

Redemption

by Richard Burke

www.richardburke.co.uk

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Before

Chapter One

You watch. You plan.

You are not accustomed to this, and so you are careful, cautious. This must be perfect. It can only happen once, and there are... requirements.

There are patterns to learn. He gets up at six-thirty, she at seven-fifteen, then the girl as late as she can. Bed is ten-thirty for all of them, but the girl stays awake secretly until the small hours. You know these habits, because you have hidden outside their house, you have timed the switchings-on and off of lights, charted the movement of shadows from room to room. The girl switches her light on again sometime before eleven.

You watch their days, too. He leaves for work, then the girl for school, then the woman, headed for whichever office she is working in this week. He walks to work, but frequently gets a taxi home. She takes the tube. The girl walks.

He always takes the same route. He grabs a doughnut from the café across from the prison before he goes in. You know the interior, you can imagine him moving through it: he strides through the clamour and shuffle of the wings, marches the corridors, stops to pass the time with officers, puts a hand on an arm here, offers a joke there, or a reassurance. You have watched him do it. He has passed you on the wings, a man from a different world, full of himself, full of certainty.

She is different. Once a week, she travels by tube to Saint Mary's Hospital. You have waited with her in the corridors, watching her nervously twist a lock of hair around a finger – twist, tug, twist, tug, chewing it in the corner of her mouth, pretending to read the same page of a magazine for an hour or more. You have been outside, waiting for her, as she emerges, nervous and uncertain, sweat misting her upper lip even on the coldest days. (This makes you smile. She is scared. Good.) Sometimes he comes with her, and you cannot go so close. But still you watch.

And then she goes to work. She is a temp: she works in different places from time to time, and that makes things harder. But that is why you have prepared. Because there can be no error. There is a balance to be gauged – eye for eye, life for life, dream for broken dream; the implacable algebra of revenge.

You watch from the doorways of vacant houses. You are a passer-by, coat collar casually turned up. You watch. You wait. And you prepare.

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Monday

Chapter Two

The dream woke him because he had nowhere else left to go. He had done something, saved someone, but the men who came did not believe him. He had seen it in their eyes. And now they had come for him, and –

Matthew Daniels dragged his eyes open.

In the half-light, shadows drifted on the ceiling. The curtains lifted and sank on a slight breeze. Where they parted, he could see the trees outside, nodding. Cars whispered past. A distant alarm sounded, and then stopped.

Someone calling in his dream. Someone accusing him.

Charlotte's back was pressed against his side. It was hot, and tacky with sweat. The sensation was still strange to him, even after more than a year. Asleep, Charlotte was a furnace. Awake, she fizzed with relentless, irritable energy. Sometimes it tired him. Sometimes, he just wanted a little peace.

Second love. The shadows on the ceiling nodded wisely at him, as if they knew exactly how he felt. He wished they would tell him – because sometimes he had no idea.

Careful not to wake Charlotte, he eased himself out of bed, and slipped behind the curtain to avoid spilling light into the room. Charlotte stirred briefly, then silence returned. The street was flat and grey in the morning light. A woman emerged from the gate of a house a little further down the street, hauling on a tubby labrador. She was bundled in layers of tweed coat, and had a woollen scarf wrapped tightly about her head. The dog was grey around the muzzle, and barrel-shaped; it hurried after her on stiff fat legs. He could hear its claws ticking on the pavement. Beads of rain sparkled dully on the rows of parked cars. A little way down the road on the far side, a car with silvered windows gleamed a little brighter than the rest.

Somewhere nearby, next door perhaps, a mobile phone rang and was not answered.

He fought his way back through the curtains into the room. Luminous digits on his bedside table told him it was twenty to seven. There was no point in going back to sleep. As he took his dressing gown down from the hook behind the door, Charlotte's came off too, and flopped loudly to the carpet. She didn't stir.

Her face was crumpled against the pillow, angled back, so that she was facing him perfectly. The one eye he could see was firmly shut; the other was obscured by a scrunched-up cheek. Her mouth was open, and strands from her bob of dark hair hung across her teeth. A high brow curved seamlessly down to the tip of a small, elegant nose. Her hair swept down around her cheeks to meet the soft line of her jaw. She wasn't angular in any dimension. She was rounded everywhere.

To Matthew, she was beautiful. She preferred call herself fat. That always made him laugh. Because if you looked at it the wrong way, it was sort of true. He didn't look at it the wrong way; but for her, of course, that wasn't the point.

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He loved watching her sleep. Her face was smeared out against the pillow. When she woke, that rumpled face would come alive with laughter, and her clamped-shut brown eyes would sparkle with mischief. And her smell – a heat that rose from her that would be almost a taste – apples, yeast, vanilla. And her voice, a high-pitched bell.

Yes, definitely love. It felt all the more precious for having won it twice.

Downstairs, he sat in the kitchen, listening to the morning's news on the radio, cradling a cup of tea, soothed by a dawn chorus of pigeons, traffic and aeroplanes. There was something special about this hour, about the near-peace of London's restless streets, with Charlotte and Em safely asleep upstairs. He found it reassuring. The world waking around them today was the same world as yesterday; it would be the same again tomorrow. Even the ceaseless drone of the news on the radio reinforced the illusion: the more sensational the story, the more familiar it seemed. The world was a big, dangerous and miserable place – but not this corner of it. Here, he could shut it all out. There was peace, of a sort – and he vowed, as he did every morning, that nothing bad would ever happen to either of them, come what may. He would not allow it. Not again.

*

At ten past seven, he took her a cup of herbal tea. Em's alarm was ringing. As he passed, there was a grunt from behind her closed door, and a thump. The ringing stopped. In the main bedroom he set down the tea, switched off their own alarm before it could ring, and kissed the top of his wife's head. It was the only part of her poking up above the covers.

'Morning, darling. Ten past.' A sleepy groan answered him. He chuckled into her hair. 'Mmm. I know the feeling. Tea's on the table.'

'Oh, *yum*,' she muttered. 'Tea.' She rolled away from him and wrapped the covers tighter. 'Go away.'

He bounced onto the bed beside her. 'What, *really*?'

'Matthew, I'm asleep. Go away.'

He slid a hand under the covers and ran it down her back. 'Ve can do zis ze easy vay, or ze hard vay.'

She arched away from him. 'Matthew! That's cold! You – you –' She ran out of words. A few seconds later, she peeped out fuzzily at him. 'I could go off you, you know.'

He kissed her on the forehead. 'See you downstairs.'

On his way down, he rapped on Em's door. 'It's quarter past.' There was no reply. There rarely was. 'Em?'

Muffled by the door, he heard her shout, 'All *right*!'

He shook his head. Teenagers: they were either asleep or in a foul mood, you could take your pick. She was awake now, which meant she was in a grump.

'Downstairs by half-past, please.' He hurried on to avoid the inevitable response. Her ranting pursued him down the stairs – which was good, because it meant that she was alert. There was a chance she'd get out of the house on time today.

*

Charlotte was first down. She pecked him absently on the cheek, and sat nursing her tea, clearly still half-asleep. Matthew made himself busy with the toaster.

He called over his shoulder, 'Sleep well?'

She groaned. 'Still sleeping. Why am I so tired?'

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'That's easy. Too much sex.'

She sniggered, reluctantly. 'Once was all it took.'

There was an envelope on the counter by the toaster. He tossed it onto the table. 'Here. You must have missed it on Saturday.' That wasn't true. He'd found it half-hidden behind a pile of recipe books. It hadn't got there by accident.

She eyed the envelope, scowling, then slid her finger under the flap and ripped it open. She stared at it for a long time before pulling out the letter. She glanced at the header hastily, then slid it back.

He brandished the butter knife at it. 'From...?'

She scowled. 'None of your business. A bill. My mobile or something.'

He smiled at her sadly. He had seen the hospital's red logo. She avoided his eyes for a beat, then muttered, 'Oh, all *right*.'

She made a show of pulling the letter out again and scanning it. 'Yeah,' she said. 'Bill.'

They both contemplated the lie for a while without talking.

The toast popped up. Matthew buttered it, then looked hopefully in a cupboard full of mugs. 'Where's the Marmite?' Ever since Charlotte had moved in and started rearranging the cupboards, he had been unable to find things. Truth be told, he hadn't been much good at finding things before, either; but now, everything seemed to move on a daily basis.

She didn't answer him. When he turned to look at her, she was studying the envelope, and softly biting her lip. Matthew felt a pang, partly of sympathy and partly of something sharper: whatever Charlotte was feeling, all too often she forgot that he might be feeling it, too.

'Charlotte?' She looked up at him, unease scored into the lines of her face. 'The Marmite?'

She smiled weakly and pretended to throw the envelope at him.

'Morning.'

Em appeared in the doorway wearing green pyjamas and a bleary frown. She assessed the scene, then stomped over to Matthew. She eyed the loaded popped-up toast, then yanked open the cupboard next to the one he had been looking in, and plonked the Marmite on the counter in front of him.

'*Feuhl*,' she muttered, in a passable imitation of Inspector Clouseau in *The Pink Panther*. She poured herself a bowl of cereal.

'I know a *feuhl* when I see one, Kato,' he shot back, narrowing his eyes to cunning slits and then crossing them, 'and I am looking at one right now.'

She chuckled, and slumped at the table with her cereal, blowing Charlotte a kiss that was carefully designed to seem insincere. When he pulled the toast from the machine, it was burnt. He slipped it in the bin and put on some more, on a lower setting. Em was amused. Charlotte wasn't.

Em sprawled over the bowl, with her mouth full of cereal. 'So you'll pick me up at one, yeah?'

It wasn't clear who she was speaking to, but Charlotte bridled instantly.

'*What*?'

'One's early. Doesn't finish till five.'

Charlotte blinked heavily, controlling her obvious irritation. 'First, Em - pick you up from *what*? And second - one o'clock? On a Monday? Absolutely not.'

'That's *so* not fair!'

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Matthew's job in these – frequent – situations was to forestall the argument.

'Em - what are we actually talking about here?'

She rolled her eyes at him. 'Hello? Just, like, the disco I told you about?'

Why did Em's generation, like, make every statement sound like a question?

This was not the moment to ask.

Belatedly, he remembered a discussion a week ago:

- *Dad, can I go to this club on Friday next week?*

- *Depends which club.*

- *It's open night. Patch is going.*

- *Which club, Em?*

- *It's an open night. Patch's sister's boyfriend's trying out as MC.*

- *What's an MC?*

- *Dexter. He's wicked.*

There had been more to the conversation, but it conveyed no information helpful to anyone over the age of fourteen. What it had boiled down to was that Em wanted to go to a disco - on a Friday, she had said - and she had agreed to give fuller details later, either to Charlotte or to him. Clearly, she hadn't.

'Is this that thing you were telling me about?'

'Yeah. At the Palace. Dexter's MC.'

'Dexter?' Matthew raised an enquiring eyebrow.

Em sneered contemptuously. 'Dexter? Like, Patch's sister's boyfriend? *Der!*'

Em fancied Dexter. Dexter was buff, apparently. And fit.

'You said that was on a Friday,' he pointed out.

'Yeah. Like, they're *really* going to let *Dexter* do a *Friday*?'

'And I never said you could go. You were going to tell me more about it first, or Charlotte.'

That was enough for Em. 'That's *typical!*' she howled. 'So, like, there's no point even going now, is there?'

'No one's said you *can* go yet,' Charlotte reminded her.

'I didn't ask *you*.'

Charlotte's face flushed. 'Now, you listen, young lady -'

'Right, that's it,' Matthew said sharply. 'Em, you do *not* speak to Charlotte like that. The answer's no.'

Em threw her spoon into her bowl and pouted at the tablecloth. 'Why are you *doing* this to me?'

'One more word you and you'll be grounded for the week.'

'I *hate* you!'

He held up a finger. 'One more word.'

Em glowered at the table. Charlotte stood, wordlessly, and stalked out of the room. Inwardly, he sighed. Why did it always come down to a choice between them? Couldn't they see how ridiculous –

He heard Charlotte's keys jingle and the front door opening. Shit.

Hastily, he muttered, 'Finish your cereal, Em.'

He caught the front door just before it closed. 'Charlotte?'

She stopped on the short path to the street, with her back to him.

'Are you OK?'

She didn't move.

'Charlotte?'

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She turned. 'What do *you* think?' she hissed. Her face was mottled with anger, and there were tears in her eyes.

Matthew looked momentarily confused. 'But -'

'Oh, *spare* me.' She turned away from him again and opened the gate. He hurried after her, and caught her arm.

'Darling, listen -'

She twisted her arm away from him. 'A little support would have been nice. But you have to just pile in there and take control - don't you?'

'What, you mean with Em? But I -'

'I'm not some little *kid*, Matthew. I can fight my own battles, thank you.'

'Charlotte, that's unfair. I was just -'

'Oh, *is* it? Well, I'm so sorry, Mr High-and-bloody-mighty. No one told me you were the only person round here who was allowed to decide things.'

'Come on, darling, be reasonable.'

For a moment, she looked like she was going to explode. Then, suddenly, she was dangerously calm. Coldly, she said, 'Goodbye, Matthew,' and walked away from him.

He called after her. 'Darling? Where are you -'

'Oh, for - I'm going to *work*!' she yelled, without looking back. She upped her pace, and, within a minute, she was gone.

Matthew rubbed his forehead wearily, and headed back indoors. Arguments were not his favourite way to start the day, particularly when he had no idea what they were about. He closed the front door thoughtfully. One way or another, things had been tense for more than a year now. And even if it was understandable - sometimes - it was wearing. It had been a while since she had stormed out, though: she knew he found it difficult.

He trudged back into the kitchen. Em was eating his and Charlotte's toast.

'Sorry,' she muttered.

He shrugged. 'Me too.' He waved a hand vaguely after Charlotte. 'She's...'

Em rolled her eyes at him, and tossed Charlotte's letter over the table towards him.

From the hospital. Her appointment for the scan.

'Dad, you are a *feuhl*,' Em said gently.

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Chapter Three

Charlotte sat in a Tube train on her way to work and let guilt and nausea wash over her. Her anger had not lasted long. She knew that Matthew was right, she had been unfair. But the fact that he was right was part of the problem. Why did he have to be so reasonable all the time, so considerate – no, worse: patronising? His concern for her left her with no space of her own, and no way out except to force him away.

Worse still was what lay behind it. He thought she couldn't see it: perhaps he couldn't even see it himself; but it was there. She could see in his eyes that he was still uncertain. He had changed himself, to make her happy. And now he was no longer sure who he was supposed to be. He was scared.

So, unfortunately, was she.

Dear Ms Daniels, the letter had read. Stupid bureaucrats. She was *Mrs Daniels*. She had once been Ms Logan. She had changed, too.

An ultrasound scan has been arranged for you at St Mary's Hospital at 9.15 a.m. on Friday 23rd May. Following the scan, we may have to admit you for surgery. Please bring an overnight bag with you in case surgery is required. Please do not eat or drink for 12 hours before your scan...

Friday. Five days from now. Four, really.

The letter went on: it told her where she should report to, what documents she should bring, that it might be necessary to take blood samples. If surgery was necessary, she should arrange for someone to collect her the next day. The letter didn't bother to point that, if things went badly, she should also arrange for someone to be there to pick up the pieces.

The Tube was saturated with stench of people. She kept her eyes closed, and breathed through her mouth, as lightly as possible. It didn't help much. A woman five seats along from her had doused herself in Opium perfume. Oily fumes coated the back of Charlotte's throat. There was sweat, aftershave, the thick dark grease that had soaked into the seats over decades, the scent of newsprint rising like acid from the cheap paper.

She sank into herself. And remembered the day, more than a year ago now, when everything changed.

*

She has been rushed from the GP's surgery to the local hospital in a taxi. They have taken blood, and scanned her uterus and ovaries with compassionate efficiency. And still, she has no idea what is going on. Now, she waits on a long line of chairs in a corridor, for someone to tell her what is happening to her that has made her period go on and on, and made the cramps so bad that occasionally she moans aloud.

Matthew has forced her to go to the doctor. There, she has waited an hour for a gap in his appointments. He has pricked her thumb and dipped a stick into the drop of blood, frowned, and then rung reception to asked for a taxi to take her to hospital.

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He has told her nothing. Now, here at the hospital, the nurses and doctors have told her nothing either. She has asked - and they have told her that she is here so they can find out what the problem is, and that when they know they will tell her. Now she waits, uncertain and afraid.

The corridor is silent. There are flurries of activity: small flocks of doctors suddenly sweep into view, white coat-tails flapping, heels squeaking on the rubber floor, and vanish through doors with scratched metal kick-plates. Through other doors, she catches glimpses of machinery, strange white shapes in the centre of empty spaces.

She waits. And she is afraid.

A heavy period shouldn't mean you have to go to hospital. You don't need a scan for it. There must be some problem with the coil that she and Matthew use for protection. She hates the coil, the idea of a metal spike inside her - but she hates the Pill more, and they long since gave up on condoms and caps. The last thing they want is a baby. Charlotte is thirty-seven. Her biological alarm clock stopped ringing long ago. She is used to a life free of attachments and consequences. It has been a hard decision to agree to live with Matthew - and she still finds it hard every day - but at least it's just the two of them, and the almost-adult Emily, whom Charlotte adores, who is so sweet to her, and who loves her father so much more than he can see. And he doesn't want a child either, or to marry. They are both independent souls. They control their own lives. It suits them both to be the way they are - attached but independent, unmarried but together, there for each other, but without demands or expectations. And besides, Matthew has Em - sort of.

But now the coil has gone wrong - hasn't it? It has gone adrift and pierced something. It has got infected and her womb is failing to cleanse itself. Or something. She must wait to find out, in this corridor, alone.

She wishes she could ring Matthew and tell him what is happening - which is nothing - but there are signs everywhere demanding that she turn her mobile off, and she doesn't know where the pay-phone is, and she doesn't dare leave, in case they come for her while she is gone.

She waits, and wonders if they have forgotten that she is there. Perhaps the scan results have gone adrift, and are floating free through the hospital, transferred from one orange cardboard file to another, with no one knowing why, or who, or what, or anything.

'Ms Logan?'

A dumpy woman with curly hair and thick-rimmed glasses is peering hopefully down the corridor, as though it is full of potential Charlotte Logans, rather than entirely empty except for her. She stands, and the woman smiles tightly and darts off towards a blank door, glancing expectantly over her shoulder to make sure she is following. She opens the door and motions Charlotte inside.

It is a small room, with just enough room for a desk and a single chair crammed next to it, where Charlotte sits. The woman follows her in, sits in the other chair, smiles distractedly, and then bends over her notes. Then she sets them down and turns to face Charlotte. There are bags under the woman's eyes. She looks exhausted. She can't be more than twenty-five. Charlotte wonders how she finds the time or energy to look after herself. When does she do her washing, her shopping? The woman smiles again, this time more sincerely, and Charlotte detects something

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uncertain in her eyes - and the thin pulse of fear and anticipation that has been throbbing inside her for the last hour becomes a sudden rush.

Whatever this is, it's bad.

The doctor opens her mouth, then pauses for thought. Then, in an abrupt, clipped voice, she says, 'Ms Logan, I'm afraid you have lost your baby.'

Charlotte opens her mouth to speak. What baby, she wants to ask - and, what do you mean, *lost*? But she cannot find words, and a strange panic swells inside her.

It is only later, coming back from the hospital on the bus, nursing a secret in her belly, and another in her heart - feeling as though she might break at any moment, and wondering why the preoccupied faces of the men and women crammed around show no trace of care or sympathy - it is only then that she comes slowly to realise that the child she has just lost is a child she has always, desperately, wanted. That the doctor has taken away a hope she never knew she had within her.

*

The Tube stopped, and she half-woke, scanning instinctively for signs to tell her which station it was. There were two stops to go. Fine. The train set off again.

A foot from her nose, there was a wall of overcoats, swaying with every jolt of the train, wafting air towards her. They obscured the adverts mounted above the seats opposite, which might have helped kill at least a few minutes. She closed her eyes again, fighting rising nausea. Why did businessmen wear over coats in June anyway?

But it wasn't just morning sickness and the constant fatigue. What really ate at her was fear. What would happen this time? She would lose this baby too - wouldn't she? Or the doctors would decide she needed the operation - and then that would go wrong. Or Matthew would change his mind: heavens knew, he'd been reluctant enough to try in the first place.

And what would she become afterwards? When Matthew had left, taking Em with him; when these few nauseating weeks of pregnancy had been reduced to a fond, sad memory? She would be Charlotte Logan again. On her own. Fiercely independent, and utterly lost. Pregnancy, it seemed, did not agree with her; and she was a moody cow anyway, even at the best of times.

It wasn't Matthew's fault. He was only trying to tell her that he cared. She would ring him and apologise. Later, though: give him time to realise what he had done wrong. No one flourished by being smothered.

She would ring him after lunch. Let him worry for the morning. Let him learn. It was obvious to her - and, she suspected, even to Em: Matthew needed to learn how to live dangerously again. Not that any of that really mattered. Because, she reflected, the truth was that she loved him. Why else would she be carrying - for now, at least - his child?

The train slowed towards her stop. She stood by the doors, and watched the tunnel walls flicker by.

*

Since leaving the Ville, Charlotte had worked as a temp, unwilling to put in the hours of travelling that would have been involved if she had accepted a transfer, and not at all sure what other choices were open to her. But having a tedious job with no future was the least of it. So much had changed. Everything, really.

Work, for the last two weeks, had been at a legal firm specialising in messy divorces. She was typist and receptionist, to an obnoxious man called Thomas Chandler. After less than a day there, typing out endless letters of litigation, she'd had

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her fill of accusations and marital posturing. The clients the firm dealt with seemed to her to have had little enough wealth in the first place: by the time it had been divided, and the lion's share taken by Chandler, there was often nothing left for the separating couples except the bitter satisfaction that their once-beloved was as badly off as they were. Couldn't they see what love *was*? Because it certainly wasn't to be found through lawyers whose only interest was in conflict. She didn't want to type letters on their behalves, she wanted to march into their houses and shake them until they understood what they were doing; that their tireless desire to destroy could only, in the end, hurt themselves.

She knew this in the only way you could ever really know anything: she had been there. When she thought about what she had done a year ago, when Matthew had first proposed, she shuddered. The only reason they were still together was that he still didn't know. But it was only a matter of time – and what then?

One moment's madness – walking out, furious, unsure what she really wanted – a moment she regretted deeply; and it still threatened to change everything in her life. It always would. Charlotte Daniels lived every day waiting for the axe to fall.

After her first week at Thomas Chandler and Associates (although there were no associates that she could see), she had told the temp agency that she'd had enough, and they had promised her something new. By the end of this week, with luck, she would be moving on.

And, with luck, she would still be pregnant. And still with Matthew.

She pulled her mobile out of her handbag, and flicked through the contacts list. Once, the number had been labelled *Matthew D.* Now was labelled *Home.* She studied the number – *her* number – then she snapped the phone shut again. Later. After lunch. For now, let him stew. She might not be perfect – but neither was he. He wasn't at home anyway, he was at work, and he'd have checked in his mobile at reception.

Nevertheless, he was a good man – in many ways a brave man, for taking on someone as screwed-up as she obviously was. And she loved him, and she knew that he loved her, and he had found falling in love every bit as hard as she had. She had always been conscious of the ghost of Rachel, his first wife, hovering somewhere in the dark corners of their growing relationship.

She placed her phone back in her handbag, among the detritus of her life: lipstick, tampons (so pointless just now, but carried out of habit), eyeliner, purse, a key ring with a light on it, a pen and a pad of paper... And buried near the bottom, the bottle of aspirin and the pen-injector for her heparin: blood-thinners, prescribed by the miscarriage clinic, who had told her that there was no guarantee that the drugs would help her, none at all. Wait for the scan, they said. The scan's the thing. If it's positive, then probably the drugs will see you through. If it's negative, we operate. And the operation may work, or it may not. She didn't want to think about it.

It was lunchtime. Better to think about food – if she could keep it down. She ignored the lights flashing on the switchboard, closed her handbag, and headed out to buy a sandwich.

The traffic fumes were a welcome change from the stench of industrial carpets. She turned onto a small road that cut behind the block where the office was, heading for a sandwich shop she had discovered towards the end of her first week there. Half way along it, there was a shut-down pub with boards on the windows; at the far end, there was a tiny corner shop, with rows of mouldy-looking vegetables on

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a rack outside. The rest of the street was houses, blank-looking, half of them cracked and in disrepair, a few of them boarded over. There was no one on the street, except for a man a little way behind her. He was hunched in an overcoat despite the warmth of the day. She didn't pay much attention to him. She was adrift in her own thoughts.

Had she looked, she might have seen his face; but it would have told her nothing. He was just a man, trudging the same street, perhaps walking slightly faster than her. He would catch up with her soon. Had she been paying attention, she might have noticed that he would reach her at about the point where a white van with blacked-out windows had pulled up at the kerb in a gap between the ranks of parked cars. As she approached, a man hopped out and slid back a side-door. He buried his head inside the van, and stayed there. Had she been paying attention, she might have thought that he was waiting for something.

She noticed nothing. She didn't notice that the road was empty, apart from the man behind her – he was close, now – or that the man in front, leaning half-inside a van was doing nothing. This was just one of the countless lulls in the busy life of any London street. She failed to notice when another man clambered from the van and loitered behind it, scratching his crotch and gazing at nothing. She wasn't surprised when the man walking behind her finally closed the gap, just as she drew level with the van.

The man who had been leaning into the van's interior straightened, and stared at her. The man leaning against the rear doors pushed himself upright and took a step closer to her.

Then the man behind her tapped her on the shoulder.

She was so far away, adrift in her thoughts, that she jumped when he touched her. Then she remembered where she was. This was Notting Hill. This was just a man. He was lost, or she'd dropped her purse. Or something.

She turned to face him, not noticing the other two men, now behind her, closing in. The man she was now facing showed her a row of gapped and yellowing teeth.

Instinctively, she smiled.