catch Jodie looking at it, wistfully.

It was getting warm under the duvet, and it was time to get up. I rolled over, but Jodie wasn’t there, which was strange. She loved lazy lie-ins, and I was usually the one who got up early. Her pillow lay neatly arranged at the pretty 45-degree angle to the bed frame that she liked, almost as

My Wife Jodie

if she hadn't come to bed. My heart pounded - there was no reason to assume anything - but something deep inside me knew. I wasn't even out of bed yet, and the drama had already started. Was she still mad with me? Did she sleep in the guest bedroom?

I got out of bed, quickly pulling on my boxers, and crept to the door listening carefully. Silence. Opening the bedroom door and walking to the dining room, I scanned the kitchen, the living room, the guest bedroom. I peered cautiously into the study. Empty.

'Jodie?' I shouted, still hoping for a simple answer. Maybe she was in the bathroom or the storage cupboard. Nothing but silence. Could she have gone to the shop? It was possible, but still early, really. Picking up my phone, I checked Maps to see if her shared location came up, but she was offline. The last known location was here in the flat, ten hours ago. Maybe her phone was flat. Maybe she did go to the shop.

I made myself coffee and sat down on the couch to shoot some zombies.

When I looked at my watch again it was almost midday. I grabbed my phone and called Jodie, worried now. It rang until her voicemail kicked in, her funny Scottish recorded greeting. I dialled again, but it went straight to voicemail. I sent her a WhatsApp message. Delivered. Which meant she had internet and her phone was on. I checked back on Google Maps. Her last location was still in the flat. Twelve hours ago now. She had deactivated her location sharing

Ethan

last night. Why? Did she leave? Nothing was making sense.

Had she taken anything with her? I looked first for her purse, rushing through the flat, but it wasn't in any of the usual places. In the hall cupboard, my small green backpack was also missing. She had left, and it wasn't an impulse. I had been so frustrated that I must have missed something. I must have. What had she been struggling with that she didn't want to tell me? Had my insistence on questioning her pushed her away? She clearly hadn't been ready to talk. But none of that mattered; I had to find her.

Taking a deep breath, I closed the door to the walk-in wardrobe. Overreacting wouldn't help the situation; I had to slow down and think clearly. Jodie might have gone to see Amy, so I should start there. And if she hadn't, then perhaps Amy could help me to understand what was going on. Jodie wasn't a dramatic person; this was not how she behaved. She wouldn't just leave me, running away without telling me. Amy had to be my first stop.

I dialled Amy's number. Like Jodie's, after the 4th beep it went to her voicemail. I re-dialled. Voicemail again. My stomach felt like it was filled with lead. Amy lived nearby; a fifteen minute walk, five in a car. I had to go.

Stepping into the bedroom, I grabbed the first pair of jeans I found in the wardrobe. As they came up over my right leg, I stepped on the carpet, and a blinding pain shot through my foot. I fell backward, grasping the bookshelf for support, causing all the books and ornaments to fall to the floor. I shouted in frustration: a glass shard protruded from my right foot, and blood was dripping on the carpet for the

My Wife Jodie

second time in as many days.

'God damn!' I shouted again. There was no one to hear me. I had to get this piece of glass out of my foot.

The nurse that had led the first aid course at work had said that you shouldn't try to remove anything sharp from your body - something about causing more harm in the removal. I took a minute running through alternatives, but lying on the floor surrounded by orange & cinnamon candles and books about female empowerment wouldn't help anyone. There was no way I could get to the hospital on my own, not with glass sticking out of my foot. Theo was in Brighton. I called Amy again, but she didn't pick up.

'Fuck me!' Inhaling deeply.

I took another deep breath. It would probably be easier to use one quick motion, though looking at how much blood there was, I guessed that making an even bigger wound wouldn't be wise.

My hands started to shake, like my brain was shouting 'don't touch it, you fool!' I took hold of the shard: instant, agonising pain.

'Fuck!'

Hitting the floor with my hands, just to get the anger out of my system, blood splattering on the carpet. The whole room was starting to look like a murder scene from CSI Miami. My heart was pounding, sweat ran down my face; I could feel the pressure deep in my head. Taking a couple more deep breaths, I gripped the glass again and pulled. It was like my foot was being held in a furnace. The pain was so intense that for a moment, I wanted to throw

Ethan

up. I shouted again, and suddenly the pain was gone.

'Thank God for that.' I leant my head against the side of the mattress.

Bandaging my foot, I slid it carefully into the most comfortable trainers I owned, then grabbed my coat and car keys, hopping out the front door as fast as I was able.

Stepping carefully down the stairs, I considered where else Jodie might be staying. Amy seemed like the best possibility - she must know something, and there was still hope that I would find Jodie there.

A rainstorm had just started as I limped and hopped pathetically to my car. Water trickled into the collar of my jacket. One more thing to add to the mess of the day.

The car was still a few metres away, and the rain was already seeping into my trainers. I unlocked it and watched it flash joyfully, as if inviting me into the cosy, dry interior. Yanking the door open, I finally fell into the car.

The rain hitting the car's roof made a deafening, pounding noise as I backed out of the parking space. I was surprised that my right foot felt ok on the pedals. I gave the engine a little more power and was thrown back in my seat with a sudden crash. For a moment, there was silence. I turned, barely making out the silhouette of a car through my back window.

'God damn!' No freaking way. What were the chances? Seriously? *When it rains, it pours.*

I took some deep breaths, counting slowly from one to ten; a tip from my mother. I found some paper in the glove box and wrote a few apologetic lines under my contact

My Wife Jodie

details, then I pushed it into a plastic sleeve and stepped out into the rainstorm, limping back to examine the damage. It was just a scratch, but I left the note under the other car's wiper.

'Having a bad day?' A woman's voice, barely audible over the storm, came from behind me. I turned, and made out a baseball cap over fiery red hair. She was slim, maybe in her 30s or 40s, and wore a shiny yellow raincoat over jeans and dark boots. A huge umbrella shielded her from the rain. She had a broad, friendly smile, the kind that could persuade you to join a cult.

'Excuse me?' I yelled. I was angered just by her standing there, smug and cosy. I wanted to get back inside the car.

'I can see you're having a bad day.' Shouting, she pointed at my car.

'Thanks for noticing.' I gave her a thumbs-up and turned back to check that the note hadn't been washed away.

'Do you need an umbrella?' She shouted again.

'Why? Do you have another one?'

'No.' She paused, then apologised.

'Cute,' I retorted. It wasn't.

I went back to my car and returned it to my space, ordered an Uber, and limped back to the shelter of my building. I was starting to shiver from the cold now. It would have been smarter to go upstairs and change into some dry clothes, but the idea of climbing those stairs again felt worse than the prospect of hypothermia. I lifted my head to watch the rain falling and noticed the woman with

Ethan

the umbrella reading the note I'd left on the red car.

'Oi!' I yelled. 'Leave it be!'

'Ethan?' She shouted back. 'Nice name!' Anger coursed through me. Jodie was missing; I had a bleeding foot, and it was all topped off by this car accident - she had *no right*.

'Miss - leave it! It's for the owner of the car!' I shouted louder this time. Abruptly, she turned towards me, and gave me a *teasing look* as she swung her hand slightly. The car I'd collided with beeped and flashed.

'Fucking hell,' I muttered to myself.

'Are you ok with me taking this now?' She had my plastic sleeve and note in her other hand. I nodded, trying not to make eye contact.

'I'm sorry! I'll pay for the damage. I live here.' I pointed to the building behind me. 'Apartment 17.' She didn't say anything. 'I'm so sorry!'

If she wanted to, she could be a right bitch, call the police, make me wait here. She could make my day even worse.

'It's ok, Ethan. I can see that today is not your day.' She raised her voice as the rain stepped up another notch. 'I'll give you a call in a few days to talk about the damage. I'm not in a rush.'

She took something from her car, locked it, and walked away, waving at me. I didn't wave back.

CHAPTER 4

The Uber pulled gently to a stop just outside Amy's house, with a soft whine of electric motors. She lived in a beautiful, rambling terrace in Rotherhithe, and I could see why Amy and Julie moved here after adopting Emmet. Ducks bobbed on the glittering lake nearby, and a few regal white swans during the summer months. I eyed their wooden front porch, evergreens in clay pots on either side of the door. No toys, or mess, no sign that a child lived here.

'Is everything ok?' the driver asked. He seemed worried, but I sat in silence, hoping to see Jodie walking past a window. This was surely the first place she would go if she wanted to get away from me for a bit. But then she knew that this would be the first place I would try looking for her.

The rain hadn't stopped, but at least it wasn't pouring now.

Ethan

‘Sir?’ The driver was probably starting to get nervous. I asked him to wait for me while I checked with Amy. Stepping out of the car, my trainers squelched on the tarmac.

I limped to the front door. As I moved closer to the house, a light flicked on upstairs. There was no doubt they were home, and then I heard noises, the sound of a child’s laughter. Emmet. Synchronised clapping and singing; I was obviously about to interrupt a lovely afternoon.

The door knocker clattered, the sound of playtime stopped, and footsteps could be heard approaching until the door finally swung open.

As soon as Amy saw me, her smile faded. I guess she was expecting a delivery man or a *good* friend. She had her hair tied up, a jam stain on her yellow t-shirt and checkered PJs.

‘Ethan,’ she said, her voice flat. ‘How’re *things?*’

‘Amy, hi, I called you.’ My smile faltered under her stony gaze. ‘Is everything okay?’

‘I’m not attached to my phone, you know,’ she crossed her arms. ‘But yeah, I’m fine. Better than Jodie anyway. She told me what happened.’

‘Oh, she’s with you!’ I hesitated again. ‘Wait, told you what? What’s happened to her? I’ve been so worried!’ I tried to move behind her, looking around Amy to catch a glance of Jodie.

‘Nope.’ She didn’t budge. ‘She’s not here. Not anymore, anyway.’ The hostility was unmistakable.

‘Amy, what the hell is going on? Please can you tell me

My Wife Jodie

what's happening? I've been losing my mind with worry.'

'She left early this morning.' Jodie spending the night at least meant she was safe, which was a relief. Amy was staring at me.

'Did she tell you why she left our house? I can't reach her. I don't understand.' I could feel my throat constricting, my voice about to catch. I swallowed and took a breath. *Calm down. She's safe.*

Amy glanced behind her to make sure Julie and Emmet weren't catching wind of the doorstep drama. She waved her hand at me, motioning that I should step back, and closed the door behind her. We stood under the small porch, barely sheltered from the rain, almost breathing on each other. Standing so close together, I can't help but notice how much shorter she was than me.

'What do you mean she *left your house?*' She was talking more quietly now.

'Well, we had a bit of a fight yesterday, and -'

Amy interrupted, 'Look, Ethan. I know all about it; she told me! I honestly thought better of you, but you're an absolute pig. Of course she came over - she needed some space.' Amy was furious, her eyes narrowed, and she was breathing heavily.

I pulled my head back, and some drops of rain hit the side of my cheek.

'Wait; *what?*'

'I can't believe you!'

'I don't know what's going on. I cut my finger yesterday, and she got so mad. It was so... it was stupid. She

Ethan

was irrational yesterday, all over the place, throwing things around the house, breaking stuff. She just kept saying she needed to fix something. But I don't know what she meant, and I thought it would be easier just to sleep it off and talk this morning. I woke up to find that she'd gone.' I couldn't wrap my head around what was happening. Why was Amy so cross? What had Jodie told her?

'Right.' Amy was cold. 'So you just handily forgot to mention the yoga teacher – Stacey.' It wasn't a question. She held my gaze, jaw tight. I stared in shock, unable to comprehend this twist in our conversation. 'How could you just do this to her? To *our* Jodie!' She uncrossed her arms and crossed them again. 'Sometimes, Ethan, I swear to God...'

My body stood stock still, but I certainly wasn't cold anymore; in fact, I'd started to sweat. I didn't even know where to begin.

'A yoga teacher? I don't know any yoga teachers. What the hell, Amy? I would never! Come on, you know me.' A headache came over me, creeping in from my temples. I took a steadying breath to stave off the anger. I felt like I'd been losing my footing for so long that at any minute, I would explode.

'Are you seriously going to deny it? Why would she make shit like that up? To me, of all people?' She was shouting now. 'Honest to God, I expected more from you.'

'It's a lie,' I said slowly, almost to convince myself. 'It just *isn't true*, Amy! I swear it.'

'Please don't even–'

My Wife Jodie

'I don't even go to yoga classes.' Amy stared at me and pulled her head back. She had opened her mouth for a retort, then shut it again. I felt a tiny glimmer of hope.

'What?' She was confused by my remark. She'd realised that there was more to it than what she'd heard from Jodie the previous day.

'I don't go to yoga classes.' I repeated it slower. 'About two weeks ago, Jodie suggested we try yoga together. There was this thing called acro yoga, where you do poses as a couple. I just rolled with it. We were going to try our first class tomorrow.'

Amy stood there, silently digesting what I'd said. She was Jodie's best friend, and she would always pick her side, but I wasn't backing down.

'Just because you haven't been attending classes doesn't mean you couldn't have whored around with this *tall, brunette, Stacey person*.' It was apparent she wanted to believe that Jodie had been telling the truth. It would be much easier if I were that *absolute pig*.

'This is ridiculous.' I didn't know who this Stacey was. 'I never cheated on Jodie. Ever.' Amy raised her index finger and her eyebrow.

'Ever?'

'Amy...' I sighed. 'It was like eighteen years ago.'

'Seventeen.'

I raised my voice. 'It didn't mean anything, drunken mistake, come on!' She was just trying to make me feel bad.

'Blame it on alcohol, or maybe your testosterone. Yes, of course it wasn't your fault. How could it be? I'm so

Ethan

disappointed with you right now, you know.'

'Look, since then I haven't kissed anyone but my wife. I have been faithful for every single moment of our marriage.' I could see Amy wanted to interrupt, so I spoke louder and quicker. *'No matter what you think!'*

Amy sighed but I continued.

'And frankly, it hurts that Jodie said something like this, and you don't even want to listen to me - when I say nothing happened.' I took a deep breath. 'I promise.'

Amy shrugged. 'Then I have no idea why she would say something like that. She spoke with incredible certainty, telling me about the 30-year-old brunette, tall, with short, fashionable hair. Her high-vis jacket made her stand out from the crowd.' She was watching me for some sort of reaction. 'Jodie thought she must be one of those girls who runs every other day, cycles to work, and eats salads for lunch.' Amy looked into my eyes and took another breath before she spoke again. 'I don't think Jodie was lying, Ethan.' I shook my head, and she touched my arm with her hand, though my wet jacket. 'And it blows my mind because you seem like you're telling the truth too. You two finally found some drama in your life, and hell! It looks like it's a whopper.' She looked away.

'Where is she?' I just wanted to speak with my wife.

'Home. She said she was going home.'

'Home?' I asked in disbelief.

'That's why I was surprised to see you, you know. You would have crossed paths. She must be back at your flat.'

I was overwhelmed with relief, though I was still angry

My Wife Jodie

with Jodie for lying to Amy. I kept telling myself there must be some reason for all of this, some misunderstanding. I just needed to speak with Jodie. No matter what, I wasn't going to let this marriage crumble.

I thanked Amy and waved goodbye as I limped back to the car. I could feel Amy's stare burning a hole in the back of my neck. I would bet anything that she was dying to know why I was limping. I climbed into the back seat and asked the driver to take me home. Amy was still standing on her porch watching me leave, arms crossed.

CHAPTER 5

The door to the apartment was unlocked, and I shouted Jodie's name. There was no response. I walked through the empty apartment remembering the times when I'd come back home late from work and she would hide somewhere in the flat. It was her way of teasing me for being late. It wouldn't be obvious at first, but after a few minutes of complete silence, I could sense she was somewhere, waiting to leap out. But now, she wasn't here; she hadn't come home. Maybe I had just left the door unlocked.

It was only about twenty four hours since I had seen her, but I already missed her silliness, her love.

I called Nancy - Jodie's friend from work. As I expected, she knew nothing about Jodie's disappearance, but in our short conversation she succeeded in stressing me out - saying that she read that the first 72 hours were the

My Wife Jodie

most important when someone goes missing. I hung up the phone. Thanks for nothing, Nancy.

Next I called my mother - careful to avoid using the word *missing*. Jodie treated my mother as her own and I had hoped she might have said something. Nothing.

Fuck this, I'm calling the police.

Though I'd never reported a missing person before, it felt like the right thing to do - maybe Amy thought everything was ok, but I had to believe what I'd seen with my own eyes yesterday afternoon. The dispatcher answered on the first ring and quickly redirected me to the police.

'I need to report a missing person - Jodie, my wife.' I said it confidently. The dispatcher asked for her full name, date of birth, and a lot of other information.

'Jodie Page, her date of birth is 24th of September 1980, the last person to see Jodie was her friend, Amy Hale.' It made Amy sound a bit suspicious.

'Is there any immediate danger to this person?'

They needed something to take the case seriously. 'She might be suicidal,' I lied. I didn't feel good about it. But if I told them the truth, they might have waited some time before they started a search. I didn't want to wait.

The officer told me they would contact me if any information came in.

It was only lunchtime, but I needed a drink, so I grabbed a beer. Time was passing too slowly; as a distraction, I called Theo. As soon as he picked up, he started talking about his gadget.

Ethan

'You know my face motion tracking -' he paused, not knowing yet what to call his invention '- motion tracking robot camera. I think it might have huge potential.'

I knew he'd been working very hard to develop his idea and was super excited to tell me about it, but I just couldn't pretend everything was normal.

'Jodie left. I don't know where she is.' I interjected, and he fell silent.

We remained that way until Theo spoke. 'What?'

Not knowing where to start, I told him everything; about our fight, Jodie spending the night at Amy's, me reporting Jodie as a missing person.

'But why would she leave?' he asked and I told him what Amy had said, about this Stacey person, someone who I'd never met and probably didn't exist. 'Did you kiss her?' His question was ridiculous.

'Of course not! She's not real!' I shouted.

'There must be something you don't know. If I'd finished my motion tracking robot camera we could find Jodie in no time!' He was trying to make me feel better.

'If only.'

'It's been less than twenty-four hours, mate, we need to wait and see. Jodie is upset. Give her time. You can come here if you'd like; you know you're always welcome at our house.'

'I do.'

My Wife Jodie

I needed a distraction, and so I started fixing the mess from earlier. On my knees, I dug through the carpet with my fingers, hoping to find more shards of glass. I found two more; satisfying and terrifying. In the process of fixing the fallen shelf, I hit my thumb with the hammer and it started to swell. I got another plaster out of the kit.

The bloodstains on the carpet proved more difficult to clean than I'd thought. I scrubbed and scrubbed with a sponge, but the rust-red stain remained. I just wanted it gone. The frustration built and built and overflowed, and I screamed into the empty flat.

Fuck this! I grabbed a bottle of red wine from the kitchen cupboard and filled two glasses, went back to the bedroom, poured one of them on the stain and downed the other. I opened the bedroom window to try and clear the smell.

In the kitchen, I cleaned all the counters. Emptying the cupboards, I wiped every item one by one until they were perfectly clean again. Tears rolled down my cheeks, tickling my nose. *Damn it!*

The local DIY shop sold me some filler after I described the hole in my living room wall. It repaired the hole, but not perfectly; like a wound, there would always be a scar.

By 7 pm, everything was done. I got some food and turned on the TV, though I couldn't relax. Hundreds of questions were spinning through my head.

One after the other, they demanded to be dealt with. I

Ethan

tried to focus on them in some sort of order – yet still, my head spun. What had triggered all this? I hopelessly tried calling Jodie again. It went to her voicemail, after the fourth ring this time.

Even if - *if* - I had somehow kissed Stacey and Jodie was furious, it didn't explain why she'd waited till night to sneak out; as if she was running away.

Darkness had descended, the fourth beer was almost finished, and I sat in the living room studying Jodie's painting of the two children. Jodie was a talented artist, who had been able to pursue her twin passions for art and teaching with her parents' support. She described them as the kind of people who had separate quarters for the servants. I'd never met them, and Jodie rarely talked about it, but she seemed happy enough to take their money. Something was badly wrong with that family.

Next to the painting of the children holding hands, on the other side of the fireplace, hung my favourite piece of Jodie's. Twins, she called it. It showed a happy family - a father, mother and a young girl having a picnic, while an identical twin woman watched them from a distance - alone. Even though the colours were bright and vibrant, this painting felt sad.

She was talented, there was no doubt about that, but now more than ever, I believed she deserved to be recognised. Her art should be hanging in galleries across Europe. She had been painting less recently, and maybe I should have supported her more.

My Wife Jodie

My phone rang, causing me to jump. An unknown number and my heart leapt.

‘Hello?’

‘Good evening, this is Sergeant Michelle Gasser from Southwark Police Station. I’m calling about your missing person report, for Ms Jodie Page.’

‘Yes, that’s correct.’

‘According to the notes I have here, you were the person who made the report?’

‘Yes. Do you have some news?’ I could tell from the policewoman’s tone of voice that the news was good.

‘We were able to locate Jodie based on the information you provided. She is safe; however, she does not want to be contacted, and I’m afraid I can’t disclose any further information.’

‘Doesn’t want to be contacted?’ What did that mean?

‘Is there anything else I can help you with?’ she asked.

‘Wait a minute, Jodie is my wife. What does it mean that she doesn’t want to be contacted?’

‘It means that she is no longer a missing person, as we were able to speak with her. She was asked if she wanted us to pass on her location or contact information to the person who reported her missing. She said no.’

‘She said no?’

‘That’s correct, sir.’

‘But, I need to know whether she’s safe. I don’t want Jodie sleeping on the streets!’ I needed her to give me something more, a bit of information. There was a patient pause on the other end of the line. ‘She has to take medication

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every day! Someone has to look after her.’ It was a lie, but the situation was getting desperate.

‘Sir, you don’t need to worry. I can tell you that she is not alone and will be looked after.’

Not alone? It meant she was staying with someone. Had Amy lied to me? Not Theo. But who?

‘Thank you, Sergeant. Thank you for your call.’

‘Have a good day, sir.’ The line crackled and the call ended with a beep.

She is no longer a missing person. When was she coming back? What about her job? She loved the kids she looked after more than anything. At least she was safe, but I couldn’t let it go; I needed to find her. She’d run off without saying anything. Did she expect me to do nothing? Was I to wait patiently until she returned?

The light flickered in the study, where she kept her laptop. I prayed she hadn’t taken it with her. Finding it in the second desk drawer, I took it out and opened it on the desk. Luckily I knew her password - *LadyBird*. She had deactivated the location sharing on her phone, but maybe something would still be syncing from her phone to her laptop. I opened the browser and found the web history for all of her devices, all conveniently time-stamped, right up to this afternoon.

Today 15:22 - Google search: Sensory deprivation Edinburgh

Today 08:32 - Google search: Meditation benefits

Today 08:14 - <https://harvard.edu/how-memory-works>

Yesterday 20:55 - Google search: London to Edinburgh trains

My Wife Jodie

‘Edinburgh?’ Amy had seemed positive when she’d told me that Jodie was going home. *Home*. That word floated for a second in my head before I made the connection. She meant she was going back home to Edinburgh. Was she going to stay with her parents?

When I proposed to Jodie, she called my mother right away. It seemed a little strange that she didn’t call her own parents, but when they didn’t show up to our wedding, I realised that her relationship with them was much more strained than I had originally thought. Jodie had never spoken much about why; she had always been much more mature and independent than the rest of us. It seemed we were the only family she had. I was happy to be close to her and did my best to fill that void in her life.

Now, after all these years of never speaking about her parents, after twenty years of silence, she suddenly decides to go back? And all this triggered by her thinking I’d kissed a yoga teacher?

The problem was, I didn’t know where her parents lived. Jodie was from Edinburgh, but she’d somehow managed never to tell me exactly where. The only information I had were their names: Derek and Denise Brown, and they were wealthy, thanks to some sort of successful business that Jodie had also failed to talk about.

I closed the browsing history and went straight to Google, typing in *Derek Denise Brown*. Nothing related to business owners from Edinburgh came up. But on LinkedIn I found a Derek Brown, originally from Scotland, now in

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London - but he was married to a Sarah. Another Derek Brown was a musician in America, but he was too young to be Jodie's father. I closed the laptop and limped out of the study.

I needed Amy's help. When she picked up, and I'd filled her in, she expressed surprise that Jodie hadn't come home. She told me that Jodie had replied to a text asking if she was ok, with a simple *I'm fine*. When I told Amy I'd reported Jodie as a missing person she snorted in amusement.

'Well, someone is clearly a bit melodramatic.' I imagined she was rolling her eyes as she said that. She was more interested when I told her about Jodie going to Edinburgh. She wanted to know how I knew, but I changed the subject. Anything that was said to Amy would most certainly be reported back to Jodie.

'Do you think she really went to Edinburgh? You both are such drama queens! Are you going to chase her all the way there, keel before her, and beg forgiveness?'

'What the hell? I don't have anything to apologise for!' Clearly, she didn't understand how much distress this was causing me.

'Ethan.' She sounded disappointed. 'You *seriously* need to relax. She is fine. We had a good chat yesterday - she was upset, but nothing more than that. She is not suicidal; she wants some time to herself. Can you respect that?'

No. Amy hadn't been there when Jodie'd hit me or thrown that knife into the wall. She wasn't there when Jodie had said, 'Don't worry, I'll fix everything.' Amy only saw what Jodie let her see. I know Jodie, and she hadn't

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been faking it. She was in some kind of trouble, and she wasn't talking to me about what it was.

'Do you know where her parents live?' I spoke calmly.

'No. I'm in the same boat as you. I've never heard her speak much about her parents. Once, she told me her father said that he'd never wanted to have children, that Jodie was a mistake.' I sighed at Amy's remark. *What a dick.*

Saying goodnight, I hung up, sitting in the darkened room. I remained for a while, not thinking, just watching the light from the window illuminating the pictures on the wall. We had created so many lovely memories; there was even a picture of our first dance together as newlyweds.

We'd been married in the forest just outside London. A picturesque nature-wedding had proven to be more complicated than our collection of Instagram photos had indicated. There'd been tents, generators, transport, permits to organise; we'd had to make sure the roads were wide enough for vans. But the moment our wedding song came up, Jodie and I came together on the dance floor as everyone stepped to the edge, and it was the perfect moment. We had placed hundreds of small lights in the trees so that they illuminated the dance floor. I grabbed her waist and swung her around me, people cheered, and then our bodies touched. We moved in sync. The night was clear, a million stars above us. My eyes were filled with tears. I couldn't help myself; I wept, letting them fall on Jodie's shoulder. She laughed and told me I was cute. My mother was beaming as she watched. She didn't need to say that she was happy; she had worked meticulously on

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our wedding arrangements. We'd given her a sheet with the details of all 57 guests, and she'd written the names and addresses neatly on each envelope. Jodie had drawn a small heart on the envelope addressed to her parents.

I bolted upright; the list of addresses my mother had used! It must be somewhere. My heart started to pound. I limped back to the study and started opening and closing drawers as if I was a thief searching for valuables. There was nothing in them, but there was one other place we kept various important documents – in a box under our bed. I dragged myself to the bedroom, adrenaline counteracting the pain. I lifted our bed, seeing the box still there, next to the extra sheets and duvet. One folder was for finances: flat ownership papers and P60s, national insurance contribution papers, and private pension care plans. The yellow folder I was holding seemed to be all Jodie's freelance work.

Going through everything reminded me how long we had been together. At this point, our lives had become one. I couldn't bear the thought that we might fall apart. One after the other, I pulled out folders and stacked them beside me. Maybe Jodie tossed it out years ago. I certainly hadn't seen it since the wedding.

I had to make sure; it might be my only chance to find Jodie. But the box was empty now, with nothing but a few scraps of paper at the bottom. The address sheet I was looking for wasn't there. There was another box next to it, one we used to fill with sentimental things. I took it out and opened it, photographs spilling from the top onto the

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floor. Of the two of us, Jodie was the one who liked taking pictures. There was a picture of me leaning against a palm tree on a perfect, white sandy beach in Vietnam - one of the islands called Phu Quoc. Aside from an overwhelming number of drunk Russian tourists, that holiday had been amazing. A picture of us in Lithuania, standing on a strange hill full of old crosses. A photo of St. Abb's Head lighthouse in Scotland. I'd taken Jodie there shortly after I'd won the lottery. We were sitting on a bench looking into the depths of the North Sea when I asked her if she would marry me. She wasn't shocked. Maybe the carefully planned romantic trip had given it away. She'd only said *yes*, hugged me, and called my mother. She laughed and screamed with joy, telling my mother to stop the car - she had some amazing news to share.

Photos of our wedding surfaced next, one of them taken just after the ceremony. When we'd exchanged rings, and the celebrant had told us we were officially husband and wife, all of our friends and family had lined up neatly along the path in the forest. Jodie had jumped on my back, making me carry her along the hard earth path while people laughed and clapped, throwing rice and seeds. Jodie threw her bouquet into the air, hanging on to me with her other hand. At that instant, the photographer snapped the picture and froze the moment forever. I smiled and put it carefully in my shirt pocket.

Seeing all the happy memories we had shared broke something inside of me. I desperately wanted her back. Tears spilled down my cheek as I smiled, remembering these

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little snippets from our life. One by one the pictures came out, and my eyes went automatically to the next thing in the box, resting on top of the pile. The small green notebook somehow felt out of place; it wasn't as dusty as the other things. I took it out and looked more closely. A dark green, hardcover A5 notebook. There was no branding on it, maybe it was even handmade. Posh. I opened it and on the first page in Jodie's handwriting was the word 'Remember.'

I quickly flipped through the pages, but it was mostly empty. There were just a few pages filled at the front and a few more at the back. The back pages, titled *happiness*, were neatly ruled into three columns and were filled with names and dates. The middle column listed a profession or some other form of identification.

Happiness

<i>Jordan</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>17-03-1998</i>
<i>Camilla</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>15-08-1998</i>
<i>Kate</i>	<i>Lesbian</i>	<i>03-12-1998</i>
<i>Taylor</i>	<i>Runner</i>	<i>29-07-2000</i>
<i>Drew</i>	<i>Magazine</i>	<i>16-05-2001</i>
<i>Victoria</i>	<i>Actress</i>	<i>10-08-2002</i>
<i>Jamie</i>	<i>Whore</i>	<i>02-08-2003</i>
<i>Remy</i>	<i>Motorbike</i>	<i>16-10-2004</i>
<i>Alex</i>	<i>Starbucks</i>	<i>30-09-2007</i>
<i>Charlie</i>	<i>Neighbour</i>	<i>14-03-2008</i>
<i>Laura</i>	<i>Baby</i>	<i>17-09-2010</i>
<i>Riley</i>	<i>Accounts</i>	<i>13-05-2012</i>
<i>Stacey</i>	<i>Yoga</i>	<i>22-08-2016</i>

Life

<i>Gary</i>	<i>22-07-1999</i>	<i>02-05-03</i>
<i>A-levels</i>	<i>16-04-1999</i>	<i>12-00-00</i>
<i>History degree</i>	<i>02-03-2000</i>	<i>02-03-01</i>
<i>Martha's death</i>	<i>10-07-2003</i>	
<i>Bike</i>	<i>14-03-2004</i>	<i>02-07-00</i>
<i>Burglary</i>	<i>29-04-2006</i>	<i>05-00-00</i>
<i>Depression</i>	<i>23-06-2006</i>	<i>12-04-02</i>
<i>Money</i>	<i>02-04-2007</i>	<i>01-07-00</i>
<i>Cancer</i>	<i>12-02-2007</i>	<i>02-11-00</i>
<i>Tony's case</i>	<i>07-02-2009</i>	<i>16-03-00</i>
<i>Jill</i>	<i>11-05-2009</i>	<i>02-05-07</i>
<i>Truck</i>	<i>01-03-2010</i>	<i>03-10-00</i>
<i>Adoption</i>	<i>07-07-2011</i>	<i>18-01-00</i>
<i>Car crash</i>	<i>01-09-2013</i>	<i>02-00-00</i>
<i>Marathon</i>	<i>08-06-2015</i>	<i>05-10-00</i>
<i>Motorcycle</i>	<i>11-11-2015</i>	<i>02-08-00</i>
<i>Amar</i>	<i>27-07-2016</i>	

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I stared at the *happiness* list for a few minutes, trying to make sense of the names. Laura - that was probably most familiar to me. I'd had two flatmates back in university who were called Jamie and Remy. Last time I saw Remy was when he'd finished university in 2003. And I hadn't seen Jamie since he moved out of the halls in 2001. Maybe these were different people. The dates, on the other hand, made no sense to me - but the last entry sent cold chills down my spine. *Stacey 22-08-2016*. That's tomorrow's date. Tomorrow?

Jodie's writing was neat and precise; this was important to her, and she'd cared enough to keep it carefully hidden. I couldn't stop thinking about Jodie and her secrets; I needed answers. I flipped back to the front of the notebook, to the other list titled *life*. The layout was similar, though this time, they seemed to be events and dates.

This list made even less sense than the other. It seemed that the first column was just keywords - things Jodie wanted to remember but not intended to be seen by anyone, probably including me. Some of the keywords and dates made sense. I recognised my failed investment in Kodak in 2007 and Amy trying to adopt Emmet in the summer of 2011. In 2007 I had been diagnosed with cancer but had been lucky enough to catch it early, avoiding serious treatment. My mother had gone through breast cancer in 1995 and had also been successfully treated. But other things like *depression* or *Martha's death* were mystifying. The only Martha I knew was my mother, but she wasn't dead. I didn't know anyone who had *depression*. Those keywords could

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mean something else, a code of some sort; I didn't know anyone called *Jill* nor anyone who had studied history.

I held the small green notebook in my hands as my grip slowly tightened until my knuckles were white, trying and failing to calm my breathing. I had no idea what to make of this. It felt as if my life was unravelling, and I didn't know what to do.

There was a pain in my chest, and cold beads of sweat pricked at my temple. My mouth was dry, and I realised I was aching for Jodie. I wanted to hold her tightly in my arms until it felt like we were becoming one. We would talk, and everything would make sense again.

Shutting my eyes, I took a deep breath in, holding it to feel the beat of my heart slow slightly. Exhaling, I crossed my arms and held the book to my chest. Slightly calmer, I had just reopened my eyes when a light blue folder caught my attention. It had been hidden under the notebook, and with black marker in my handwriting was labelled, "Wedding Stuff".