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Margaret Johnson
Excerpt
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Chapter 1 *The start of it all*

I used to think that murderers were born murderers, but now I know differently. Now I know they can be made.

In my case, it was shock that did it. Four brutal words that changed my life forever. And who spoke those words?

You.

Congratulations, you created a murderer.

But even though I've killed three people, I'm not to blame. You are. Because you betrayed me. And the sad thing is, there's still a part of me that can't believe you did it. Still a part of me that loves you . . .

But don't worry, I'll deal with that. I won't allow a little emotion like love to stop me from killing you. But until then, I'm hoping it will make me feel just a little bit better to write this whole story of sorrow and revenge down. I've got to do something to stop myself from going crazy.

The day you dropped those first seeds of murder into my heart was a hot summer Sunday afternoon in mid-August. August 21, to be precise. Charlotte and Rebecca had escaped from the heat and were indoors in front of the TV, quarrelling about what programme to watch. (No, I didn't hear them quarrelling, but when don't your daughters quarrel?) Anyway, they weren't around. Even the puppy was asleep, lying unconscious on the concrete after a morning of chasing flies. And as for our neighbours, they were all relaxing with the newspapers after their Sunday

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lunches, content in the knowledge that their gardens were tidy and their cars were shiny and clean.

And you and I? We were lying on a blanket together in the garden. Side by side, in each other's arms beneath my favourite trees. The tall grey poplar trees that marked the boundary of the garden. I loved them for their changing colours, but most of all for their music. They sang and they whispered to us that afternoon, just as they had sung and whispered to us on many other afternoons since I had moved to live in your house.

It's still all so clear in my mind, like a scene from a film. I remember you had your eyes closed and a mixture of shadows and sunshine was painting your face. Your handsome face. Dark, light; dark, light. Shadows, sunshine; shadows, sunshine. Dappled shade, you called it. Dappled shade was your favourite place to be. If we ever had a picnic, you'd say, 'Let's sit in the dappled shade.' And if we went camping, that's where we put the tent, in the dappled shade.

I prefer full sunshine, I must admit, but I never told you that, because what good was sunshine on my own? You and the dappled shade were a million times better to me than full sunshine on my own. You . . . My man. My property. Mine.

I was completely confident of my status as your lifelong partner, lying there beneath the grey poplars. I had no doubt at all that we would be together forever. That we would be walking hand in hand by the sea together after our hair had turned white and your daughters were busy with their own lives. You and me together forever, right up until one of us died. Pathetic, really, especially as you killed me with your words right there in the garden on

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August 21. And the worst of it was, there was no warning at all. Nothing to prepare me for those four little words of destruction.

One moment I was lying sleepily next to you under the trees watching the stripes of sunshine painting your face, and the next moment I heard you give a strange, nervous cough.

‘Carla,’ you said, and something about your voice made me feel instantly afraid.

I remember turning my body towards you and holding my hand to keep the sun out of my eyes. ‘What’s wrong, darling?’ I must have said, or something very similar. Poor, innocent creature. I thought you were ill or something. I was worried about you. ‘Tell me, what’s wrong, Mark, please!’

Well, you told me. You certainly did.

You looked at me with your beautiful dark eyes and you said, ‘I’m sorry, Carla. I’m so sorry. There’s no easy way to say this, so I’ll just come right out and say it. I . . . I’ve met somebody else.’

I’ve been busy in the last twelve months. I’ve changed my hairstyle. Moved to a new city and started a new job. Had a string of affairs. Some of the sex was even quite good.

I think I was a bit crazy for six months or so. I certainly didn’t care very much what happened to me or what I did. So I did pretty much whatever I wanted. Anything I thought might limit the pain. And sometimes it even worked for a short time.

Then one rainy morning I woke up next to some man I’d met in a nightclub the previous evening and I couldn’t even remember his name. There was an empty bottle of vodka on the bedside table and my headache was so bad I

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knew I was responsible for drinking at least half of it. I went to the bathroom, and when I looked at my reflection in the mirror I didn't like what I saw. My face was as white as a ghost's, and there were black circles beneath my eyes. I looked wild and out of control.

And, worst of all, I knew that all the time I was suffering, you were with another woman. I doubted whether you even thought about me any more at all. Suddenly, as I stood there looking at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, the injustice of everything hit me right in the stomach like a hard punch. I had loved you with all my heart, and in return you had stamped me into the dust.

After I'd thrown the stranger out of my bed and out of my flat, I stood under the shower with the water mixing with my tears until the water ran cold. Then, as I dried my shivering body, I decided that enough was enough. I couldn't go on like this. I had to do something to make me feel better, and drinking vodka and spending time with anonymous men clearly wasn't working.

A few weeks earlier I'd seen an advert in the newspaper for a special course for people who have experienced a broken relationship. It was a Restart Course. I dialled the number in the advert, and two weeks later I was sitting in a classroom for the first session. And that's where I met Diane, Gemma and Cathy. Let me tell you, they're worth at least a hundred of you and for the moment they're my family. Or the only family that counts. Let me introduce them.

First up there's Diane, fifty-two, brutally rejected by her husband of twenty-five years in an email from Cuba. Then there's Cathy, thirty-two, abandoned by her husband after

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several years of depression. Next there's Gemma, forty-five, who made her escape from a twenty-year marriage to a man who cruelly abused her. And then there's me. Carla, thirty-five, replaced by a blonde business studies teacher you met on holiday while I was at home loyally looking after your daughters.

After the weekly Restart class, the girls and I always go to the pub next to the college to have a few drinks and to laugh away some of the tension. And later on we inevitably start to remember happier times.

'My Alec and I used to have such fun when we were first together. Got into trouble all the time.' That's Diane. Long blonde hair, loud laugh. Turning heads left, right and centre even though she's old enough to be Cathy's mother. 'One night on our honeymoon, we decided to make love outdoors. Exciting and romantic, you know. Anyway, we'd just taken our clothes off when a group of elderly walkers came round the corner! I don't know who was more embarrassed, them or us!'

Diane tried to kill herself earlier this year with a combination of alcohol and headache pills. Fortunately she was discovered before it was too late, but she was seriously ill for some time. And Alec, the father of their three daughters, didn't even bother to get up from beneath his Cuban beauty to find out how she was.

Diane, Gemma and Cathy. I've hardly known them any time at all, but somehow I feel I've known them forever. If a life can be so completely changed in the space it takes someone to say four short words, then the whole idea of time means nothing anyway.

'He sent me another charming email from Havana