

All the Wrong Places

A NOVEL

Joy
Fielding

BALLANTINE BOOKS  NEW YORK

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Published in the United States by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Fielding, Joy, author.

Title: All the wrong places : a novel / Joy Fielding.

Description: New York : Ballantine Books, [2019]

Identifiers: LCCN 2018051132 | ISBN 9780399181559 (hardback) | ISBN 9780399181566 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Online dating—Fiction. | Murder—Investigation—Fiction. |

BISAC: FICTION / Suspense. | FICTION / Mystery & Detective / Women Sleuths. |

FICTION / Contemporary Women. | GSAFD: Love stories. | Mystery fiction. |

LCGFT: Detective and mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PR9199.3.F518 A44 2019 | DDC 813/.54—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018051132>

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

randomhousebooks.com

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Book design by Debbie Glasserman

TO WARREN, WITH LOVE ALWAYS

CHAPTER ONE

"So, tell me about yourself," he says. He smiles what he hopes is a sweet smile—neither too big nor too small, one that hints at a wry, maybe even offbeat sense of humor that he thinks would appeal to her. He wants to charm her. He wants her to like him.

The young woman sitting across from him at the immaculately set table for two hesitates. When she speaks, her voice is soft, tremulous. "What do you want to know?"

She is beautiful: late twenties, porcelain skin, deep blue eyes, long brown hair, just the right amount of visible cleavage. Exactly as advertised, which isn't always the case. Usually the photos they post are a few years old, the women themselves older still. "Well, for starters, why a dating app? I mean, you're gorgeous. I can't imagine you'd have any trouble meeting guys, especially in a city like Boston."

She hesitates again. She's shy, thoughtful as opposed to self-absorbed. Something else he likes. "I just thought it would be fun," she admits. "All my friends are on them. And I've kind of been out of the dating scene for a while . . ."

“You had a boyfriend?”

She nods. “We broke up about four months ago.”

“You broke up with him?”

“Actually, no. He broke up with me.”

He laughs. “I find that hard to believe.”

“He said he wasn’t ready to be tied down,” she offers without prompting. Her eyes fill with tears. Several escape without warning, clinging to her bottom lashes.

Instinctively he reaches across the table to wipe them away, careful not to disturb her mascara. “You miss him,” he says.

“No,” she says quickly. “Not really. It’s just hard sometimes. It’s more being part of a couple I miss, our friends . . .”

“Were you together long?”

“A little over a year. What about you?”

He smiles. *She’s trying*, he thinks. Even though he can see her heart isn’t really in it. Still, some women never even think to ask. “Me? No. It’s been a while since I’ve been in a serious relationship. But we were talking about you.”

She looks toward her plate. She hasn’t touched her food, and he spent hours preparing it, letting the expensive steaks marinate all afternoon, wrapping the large Idaho potatoes in tinfoil for baking, arranging the watermelon and feta cheese salad just so on the delicate floral china, wanting to impress her. *Maybe she’s a vegetarian*, he thinks, although there was nothing on her profile to indicate that.

He should have asked when he suggested dinner. “Tell me about your childhood,” he says now.

She looks surprised. “My childhood?”

“I’m assuming you had one.” Again, the sweet smile hinting at greater depths.

“It was pretty ordinary. Nothing much to tell.”

“I’m guessing upper middle class,” he offers, hoping to stimulate the conversation. “Comfortable lifestyle, maybe a nanny or a housekeeper, parents who loved you, made sure you had everything your little heart desired.”

“Not really. Well, maybe at first,” she agrees tentatively. “Until I

was about six and my parents got divorced. Then everything changed.”

“How so?”

“We had to move. My mom had to go back to work. My dad remarried a woman we didn’t like. We were always being shuffled back and forth.”

“We?”

“My brothers and I.”

“I like that you say ‘I,’” he interrupts. “Most people would say ‘me.’ They have no respect for grammar. Or maybe they just don’t know the difference between the subject and the object of a sentence. I don’t know.” He shrugs, sensing her mounting discomfort. Not everyone is as concerned with grammar as he is. “How many brothers do you have?” he asks, aiming for safer ground.

“Two. One’s in New York. The other one’s in L.A.”

“And your mom? Where is she?”

“Here. In Boston.”

“Does she know where you are tonight? Well, how could she?” he asks, answering one question with another. “Don’t think she’d approve of your agreeing to have dinner in a stranger’s apartment, would she? Are you always this adventurous?” He cocks his head to one side, a gesture some have called charming, and waits for her response.

Another hesitation. “No.”

“Should I be flattered? ’Cause I’m feeling kind of flattered here, I gotta admit.”

She blushes, although whether the sudden redness in her cheeks is from embarrassment or anticipation, he isn’t sure.

“Is it because I’m so good-looking?” He says this playfully, accompanied by yet another smile, his sweetest one so far, and although she doesn’t respond, he knows he’s right. He *is* that good-looking. (“Pretty boy,” his father used to sneer.) Much better-looking than the picture he posted on the dating site, which in truth isn’t a picture of him at all, just some shirtless model with handsomely generic features and washboard abs whose photograph he saw in a *Men’s Health* magazine.

Good-looking enough to make a woman silence the nagging voice in her head warning her to beware, to follow him out of the crowded bar where they'd agreed to meet and go with him to his apartment near Sargent's Wharf, where he's promised a gourmet feast.

"You're not eating," he says. "Is the steak too rare for you?"

"No. I just can't . . ."

"Please. You have to at least try it." He cuts a piece of meat from his own plate and extends his fork across the table toward her mouth. "Please," he says again, as blood drips from the steak to stain the white tablecloth.

She opens her mouth to receive the almost raw piece of meat.

"Chew carefully," he advises. "Wouldn't want you to choke."

"Please . . ." she says, as the cellphone in his pocket rings.

"Hold on. I'll just be a minute." He removes the phone from his pocket and swipes its thin face from left to right, then lifts it to his ear. "Well, hello there," he says, lowering his voice seductively, his lips grazing the phone's smooth surface. *Finally*, he thinks.

"Hi," the woman on the other end of the line responds. "Is this . . . Mr. Right Now?" She giggles and he laughs. Mr. Right Now is the name he goes by on the multiple dating sites to which he subscribes.

"It is. Is this . . . Wildflower?"

"It is," she says, more than a trace self-consciously, not as comfortable with pseudonyms as he is.

"Well, Wildflower," he says. "I'm so glad you called." He's been anticipating this moment for what feels like forever.

"Are you still in Florida?" she asks. "Is this a bad time?"

"No. It's perfect. I just got back into town about an hour ago."

"How's your mother?"

"Much better. Thanks for asking. How are you?"

"Me? I'm fine." She hesitates. "I was thinking maybe you were right, that it's time we give this another try."

"No maybes about it," he says, eager to nail her down. "At least on my end. How about Wednesday?"

"Wednesday is good."

“Great. Are you familiar with Anthony’s Bar, over on Boylston? I know it’s usually crowded and it can be pretty noisy, but—”

“Anthony’s is great,” she says, as he knew she would. Crowded, noisy bars are always a woman’s preferred place to meet.

He smiles at the woman sitting across the table, notes the tears now wriggling freely down her cheeks. He checks his watch, making no move to wipe the tears away. Anthony’s Bar is where he met her less than two hours ago. He is being rude and insensitive.

“Say six o’clock?” he says into the phone.

“Six is good.”

“No more last-minute cancellations?”

“I’ll be there at six on the button.”

“No!” his dinner companion shouts unexpectedly. “Don’t . . .”

He is instantly on his feet, his hand sweeping across the table to slap her hard across the face. It connects with such ferocity that the chair to which she is securely tied, her hands handcuffed behind her back, teeters on its hind legs and threatens to fall, causing the noose looped around her neck to tighten. He watches as she gasps frantically for air. Another minute of flailing uselessly about and she will likely lose consciousness.

He’s not ready for that. He isn’t done with her yet.

“What was that?” the woman calling herself Wildflower asks.

“What was what?” he asks easily in return, walking around the table to steady the chair, then covering the frantic woman’s mouth with his free hand. “Oh. Probably just the TV. Some guy getting the shit kicked out of him. Excuse the language.”

A second’s silence. He can almost feel Wildflower smile.

“Are you going to tell me your real name?” she ventures.

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours,” he replies flirtatiously. A lie. He never tells any of the women his real name. “Although I gotta say, I kind of like Wildflower.”

“Then suppose we leave things the way they are for now.”

“Till Wednesday, then,” he says.

“Till Wednesday.”

“Looking forward to it.”

He returns the phone to his pocket and removes his hand from the woman’s mouth. “If you scream, I’ll stick this steak knife in your eye,” he says calmly, brandishing its serrated edge in front of her face. The noose around her neck is now buried inside her flesh. He doubts she has enough air to scream, even if she were so inclined. Still, he’d underestimated her before.

She’d been so easy. Almost too easy. Mesmerized by his beautiful exterior, she’d gone along with his every suggestion, agreeing to leave the dark, crowded bar to enjoy a home-cooked dinner in his apartment, then eagerly sitting down at the small, round table with its white linen tablecloth already in place, not comprehending the danger she was in until her hands were handcuffed behind her and the rope was literally around her throat.

She’d tried so hard, been so compliant, going along with his silly game of pretending they were on a real date, answering his stupid questions, even offering up a few of her own, undoubtedly hoping to save her life. And even when she recognized this for the pipe dream it was, when the phone call convinced her that she was simply one of many, that there was nothing special about her, and that he was already moving forward, who’d have thought she’d have the gumption to try warning his next victim? He admires that.

Not that it matters.

He resumes his seat at the table and calmly finishes his meal, careful to chew each piece of meat thirty times, as his father used to insist. He hopes she won’t do anything stupid, something that will make it necessary to finish her off quickly. He wants to take his time with her, show her he’s more than just a pretty face.

He smiles, hoping to convey that she has his full attention. She deserves that. But even as he lifts the last piece of steak toward his lips, his imagination is already leaping ahead.

To Wednesday.

And the woman who will be his crowning achievement: Wildflower.