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Bad Things Happen

Written by Harry Dolan

Published by Ebury Press,
an imprint of The Random House Group Ltd

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HARRY DOLAN

BAD THINGS HAPPEN



EBURY
PRESS

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2010 by Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company
First published in 2009 in the US by Amy Einhorn Books, an imprint of
G.P. Putnam's Sons, Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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Typeset in Adobe Caslon by Palimpsest Book Production Limited, Grangemouth, Stirlingshire
Printed in the UK by
CPI Cox & Wyman, Reading, RG1 8EX

ISBN 9780091933104

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Chapter 1

The shovel has to meet certain requirements. A pointed blade. A short handle, to make it maneuverable in a confined space. He finds what he needs in the gardening section of a vast department store.

He stows the shovel in his cart and moves unhurriedly through the wide aisles, gathering a few more items: D-cell batteries, a bag of potting soil, a can of weed-killer. Leather work gloves, two pairs. In the grocery section he picks up four deli sandwiches wrapped in plastic and a case of bottled water.

The checkout lanes are crowded. He chooses a line and the fluorescent lights flicker overhead as he considers how he's going to pay. His wallet holds a credit card in the name of David Loogan. It's not the name he was born with, but it's what he calls himself now. He's not going to use the credit card.

He does some calculations in his head and decides he has enough cash.

The line moves and he thinks he'll get out quick and clean, but he's wrong. The cashier wants to talk.

"I think I've seen you before," she says to him.

"I doubt it."

She's tall, broad in the hips, attractive, though the stark light accentuates the lines under her eyes and around her mouth.

"You look familiar," she says.

The man who calls himself David Loogan doesn't want to be familiar. He wants to be nondescript. Unmemorable.

"Maybe I've seen you here in the store," the cashier suggests.

He offers her a lukewarm smile. "That must be it."

He busies himself loading things onto the counter. The cashier takes the shovel and holds it with the blade pointing skyward so she can scan the bar code on the handle.

"You must be a gardener," she says.

He ought to agree and leave it at that, but he gets flustered. He starts to say, "I'm an editor," but stops himself. The truth won't do. He goes with the first lie that comes into his mind.

"I'm a juggler," he says.

It's a mistake. She decides to find him charming. She smiles and sets the shovel on the end of the counter and reaches for the potting soil in a leisurely way.

"You must be very good," she says lightly. "I've never heard of anyone juggling shovels. But one's not enough, is it? You ought to have three."

Go with charming then. "I've already got three," he says. "Anyone can juggle three. The real trick is juggling four."

"It must be dazzling," she says. "Where do you work? Kids' birthdays?"

He waits a beat and answers in his most serious tone. "Garden parties."

"Ha. Are you sure we haven't met before?"

She's flirting, Loogan decides. He looks at her fingers as she scans the sandwiches. She's wearing a wedding ring.

"I could swear I know you," she says. "Maybe we went to school together."

"I never went," he says. "Everything I know about juggling is self-taught."

"I'm serious. I think we went to high school together."

"I didn't go to high school around here."

"Well, hell, neither did I," she says. "And it's been quite a while. But you remind me of a boy in my class. I'll think of your name in a second."

She bags the gloves and the batteries together, the weed-killer separately.

"Dennis," she says suddenly, looking up at him. "Or Daniel?"

David Loogan picks up the shovel from the counter and is troubled by a momentary vision. He sees himself stabbing the blade into the base of the cashier's neck.

"Ted," he tells her. "My name is Ted Carmady."

She smiles and shakes her head. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

She lets it go with a shrug. "Well, then I was way off, wasn't I?"

He puts the shovel in his cart, and she reads off his total and takes his money. He thinks she has turned shy on him, but she scribbles something on his receipt before she hands it over. He scans it on the way out, sees her name (*Allison*) and a phone number, and crumples the paper discreetly.

Out in the parking lot, Loogan adjusts the collar of his black leather coat and checks his watch. Nine-thirty on a Wednesday night in October. A mist of rain is falling

and the cars in the lot glow in the yellow light of tall arc lamps.

The lamps reassure him. He is not exactly afraid of the dark, but he often feels uneasy going out after sunset. And parking lots unnerve him. The echo of footsteps in a parking lot at night can set his pulse racing.

Loogan moves steadily along a row of cars, pushing the shopping cart before him. He has an uncomfortable moment when he sees a figure coming toward him. A thin man with a weathered face, hollowed eyes. A hooded sweatshirt, pants torn at the knee. Right hand resting in a pocket of the sweatshirt.

Loogan is suddenly aware of the humming of the arc lamps, the turning wheels of the cart.

You're fine, he tells himself. Nothing's going to happen.

As the thin man gets close, his hand comes out of the pocket of his sweatshirt. Loogan sees a glint of silver. Metal, he thinks. Blade. Knife.

Reflexively he reaches out to grab the thin man's wrist, but he stops himself in time. The thin man flinches away from him and hurries past, clutching a silver-gray cell phone to the front of his sweatshirt. He mumbles something Loogan doesn't catch.

Then he's gone and it's over and Loogan comes to his car. He loads the shovel in the trunk, and the potting soil, and all the rest. He shuts the trunk and pushes the cart into an empty parking space.

The hum of the arc lamps has receded into silence. Everything is normal. David Loogan is an ordinary shopper. No one would think otherwise. He opens his car door and

slides in behind the wheel. He looks nothing at all like a man heading off to dig a grave.

The man who called himself David Loogan had been living in Ann Arbor since March. He rented a small furnished house on the west side: a sharp-roofed wood-frame place with a porch in the front and a little yard in back wound about with chain-link fence.

He spent his days in the vicinity of Liberty and State streets, reading newspapers in cafés, watching movies at the Michigan Theater. He observed the comings and goings of university students, listened in on their conversations. He was not out of place in a university crowd: he might have passed for an older graduate student, or a young professor. He was thirty-eight.

The house he rented stood on the corner of a tree-lined street and belonged to a professor of history who was on sabbatical, doing research at a think tank somewhere overseas. He had left a neglected garden in the backyard, and for a few days in April Loogan tried his hand at planting flowers. He bought seeds and poked them into the dirt. He watered, he waited. The flowers showed no sign of growing.

On an afternoon in May, he found a short-story magazine that someone had abandoned in a coffee shop. The title was *Gray Streets*. He ordered a cappuccino and found an overstuffed chair and read a story about an innocent man framed for murder by a beautiful and enigmatic woman.

The next day he set up camp in the professor's home office, clearing books and papers from the desk. He turned on the computer and started to compose a story about a

killer with a fear of parking lots. It took him three days to finish a draft, which he printed and read through once before tearing it in half and burying it in the wastebasket.

The second version took him four days, and he considered it barely passable. He let the pages sit on the desk for a week, until one evening he put them away in a drawer and began to click away at a third version. He kept at it for several more nights until he had worked out a plot that satisfied him. The killer turned out to be the hero of the piece, and there was a twisted villain, and a woman the killer saved from the villain. The climax took place on the top level of a parking garage. Loogan went back and forth on whether the woman would stay with the killer after he saved her, but he decided it would be better if she left.

When he had the ending the way he wanted it, he printed a clean copy with a title on the first page and no byline or contact information, and then consulted his copy of *Gray Streets* for the magazine's editorial address. The address was a dozen blocks away, on the sixth floor of a building downtown. He walked there on a Saturday and the lobby doors were locked, but in the back he found a service entrance – a steel door propped open with a brick. A dingy stairway brought him to the sixth floor. He passed the offices of an accountant and a documentary production company, and there it was. Neat black letters on the pebbled glass of the door: GRAY STREETS.

He had the manuscript in an unmarked envelope. It was too thick to slide under the door but there was an open transom above, and he slipped the envelope over and heard it drop to the floor on the other side.

In the days that followed he returned to his routine, going to movies and lingering in coffee shops. Then, on a night when he couldn't sleep, he went down to the professor's office and sat before the computer screen, reading the story again line by line, tinkering with it as he went along. Trimming words and phrases and finding that the sentences were stronger without them. The next day he printed a new copy and after business hours he walked downtown and climbed the narrow stairs and slipped another envelope over the transom.

He was sure that would be the end of it. He made himself busy, branching out in his wanderings: to museums, to art galleries, to public parks. But it wasn't the end. His memory was sharp; he could recall sentences and paragraphs; he could rewrite them as he walked along a path or stood before a painting. On another sleepless night he descended to the professor's office, intending to delete the file from the computer; he stayed there for an hour, for three, mulling every word choice, fussing over every bit of punctuation.

He thought he would leave it there, a file on a hard drive. What would it matter if he printed it again? At twilight two days later he found himself in the hallway once more, holding the manuscript in an envelope under his arm. He stood before the door with the transom and tried to see beyond the pebbled glass. There might be nothing on the other side, he thought. Maybe just an empty room with two envelopes on the floor, gathering dust. And now a third to join them.

The door opened.

The man who opened it wore a dark blue suit with a

powder blue shirt and a silk tie. He paused in the motion of putting on his hat – a black fedora with a band that matched the suit. He saw Loogan and his eyes went to the envelope and the hat came down, the door swung open wide.

"It's you," he said. "Come in."

He retreated into the dimness of the room and after a few seconds a light came on in an inner office. From the lighted doorway he beckoned to Loogan with his hat.

Loogan took a few tentative steps. "I can't stay," he said.

"Why not?"

There was no answer for that. The answer that occurred to him – *Because it's going to be dark soon* – would sound ridiculous.

"You're not going to make me drag you in," said the man in the blue suit.

His voice had an oddly formal quality, the voice of an actor running lines. He directed Loogan to a chair and went around behind the desk. Among the papers on the desktop, Loogan saw his own two envelopes, each one sliced open along the edge.

"I've been waiting for you to come by," said the man in the blue suit. "That was clever, leaving your name off. It sparked my interest."

He tossed his hat onto a filing cabinet. Loogan said nothing.

"Is this the same one again, or a new one?"

Looking down at the envelope in his lap, Loogan said, "It's the same one. I've made some improvements."

"You ought to be careful. If it gets much better, I won't be able to publish it." The man took a seat at the desk.

"The reason I've been waiting for you – I wanted to make you an offer. I want you to work for me."

This was unexpected. Loogan frowned.

"I'm not really a writer."

"I don't need another writer. I've got writers scrabbling between the walls here, gnawing on the wiring. What I need is an editor."

Loogan shifted in his chair. "I don't think I'm qualified. I don't have the training."

"Nobody does," the man said. "It's not like people go to school for it. No one sets out to be an editor. It's something that happens to you, like jaundice or falling down a well." He pointed at Loogan's envelopes. "I like what you've done here," he said. "There's a clear improvement from one draft to the next. The question is, could you do the same thing with someone else's story?"

Loogan looked to the window, where the twilight was deepening. This isn't a problem, he thought. You can always refuse.

"I suppose I could," he heard himself saying, "but I'm not looking for a job. I don't know how I feel about coming into an office every morning."

The man in the blue suit leaned back. "You won't have to come in. You can work from home. You won't have to follow a schedule. You'll only have to do one thing."

"What's that?"

"You'll have to tell me what your name is."

A moment's hesitation. Then: "David Loogan."

"Tom Kristoll."