

CHAPTER 1

It was after midnight as Gary Makin finally got to the front of the queue at the taxi rank. It felt as if he'd been waiting ages in the early August drizzle and since nobody ever wore an overcoat when clubbing in Liverpool, no amount of pulling at his lapels was protection from the wet.

At last, a hackney pulled up and Gary clambered in. He'd had his fair share of drink, but he was pretty well bored with the night scene. After all, he was well past his mid-twenties and some sort of innate message seemed to be telling him he was too old for all the noise and fervour of clubs.

He'd started out the evening with two pals, long-time friends both his own age, but they'd got themselves fixed up with a couple of women and once it was obvious they were going to stick, he decided he'd had enough. He reckoned, by leaving early, he might beat the rush for the taxis, but he really should have known better.

He sat in the back seat of the cab facing forwards. They'd barely travelled to the first set of traffic lights and were stopped at red, when the door to the cab opened sharply and a young woman almost dived inside.

The driver immediately registered his disapproval, but the woman appealed to Gary. "Please, please, get me away from here!" she cried, her breathlessness seeming to add to her panic.

She had a pretty face, indeed more than that, thought Gary. Even in the semi-darkness of the cab, he noticed her flowing auburn hair, but fear was her overriding feature. Against his better judgement, Gary called to the cabbie, "It's okay, she can stay. I'll see you right"

He could tell that the driver thought he was being taken for a sucker, but Gary reckoned all he was bothered about was getting paid the right fare.

Gary was heading for south Liverpool to his modest terraced house in Mossley Hill, off the far end of Penny Lane.

At first, the woman, who was sitting in the seat directly opposite Gary, didn't say a word. Then she finally looked him in the face and smiled. "Thank you," she said.

As Gary made eye contact, straight away he felt a connection. At the same time, she leaned across and touched his hand. She repeated the words, "Thank you."

They kept eye-contact and once again she leaned over to touch his hand. "Thank you so much; I really mean it, thank you. You've rescued me tonight from something awful. I'm really okay now."

They were turning right at the Picton Clock, about three miles away from the city centre, when she asked to be dropped off. The driver pulled over outside the Co-op Supermarket which, years ago, used to be the Abbey Cinema, one of the most popular picture houses in the city.

As she was about to get out, the women leaned over and kissed Gary ever so tenderly on the lips. Once again, she looked him in the eye, but before Gary had time to blink, she was gone. He watched her head round the front of the supermarket and disappear, before the cabbie started-off again.

"Not for me to say, but she took you for a fool there," he said to Gary. "We see it all the time; night after night. You guys always fall for the pretty face."

Gary said nothing. Perhaps the driver was right, but despite the amount he'd drunk, he nevertheless couldn't get the woman out of his mind. Not just the fear, but, above all, the most appealing eyes he'd ever come across. They had meaning for him. He wished he could turn the clock back and find out more about her.

He got out of the taxi and paid the fare, then climbed the two front steps to his house. Inside, he put the kettle on to make a cup of coffee. The next moment, he'd passed out in the armchair. It was three o'clock when he awoke shivering, but still fully clothed. He had a headache too.

He staggered up to bed. He never did drink the coffee. When he lay down and pulled the bedclothes over him, his head was swirling and his ears buzzing as an aftermath of the loud music in the night club.

He fell asleep with only one image on his mind and that was the woman in the taxi and, most of all, the look of fear on her face.

He was convinced she was not trying it on for a free ride. She was escaping from somebody or something.

Next morning, despite the persistent hangover, his mind kept returning to the sad face and the kiss. He put his fingers to his mouth; he could still feel the suction of her lips.

He wanted to go back to sleep to get rid of the throbbing pain in his forehead, but the image of those pretty eyes wouldn't let go.

CHAPTER 2

Somewhat inevitably, by Monday morning, the vision had first distorted and then blurred. Meanwhile, work beckoned.

Gary was employed by a large company of accountants in the city centre, but, despite owning a car, he chose to catch the bus most mornings. Parking was an utter pain and extremely expensive. Only if he had to go out to meet a client would he take the car and even then, whenever possible, he fixed up the appointment first thing, before driving back home afterwards and then getting the bus.

This particular morning he had an appointment, so he was in the car. He drove up Church Road and came to the Co-op Supermarket. There were long queues in all directions, but finally he turned right and headed along Childwall Road.

The traffic was crawling and, after a mere fifty yards, he came to an enforced halt. He glanced casually at the queue of people standing at the bus stop on the other side of the road.

And there she was — the same woman!

He wanted to get out of the car and run across the road, but, just as he tried to refocus and make absolutely sure it was her, a double-decker bus pulled up and blocked his sight path. Then he was startled as the driver of the car behind him tooted to tell him the traffic was moving again.

He couldn't hear what the guy was shouting but he was clearly mouthing some kind of diatribe about concentration.

One way or another, Gary managed to get through the work of the day, but a vision of that most striking face was tormenting him. Somehow, he had to find her.

Next morning, he set off from the house earlier than usual and walked all the way up Church Road to the supermarket. Behind the bus stop, there was a small wall and he sat on it, waiting in the hope that she would turn up.

He lasted until ten minutes after the time of his sighting of her the previous day and, when she hadn't appeared, he caught the next bus into town and to the office.

On each morning for the rest of the week, he did the same thing to no avail, but he'd promised himself he'd persevere until he felt it was a forlorn cause. Then, at the start of the following week, there she was, striding purposefully across the road by the pelican crossing.

He waited until she'd joined the queue for the bus and then sidled over to her.

"Hello," he said. "I thought it was you. Indeed, I hoped it was you. Do you remember me from the other Saturday night — the taxi cab?"

She smiled that same smile with those incredible bewitching eyes. "Of course I do. How could I forget my rescuer?"

"I've waited here every morning since, in the hope you'd turn up," he went on.

"And now you've found me," she responded.

If he was worried that he would get the cold shoulder, he couldn't have been more wrong. As he spoke, she was gazing into his face. It was as if the infatuation on his part was being reciprocated.

The bus arrived and they both got on. It was standing-room only and they were squeezed up close together, their bodies making contact. Neither of them made any effort to resist and the woman grabbed his arm to support herself as the bus turned a corner. When it was back on an even keel, she didn't try to break free and incredibly Gary could feel her squeezing his upper arm.

"I'm Gary Makin," he said.

"I'm Michelle," she replied. "Michelle O'Rourke."

He leaned over to whisper in her ear, so he could be heard above the noise of the engine. "I want to see you again," he said. "I need to. Please say you will."

Michelle turned to face him until they were but inches apart. Then incredibly, she moved even closer until their noses touched. Before he knew it, she'd pecked him with her lips.

"Do you have a lunch break?" she asked.

He nodded, almost lost for words, but still able to ask, "Can you get anywhere near Castle Street?"

"I think I know where that is," she replied.

"There's a news kiosk at one end, by the Queen Victoria monument — the opposite end from the Town Hall. I'll meet you there at five minutes past noon."

The bus was almost in town and Michelle got off at the Adelphi Hotel, but not before giving Gary a squeeze.

He watched her walking down the pavement as the bus moved on. He couldn't believe it as she waved to him. His walk across town to the office was made in a daze.

His morning had been set aside to complete two particularly heavy sets of accounts, but in the event, his level of concentration was minimal. He had only one thing on his mind.

He was at the kiosk ten minutes early and was amazed when Michelle was only seconds behind him. They embraced and walked away with their arms around each other. They said nothing.

Gary led the way into the *Liverpool One* centre where he pointed out a small bar-restaurant that served sandwiches. Truth was though, he didn't think his stomach would manage food of any sort. It was churning like a cement mixer.

They held hands as they sat, her thumb continuously stroking the back of his fingers. He was so aroused, he thought he was going to burst. Lunchtime could only be a relatively short break, but Michelle was seemingly as pent up as Gary was.

"I'm into you!" she said. "I'd devour you right here and now if it were possible." And she leaned into him and kissed his neck.

He responded, "I've read in novels about love at first sight, but I'm so infatuated by you. I want you too. What are you doing as of now?"

My time is my own," she replied.

"Right, that seals it," said Gary. "I'm taking the afternoon off, though I'll have to go back into the office to collect my bag. I have no appointments. Will you come back to mine?"

She nodded.

All the way back to Gary's house on the bus, the pair couldn't keep their hands off each other. In contrast to the morning rush hour, there were just a few elderly women seated downstairs near the front, while the two of them sat in isolation near the back. He adored her long auburn hair.

They virtually ran all the way from the bus stop to Gary's house with no attempt to appear nonchalant. They'd hardly got through the door than they were undressing each other in his living room. It was over in minutes and the pair looked at each other's nudity and began laughing.

They didn't bother to dress and Gary walked into his kitchen without a stitch on. When he returned with two cups of coffee, Michelle was still sitting naked on the sofa. He'd no sooner put the cups on the table than she was all over him again and his body responded immediately.

"Let's go to bed," she said after a repeat performance. "I want to sleep in your arms."

They lay together and he said, "What have you done to me?"

"I feel like that too," she replied.

They slept soundly for several hours before taking each other again. Gary had never felt so elated in all his life. This was surely the craziest thing that could happen to any man. He felt even better as he saw her face and, most of all, those wonderful eyes staring at him across the pillow.

"This has to be the daftest moment of my life...ever," he said.

"But is it making you feel happy?" she asked.

"Blissfully."

"Me too. Don't let go."

"Do you realise we don't know a single thing about each other?" he said.

Michelle nodded and once again gave him that incredible smile.

Her hand moved back and forth across his abdomen. "Oh!" she said with a grin. "You really are happy. Perhaps I should do something about it! I like a man with stamina!"

Eventually, they decided to put some clothes on, essentially because they were totally loved-out. Gary cooked some hot food and they sat opposite each other across the dining room table.

"Where do you live?" he asked after a while.

Not far from the Co-op Supermarket where you met me this morning," she replied. "Where I live is not important. I will always come to you where we can be alone."

Gary wasn't going to fall out over that.

"When will be the next time?" he asked her.

"Tomorrow night," she replied. "I will come here — what time do you get home from work?"

"I'll make sure I'm home by six," he stated. "Do you want me to drive you home," he asked.

"You can drop me in the supermarket car park," said Michelle.

Gary was a touch mystified at the secrecy, but given the circumstances, he wasn't about to argue.

As he drove the mile or so back to his own house, his astonishment was still active. Was this for real? Love at first sight only happens in the movies or in romantic novels!

Next morning, a completely smitten Gary chose to walk to the same bus stop as the previous morning, but there was no sign of his new love. He couldn't believe the amount of testosterone his body was creating.

The day was tedious and passed slowly. He was away from the office well before five and home by twenty-to-six. Almost on the hour, his doorbell rang and there she was, standing on the step looking stunning and smiling.

She entered and took off her light casual jacket.

Michelle looked absolutely gorgeous. It wasn't that her clothes were something special; in fact they were quite simple, but she knew how to display her curves, except that for Gary, it was her face and eyes which captivated him the most.

The next couple of hours were as intense as the previous night and followed almost the same procedure. This time, as they were eating at the table, Gary learned a few things about Michelle.

Though she was English, she'd been working in Ireland for some time and was visiting her sister Amanda, though that was about as much info as he was given. Whenever he began interrogating her, she'd

seduce him — or at least attempt to. He had nothing left to give on that score, but it did at least stop him from asking questions.

As they were telling each other bits and bobs about their lives, almost as an afterthought, it seemed, Michelle reached over to her handbag and picked out a small key.

"Will you keep hold of that for me," she asked.

It did seem a strange thing to ask, but Gary saw a different aside from the request. She trusted him with something and, for sure, she would be seeing him again.

"It's alright," she declared. "It's just I can be very forgetful." And that was all she said about it. Gary, for his part, placed it in his trouser pocket and never gave it a moment's thought.

The drive home was just like the previous night and over the next few days, every evening would start and end in the same way. Over the weekend, the two hardly dressed. The most Gary had on was a scruffy old dressing gown, while Michelle wore one of his baggy shirts — occasionally!

Gary meanwhile, could hardly believe his own depths of stamina, but then, he'd never in his life come near to loving somebody in this way. And even after their first full week together, he wasn't sure he was any the wiser about her background, even though he told her a lot more about himself.

On the eighth night, Michelle didn't appear. The thing was, Gary had no means of contacting her — she didn't carry a mobile phone. He'd already told her that she ought to have one for her own security at least, but it was too late now. All he could do was sit and wait.

He was feeling totally secure about their relationship. He'd lost count of the times she'd confessed her love for him. There had to be a reason for her not turning up and he assumed she'd either be in touch or be back at his house at the usual time the next night.

But, it didn't happen and a week later there was no sign of Michelle whatsoever.

It was only during these lonely evenings that he realised, not once had he talked to her about the night they'd first met in the taxi, when she was obviously distressed. What had she been so scared of?

A full ten days later, Gary was in the office when he picked up a copy of the *Liverpool Echo* lying on one of the desks. He glanced at the headline.

'BODY FOUND IN THE MERSEY'

He continued reading without the story registering much, until he came to the bit which stated that the body was of a woman in her mid-twenties. It had been washed up near Garston, but as yet, had not been identified.

Gary read the whole story with a great deal more scrutiny. It really couldn't be — could it? After all, these things only happen to other people.

Over the next few days, Gary made a point of reading the same newspaper looking for possible updates. He hadn't given up hope that Michelle would suddenly turn up one evening at six, though increasingly, he was becoming reconciled to it not happening.

It was a full week after the first story, when the same paper reported that the body had been identified as Michelle O'Rourke, who'd been over from Ireland and staying with her sister. The spokesperson for the police stated they were keeping an open mind about her death.

Gary went back into his office and closed the door. He flopped down in his seat and allowed himself to cry. He was glad to be alone.