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Forward Slash

Written by
Louise Voss and Mark Edwards

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HE'S POSTED ON YOUR WALL

HE'S FOLLOWING YOU ON TWITTER

FORWARD SLASH

HE KNOWS WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW

Louise Voss & Mark Edwards

FROM THE BESTSELLING AUTHORS OF CATCH YOUR DEATH

FORWARD SLASH

Louise Voss and Mark Edwards are the co-authors of *Killing Cupid*, *Catch Your Death* and *All Fall Down*. They have been writing together for fourteen years.

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They can also be found on Twitter, @mredwards and @louisevoss1, and blog regularly on www.vossandedwards.com.

Also by Louise Voss and Mark Edwards:

Catch Your Death
Killing Cupid
All Fall Down

LOUISE VOSS AND
MARK EDWARDS

Forward Slash

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Prologue

Him

She looked nothing like her profile picture. I mean, it was definitely the same woman but in the flesh she was seven or eight years older, her hair duller, skin pale and wrinkly, with saggy bags under her eyes, bags in which she appeared to be carrying half the world's woes. When I saw her and realized this was Karen, my date, I almost fled. She so clearly wasn't The One that there was no point even talking to her. But she had already seen me. Because, although I may be dishonest about everything else, including my name, on my dating profiles, I look as good in the flesh as I do on the screen.

'I thought you were blonde,' I said, after enduring a preliminary round of chitchat.

She pinkened. 'Yes, I know, that photo is a couple of years old.'

And the rest.

'I prefer to go natural now.'

She had ordered pasta with cheese sauce. As she talked, I could see strings of yellow saliva threaded in her mouth, making my own food inedible. She kept asking me stupid

questions about my made-up job. She thought I was a professor of sociology, a subject in which she had a GCSE. She looked at me through her lashes as she went on, putting on that ridiculous sub-Diana coyness that many women believe drives men crazy but just makes me mad.

'You're a nurse,' I said.

She nodded and shovelled more pasta into her cakehole. No wonder she was overweight. She had put on at least a stone since the sunny holiday photo she'd posted on the dating website. This was the big problem with Internet dating. You couldn't trust anyone.

'Any interesting accidents at the hospital recently?' I asked.

'Accidents?'

'Yes. Like, I don't know, I was reading about a woman who fell out of a window and was impaled on railings.'

Her eyes widened. 'Nothing like that, no. Just people bitten by dogs and chopping their fingers off when they're cooking.'

I yawned.

'Am I boring you?' she said, putting down her fork.

'Yes.'

'Oh.'

I leaned closer so the diners around us wouldn't hear and beckoned for her to come closer, giving me a better view of her jowls.

'Not only are you boring me, but you disgust me. You eat like a pig and you're not so much "mutton dressed as lamb" as "tripe dressed as mutton".'

Her expression made the date worthwhile. For a second I thought she was going to slap me, which would have made the evening lead to more interesting places, but instead she burst into tears.

'You're the pig,' she said, voice wobbling. She'll probably make a complaint about me to the site, but who cares? It's a rubbish site and I'm removing my profile later anyway, if this is typical of the calibre of women on it. Plenty more to choose from.

I pushed the tip of my nose to form a snout.

Karen stood up and, after groping around in her brain for a few seconds to find an adequate word, spat, 'Bastard!' at me. Pathetic.

I watched her go. She will never know what a lucky escape she had.

After Karen had stormed off into the night, I felt coiled and dissatisfied. My blood itched in my veins. Not wanting to go home, I headed to the bar next door to the restaurant. It was a cool place, all blue lights and shadowy corners, but crowded. That suited me. Nobody would notice me standing alone, watching.

I paid for a bottle of beer and stood against a pillar, phone in hand, and tapped to open the Girls Near Me app. The app works just like Google Maps or the GPS in your car. Geo-location, they call it. After a few seconds it found my location on the South Bank.

Then came the clever part, the feature that makes Girls Near Me such a handy tool. It showed me women who were also in the area by scanning the Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare profiles of women who had 'checked in' using their phones to let those and other social networks know they were in the area. Very soon, I was looking at a list of women who had checked in within a hundred yards of where I stood. There were two, in fact, in this very bar. Tara and Charlotte.

A glance told me Tara wasn't right. Too ugly. Wrong hair

colour. Nothing like The One. But Charlotte looked very promising indeed. Long, honey-coloured hair, gorgeous eyes, pretty smile. I clicked on her name and was shown links to her Twitter profile and Facebook page.

I glanced around the bar but couldn't see her. No matter. According to her Twitter feed she was still in the bar – she had tweeted just five minutes ago about how she and her friend Lucy were drinking cocktails here. I clicked through to her Facebook page for a look through her photos. Jackpot. She hadn't protected them and there were two dozen pictures of her on holiday on the beach, in a bikini. Great little body. Skinny, boobs not too big and, most importantly, not fake. I can't bear breast implants. I messed up once and took home a girl with implants. I had to cut them out.

I went back and had a proper look through her tweets, discovering that she went to see Foo Fighters in concert the day before and loved it, but on the way home some woman trod on her foot on the Tube. Lucy also tweeted that she needed to lose weight, that she was sick of her job at Topshop, that she was going to a school reunion soon in Wimbledon. She usually drank white wine spritzers and she had an ancient Siamese cat called Milky.

She also tweeted that she was sick of guys her age and wanted her next boyfriend to be someone older, more sophisticated, more grown-up.

I love technology.

I nudged my way through the crowd, looking for Charlotte. This was where the density of the crowd became irritating. I spilled some shaven-haired moron's drink accidentally and he started grunting at me so I pressed a tenner into his fat hand to shut him up. But then, as I emerged from a thick knot of bodies, I saw her.

She was sitting on a tall chair by the bar with a girl with curly dark hair. Lucy. Lucy was a serious problem for me, and I directed spears of hatred towards her back. The two of them were huddled together, drinking Sea Breezes, their shoulders shaking with laughter. Best mates, according to Twitter. She would remember me, be able to describe me.

I clenched my fists. There were things I could do to the friend. I could take them both, but that would cause complications, make everything more liable to get messy. I could slip something into her drink, render her sick or unconscious, but the chances were that Charlotte would feel the need to help her get home, and my prey would slip away. Fuck. I might have to accept that Charlotte was a no-go, that fate was telling me she wasn't right.

Still, no harm in watching the beautiful creature as she drank and chatted and ran her hand through her hair. I nursed my drink and reminisced about a more fortunate encounter, a lone girl I'd met, with the help of my app, in a bar in Soho. After reading up on her interests – scuba diving, *Mad Men*, reality TV – I had gone up to her and started laying on the charm.

Her name was Jennifer. Jenny. Call me Jen, she had said. I bought her a few drinks then asked her back to my place. That's one of my rules: never go back to theirs. At my place, I can control everything. Plus, there I have all my props. All my tools.

Call-me-Jen had hesitated for a moment – just a moment – then accepted my invitation.

I was so excited all the way home. Rather overexcited, in fact. I wasn't careful enough. I think it's because I've been feeling frustrated recently. I've been searching for so long now. My patience is running thin, and Jen bore the

brunt of that frustration, my loss of control. It was messy. I used my best set of knives. Very expensive and very sharp.

I can picture her now, lying back on the bed, quite drunk. Irritatingly drunk. Her eyes were rolling and she had a sheen of sweat on her body. There were pink marks on her skin where her underwear was too tight. I knew the instant I saw her body I'd made a mistake, that yet again this was the wrong girl. I had to eliminate her.

There was so much blood. I must have hit an artery or something. It was everywhere. Even my hair was soaked with it. I suppose I was in something of a frenzy.

She screamed like crazy. It was incredibly annoying. When I stuck the knife in her mouth she made this horrible gagging sound and spat blood all over my face. She didn't last long after that. I slashed her throat. She was already dead when I made love to her. It took her a little while to go so cold that I couldn't bear to touch her any more. It's called the *algor mortis* phase – did you know that? The death chill.

I reminisced about all of this as I watched Charlotte; I was churning with frustration and thinking that I was going to have to go to some sleazy pick-up joint, or find some cheap prostitute, a woman no one would miss. But then a stroke of luck, or *kismet*. I had noticed, absentmindedly, that Lucy kept looking at her watch. Now she stood up and slipped on her jacket. Charlotte flapped a slender hand at her drink. Lucy left – leaving Charlotte alone.

An hour later, after employing the methods I had learned from studying the techniques of the world's most successful pick-up artists, Charlotte was sitting beside me in my car, heading back to mine. She was sozzled, to an almost irritating degree, but her eyes blazed with lust and she squirmed

against my hand as it rested on her thigh between gear changes. She was 23, younger than I usually like them, but she had the look, the attitude, the vivacity. Exactly the right bust size and the perfect colour and length of hair. Her eyes were the most beautiful thing about her. They sparkled like a tropical sea. She had the fresh, open demeanour and easy smile of a girl who had never been through bad shit, whose greatest tragedy had been the death of a decrepit grandparent, who had never suffered or felt pain.

Those are the girls who excite me the most.

As soon as we got inside, she tried to kiss me. A bit forward, but she was young and excited so I could let that go, though others have paid the price for being so sluttish. I sat her down and started asking her about herself, mentally noting her answers, all of which pleased me, enjoying the way she smiled through it. There was that thrumming in my blood. *Could* she be The One? There was one final test.

I led her through into my special room. Of course, looking back now, I realize it was too soon. She wasn't ready. She hadn't been prepared. Her mouth dropped open and she stared at me, then around her, then back at me. And she giggled.

'What the fuck?' she said.

'Do you like it?'

'Are you all right? You look . . . strange.'

'I'm great, Charlotte. Are you?'

'I think I want to go home.'

I shook my head emphatically, before ducking through the doorway and bringing out the item I wanted her to wear.

'Put this on,' I said.

She goggled at it. 'You're joking. Right? Oh, my days.'

And I realized with a cold shudder that she was not the woman I was looking for. I gritted my teeth, felt my jaw muscles expand and contract. Again. I had wasted my time again. Why can't any of these stupid sluts be the woman I want them to be? What is wrong with them all?

As I pictured myself ripping her throat out with my teeth, she continued to look around the room. She had gone very pale. Then her eye fell upon an object that made her stagger, as if she were about to faint.

'What . . . is that?' she said, her voice trembling.

'Oh, that? I must have forgotten to put it away. I was playing with it earlier.'

The look of utter horror in her eyes was delicious – I would get something from tonight after all, especially when she realized that, while she was staring at my plaything, I had taken a knife from the sideboard. When Charlotte saw it she started screaming, ran to the door, tried to yank it open before realizing it was locked. I walked over to her, holding up the knife. She scrambled in her pocket for her phone. Her hand was shaking so much she could barely get it out of her pocket. I smelled something unpleasant and looked down. Liquid ran down the inside of her leg. She had pissed herself. Finally, she produced the phone.

'There's no signal in here,' I said and stepped towards her.

She swung the phone at my head. It was one of those huge beasts, a Samsung, and because I wasn't expecting this, I failed to block the attack. The phone connected with my head, just above my eyebrow, sending me staggering. It really hurt.

'You little bitch,' I spat. I could feel blood trickling

down towards my left eye. I was so stunned that I didn't anticipate the kick, which missed my erection by an inch, sending me staggering backwards. Charlotte lunged for the knife, but as she did I recovered my wits. A flaming ball of anger whooshed through me and, as her hand reached for the knife, I sliced it, the skin of her palm gaping open and blood gushing, making a terrible mess that I was going to have to clear up later. That made me even more furious. As she clutched her bleeding hand I punched her in the face, twice, knocking her to the floor.

I fell on top of her, straddling her and holding her throat with one hand, pointing the knife between her eyes with the other.

'Please,' she begged, her voice rasping, barely able to escape from her squeezed throat. 'Please . . . my mum . . .'

I banged her head against the floor until she passed out.

I carried her through to the bedroom and stripped her, bagging her clothes for disposal later. Her body really was something special. It was such a shame. I handcuffed her to the bed and gagged her, then waited for her to wake up. I needed to get some information out of her before she died.

I was furious with myself. The whole night had been a disaster. I had acted impetuously and dangerously. Looking at it rationally, I could see it was a result of my growing frustration. I needed to be more careful, plan things better. I had let things slip.

I took out my anger on Charlotte. Made her suffer more, stay alive longer, than I would normally. So in the end, I suppose the day wasn't a total waste. It provided me with a sharp reminder that I needed to raise my game, and provided me with a couple of hours of pleasure at the end.

I also got a pair of new souvenirs to add to my collection. Those beautiful eyes.

Before going to bed, I checked my emails and had a pleasant surprise. A little fish I had my eye on had nibbled at the bait.

The One may be closer than I thought.