**Chapter Two – Playing Away**

Dinner was a much better affair that night. Emma was much more relaxed and there were no raised voices or harsh words between them, this was something John was very happy about.

That evening was spent with the pair of them watching television and whilst it was nice being snuggled up to his wife, John just couldn’t take his mind off the computer. He hoped Mary would still be awake to talk to him later that night. Yet again he didn’t know why it had to be such a secret but he knew that telling Emma would be a mistake.

“What time is it?” Emma asked with a yawn after a while.

“It is… 10 o’clock.” John replied as he checked his watch.

“Ugh…” Emma hid her face in her husband’s chest, “I really should go to bed. I’ve got a long meeting tomorrow.”

“Well, I don’t want you all cranky at work!” John teased playfully.

“Cranky?” Emma sat up and looked at John, “You think I’ll be cranky? I’m not a baby.”

“No… Emma, I know you aren’t.” John quickly realised he had said the wrong thing again, “I was just joking!”

“I take my work a little more seriously than a joke.” Emma replied as she stood up.

John didn’t know what to say. This outburst had come out of nowhere and after a great evening spent relaxing together, Emma had suddenly worked herself up into an angry state again.

“Emma, I’m sorr-” John started as he sat up straight.

“Save it.” Emma replied.

John watched as, for the second night in a row, his wife stomped away from him and up the stairs. He was flabbergasted that Emma was having another tantrum and despite doing his best to keep the peace it seemed that his wife was determined to take offence to something. Despite being so adamant that she wasn’t a baby, she was certainly acting like one.

This time John himself was angry and there was no way he was going to go after Emma tonight. He sat back down and changed the channel of the television to watch some sport, if Emma wanted to be cross then she could do it upstairs alone.

John felt his own anger dropping rather quickly but he was still annoyed at his wife. He wished she would learn to deal with her stress better. He would like nothing more than to go to couples therapy or something but Emma would always calm down and say it was unnecessary.

When an hour had passed and Emma hadn’t reappeared, John decided that she must be asleep and he decided it was time to go online. He scooted over to the computer and after a conspiring look around him he logged on to the computer and hurriedly visited the chatting website.

“Hey!” A pop up from Mary appeared at the bottom of the screen almost immediately.

“Hello.” John replied. He sat back in his seat and smiled. He had barely pressed enter on the password screen when Mary had messaged him, she must have been looking forward to the chat, John knew that he was.

“How are you? I was just about to go to bed. I didn’t think you were coming on!” Mary typed quickly.

“I’m fine. I’m just done with the day and relaxing with Casper.” John replied.

“Casper?” Mary asked.

“My dog. My pride and joy!” John answered with a smile.

“Aww, how sweet!” Came Mary’s reply.

They talked for an hour about this and that. They talked about growing up and what led to them both being here at the same time. It was all just getting to know each other stuff until, out of the blue, Mary suddenly said something very unexpected.

“So… Both of us are out of work, neither of us have anything urgent to do during the day and we seem to be getting on really well.” Mary typed.

“When you put it like that we sound like a pair of losers!” John replied with a giggle.

“Haha.” Mary wrote.

John felt like he was meant to respond but he saw the little chat bar tell him that Mary was still typing. John took the momentary pause to give Casper a quick stroke, the dog wagged his tail in appreciation.

“But seriously…” Mary continued, “Why don’t we meet up?”

John was taken aback by the proposition and he wasn’t sure how to respond. He felt guilty enough talking to someone online secretly but meeting a woman from over the internet behind his wife’s back seemed like an even bigger step.

“You know I’m married…” John typed. He really wasn’t sure what else to say, he didn’t want there to be any confusion.

“Oh my God!” Mary typed back, “Of course I do! You told me that, I meant… You know, just meeting for coffee or something. Like normal friends!”

“Well, I mean, if that is all you want then… Why not? I guess it could be fun.” John didn’t feel confident as he typed out his message.

“Cool. How about on Friday?” Mary asked, “Midday?”

“Yeah… Sounds good.” John replied.

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The rest of the week went on as usual. Emma seemed on edge after work and despite John’s best efforts it seemed like she was just determined to be in a bad mood. John soon realised that she was better off just not interacting with his wife much when she was in a bad mood, it seemed like everything he did antagonised her.

Thursday night, the night before John’s still secret lunch time meeting, was the worst one so far. Emma just flat out refused to talk to John which made him very upset, she then blamed him for her problems and ran off upstairs. John hadn’t helped matters when he lost his temper as Emma stomped away.

“If you just went back to anger management we would both be happy.” John had yelled before he could stop himself.

It made no difference anyway, Emma was already irritated so his comment didn’t do anything to make things worse. Although he had yelled it in anger he did genuinely believe what he said would help. He just had no way of making Emma see that much to his own frustration.

Any hesitation John had for meeting with Mary was dramatically reduced by that evening’s events. It would be good to have a sympathetic ear and to talk to someone who wasn’t going to snap at him if he said the wrong thing.

The next morning, when Emma had made her usual apology and left for work, John got up and showered. He could feel butterflies in his belly from the moment he woke up and no matter how much he tried to tell himself that this was just a friendly meeting it felt like much more.

John and Mary had agreed to meet in a coffee shop just off the high street of the town. It was a place that Mary apparently knew quite well and would likely be relatively quiet considering it would be lunch time. She had given John her phone number as well just in case there were any problems.

John spent the whole morning feeling like he was on the edge of calling the whole thing off. He felt like he was being disloyal to his wife to be meeting another woman and more than once he had the number ready to be dialled on his phone.

It was almost a surprise to John when he found himself in the car and driving into town. He fully expected himself to call things off and yet here he was making the trip. Not only was he driving to the meeting but he was also excited to get there, he was excited to meet Mary.

The journey was unremarkable except for John’s heart hammering harder and harder the closer he got. By the time he had pulled up on a side street not far from the café, John was having to manage his breathing to calm himself down before he passed out.

“It’s just a friend…” John muttered to himself, “I’m just meeting a friend.”

John stepped out of his car and walked towards the small coffee shop with shaky legs. He checked his watch and found he was a little late, just a few minutes but it was enough to make him even more self-conscious.

When John reached the café he paused and took a deep breath. The café was indeed very small and quaint, it looked like a converted cottage and the green paint around the windows and doors was peeling badly. It was clearly the sort of shop that was run by a family, maybe multiple generations had served here. It was quickly becoming a relic as more and more of these places closed to be replaced by large chain stores.

A small bell rang as the door opened and John stepped inside. He tried to look as casual as possible as he scanned the seats but he knew he must look particularly conspicuous underneath the bell. He was hit by the smell of fresh tea and coffee as he nervously looked around.

The café was as small as Mary had said it would be. There were only a half dozen tables set up and only people at half of them. One of the tables was an elderly couple, another table had a mother with their daughter and the third table had a single woman sitting at it.

“John?” The woman asked when she saw John staring at her.

“Mary… Hi.” John replied awkwardly.

Mary was prettier then John had imagined. With her shoulder length brown hair and large green eyes, she almost looked like an oil painting. John was surprised that she seemed almost as tall as he was and she looked quite fit from what the awkward man could see.

Mary was wearing a very nice black top with a gold necklace over the top. She had some rings on her fingers which were clutching the edge of the table lightly.

“So good to see you!” Mary said as she stood up and indicated the chair opposite her.

John took the couple of steps and sat down. Mary’s smiling face was like an image from heaven, she looked so sweet and lovely that John wouldn’t have been surprised if she had told him she was from heaven. Even her voice was high and angelic.

“You too.” John replied as he smiled back.

“I have to admit I almost chickened out.” Mary said with a laugh.

“Thank God it wasn’t just me!” John replied causing both of them to chuckle, “I’m just… Not good at meeting new people.”

“I understand completely.” Mary replied with a warm smile, “But I’m not a new person. Heck, you know more about me after our online chats than some of my oldest friends.”

A waitress came over to the pair of them and took their orders. John just ordered a regular coffee but Mary ordered some very fancy sounding French coffee. It sounded very exotic.

The two of them talked for a long time, mostly about Mary. Mary told John about her lack of a relationship and how she always wanted a partner and, in particular, a child but just never met the right person so far.

The conversation of partners turned around and led to John ranting about Emma for a bit. His frustration was finally getting an outlet.

“Sounds like you aren’t getting what you need from your wife.” Mary eventually said when John paused his rant.

“She is a great person and I really do love her…” John said as he took a sip of his coffee, “But I feel like a punching bag.”

“That’s terrible.” Mary replied sympathetically.

“It wasn’t always like this though.” John continued, “Things have just got worse and worse as time has gone on.”

“I hope I’m not overstepping the mark when I say that you deserve better.” Mary said as she sipped her coffee.

John didn’t reply. It was what he had been thinking even if he didn’t dare say it out loud. He looked over his own drink at the woman who was being so attentive to him, so nice and seemingly interested in everything he had to say. She was everything he wished Emma was, she was everything Emma used to be.

“Listen, I can’t stay long.” Mary looked apologetic, “I have friends I promised to meet this afternoon.”

“It’s cool.” John replied with a smile, “It was great to talk to you face-to-face. I never thought I’d meet someone online… A friend, I mean.”

John felt his heart skip a beat. Did he really just say that?

Mary stood up and grabbed her things. She took a couple of steps towards the door before stopping and seemingly hesitating. John turned in his seat and saw her looking at him over her shoulder, she turned around to face John again.

“Listen… I can’t believe I’m going to suggest this but… Would you like to go somewhere for dinner tomorrow night?” Mary asked. John thought she looked nervous, “Just to talk more. I feel like we got cut off early today and…”

“Sure.” John interrupted the spluttering woman and agreed that dinner would be nice, “As friends, of course.”

“As friends.” Mary agreed with a smile, “I’ll make the reservation and message it to you tonight.”

“I look forward to it.” John replied.

The two of them shared a smile before Mary turned to leave the café. John turned back to the table and felt his heart hammering. Did he just agree to have dinner with a woman he met online without his wife’s knowledge?