

MARY KUBICA

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
LOCAL WOMAN MISSING

JUST
THE
NICEST
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A NOVEL

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Praise for *Just the Nicest Couple*

“A masterfully written thriller... Taut and incredibly suspenseful, every moment is perfectly crafted to keep us wanting more. An engrossing, spine-tingling read!”

—Ashley Audrain, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Push*

“You won’t know who to trust in *Just the Nicest Couple*, a domestic thrill-ride which grabs you on the first page and doesn’t let go until you reach the end. A riveting tale about marriage, trust, and secrets, this is Mary Kubica at her best.”

—Laura Dave, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Thing He Told Me*

“Kubica ratchets up the tension, one twist after another, until the last shocking conclusion. *Just the Nicest Couple* is propulsive, addictive, and impossible to put down.”

—Julie Clark, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Last Flight*

“Rich with detail and a mounting, almost suffocating sense of dread, *Just the Nicest Couple* is a dark and twisted exploration of loyalty, family, and how far we’ll go to protect the ones we love.”

—Andrea Bartz, *New York Times* bestselling author of *We Were Never Here*

“*Just the Nicest Couple* is Mary Kubica at her twisty, mysterious best. Every character brims with secrets. Every page holds a surprise. It’s entirely unputdownable.”

—Sally Hepworth, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Younger Wife*

MARY KUBICA is a *New York Times* bestselling author of thrillers including *The Good Girl*, *The Other Mrs.* and *Local Woman Missing*. Her books have been translated into over thirty languages and have sold over two million copies worldwide. She's been described as "a helluva storyteller" (*Kirkus Reviews*) and "a writer of vice-like control" (*Chicago Tribune*), and her novels have been praised as "hypnotic" (*People*) and "thrilling and illuminating" (*LA Times*). She lives outside of Chicago with her husband and children.

MaryKubica.com

MARY KUBICA

Just the Nicest Couple



For Rachael

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

PROLOGUE

I gasp and stagger backward. My hand goes to my mouth, bearing down.

My brain screams at me to run. *Run.*

I can't at first. Shock and fear hold me captive. They keep me from moving, like a ship that's dropped anchor. I'm moored to this spot, my eyes gaping in disbelief. My breath quickens and I feel the flailing of my heartbeat in my neck, my throat and in my ears.

Run, my brain screams at me. Go. Fucking run.

There is movement on the ground before me. The sound that comes with it is something heathen and raging, and some part of me knows that if I don't go now, I may never leave this place alive.

I turn away. It's instantaneous. One minute I'm unmoving and the next I'm moving so fast that the world comes at me in vague shapes and colors, streaks of brown and blue and green. I barely feel the movement of my legs and my feet as I run. I don't feel the impact of my shoes colliding with the earth, moving quickly across it. I don't look back, though I want more than anything to steal a look to know that I'm alone. That I'm not being followed. But I don't look. It's too risky. Looking back would cost precious seconds that I don't know that I have. If I do, those seconds could be my last.

Sounds come, but I'm so disoriented that I don't know where they come from. Is it only my pulse, the rush of blood in my ears?

Or is someone there?

I feel something tangible against my hair and then my spine. My back arches. I jerk away, pitching forward, landing hard on my hands and knees.

The world stops moving.

I have only two thoughts in that moment: staying alive, and that this isn't the way it was supposed to happen.

CHRISTIAN

Lily is sitting on the leather chair in the family room when I come in. Her back is to me. I see her from behind, just her long brown hair spilling down the back of the chair. She stares toward the TV on the opposite wall, but the TV is off. It's just a black box, and in it, I see a murky reflection of Lily on the screen, though I can't tell if her eyes are open or shut.

"Hey," I say, coming in through the garage door, closing it quietly and stepping out of my shoes. I set my phone and keys on the counter, and then ask, "How was your day?"

It's getting dark in the house. Out the window, the sun is about to set. Lily hasn't bothered with the lights, and so the inside of the house is colorless and gray. We face east. Any pretty sunset is the other way. You can't see it from here, if there even is one to see.

Lily says nothing back. She must have fallen asleep, sitting upright in the chair. It wouldn't be the first time. She's been extremely tired lately. The pregnancy is getting the best of her, not to mention that she's on her feet teaching all day. These two things in combination exhaust her. It used to be that Lily would be in the kitchen, cooking dinner when I got home, but these last few weeks, she comes home from work ready to drop. I don't mind that she's not cooking. I've never been the kind of person to need a home-cooked meal after work, but that's the way Lily was raised. Her mother did it for her father, and so she thinks she should do it for me. She's been apologetic that she hasn't had it in her to cook dinner, but she's been queasy, too, and the last thing she needs to be doing is cooking for me. I called from the car and ordered takeout already; it will be here any minute.

I step quietly into the family room. I come around to the other side of Lily to face her. Lily isn't asleep like I thought. Her eyes are open but her expression is blank. Her skin looks gray, washed-out like the room, and I blame the poor lighting.

Lily's head turns. She looks up at me as if in slow motion.

"Hey," I say again, gently, smiling. "You okay? Did I wake you?"

I flip on a side table light, and she winces from the brightness of it, her eyes taking time to adjust. I apologize for it, realizing that her pale face had

nothing to do with the lack of light.

In the warmth of the lamp's glow, I see that Lily's hair is wet. She wears maroon-colored joggers and a sweatshirt. She's showered and changed since coming home, which is more than she usually does. Usually she falls flat on the couch and doesn't leave until it's time to go to bed.

I drop to my knees in front of her. I reach forward and run a hand the length of her hair. "You look exhausted, babe. Do you want to just go to bed? I can help you up. Takeout should be here soon. I'll bring it up to the room for you when it gets here."

Lily blinks three times, as if to clear the fog. She finds her voice. It's husky at first, dry, like after a day of shouting at a football game, which is not that different than a day of teaching rowdy high school kids math. "No," she says, shaking her head, "I'm fine. Just tired. It was a long day."

"You sure? I wouldn't mind dinner in bed myself." I had a long day too, but it doesn't seem right to compare them when only one of us has another human growing inside of them.

"That sounds messy," she says.

"I promise I'll be neat."

Lily smiles and my heart melts. I love it when she smiles at me. "When are you ever neat?"

"Never," I say, feeling better if she can still poke fun at me. I've done my research on pregnancy and childbirth. I've read that the fatigue women feel during the first trimester is maybe the most tired they'll feel in their whole lives. Growing a human is exhausting. Caring for one is too, but we're not there yet.

"You need anything?" I ask, and she shakes her head.

Takeout comes. I convince Lily to come sit on the couch with me, where we both fit. We watch TV and, as we do, I ask her about her day and she asks me about mine. She's quieter than usual tonight. I do most of the talking. I'm a market research analyst, while Lily teaches high school algebra. We met in college over of our shared love of math. When we tell people that, it makes them laugh. We're math nerds.

When it's time for bed, Lily goes up to the room before me. From downstairs, I hear the sink run as she washes up. I clean up from dinner. I throw the takeout containers in the trash. There is a package waiting on the front porch. I step outside to get it, where the night is dark, though the sky is clear. It must be a new moon.

Lily is standing at the top of the stairs when I come back in. She's there in the upstairs hall, standing in the dark, backlit by the bedroom light. Gone are the maroon sweats she wore earlier. She has on my flannel shirt now. Her legs are bare, one foot balanced on the other. Her hair is pulled back, her face still wet from washing it.

"Don't forget to lock the door," she says down over the railing, patting her face dry with a towel.

I wouldn't have forgotten to lock the door. I never do. It's not like Lily to remind me. I turn away from her, making sure the storm door is shut and locked, and then I push the front door closed and lock the dead bolt too.

Our house sits on a large lot. It's old on the outside, but has a completely revamped, modern interior. It boasts things like a wraparound porch, beamed ceilings, a brick fireplace—which Lily fell in love with the first time she laid eyes on the house, and so I knew I couldn't say no despite the price—as well as the more modern amenities of a subzero fridge, stainless steel appliances, heated floors and a large soaker tub that I was more enthusiastic about. The house is aesthetically pleasing to say the least, with an enormous amount of curb appeal. It practically broke the bank to buy, but felt worth it at the time, even if it meant being poor for a while.

In the backyard, the river runs along the far edge of the property, bound by a public hiking and biking trail. We were worried about a lack of privacy when we first moved in, because of the trail. The trail brought pedestrians to us. Strangers. People just passing by. For most of the year, it's not a problem. The leaves on the trees provide plenty of privacy. It's only when they fall that we're more exposed, but the views of the river are worth it for that small sacrifice.

"Done," I tell her about the locks, and she asks then if I set the alarm. We've lived here years and hardly ever set the alarm. I'm taken aback that she would ask.

"Is everything okay?" I ask.

Lily says, "Yes, fine." She says that we have an alarm. We pay for it. We might as well use it. She isn't wrong—it's just that she's never wanted to before.

I set the alarm. I make my way around the first floor, turning off lights. It takes a minute. When I'm done, I climb the stairs for the bedroom. Lily has the lights off in the room now. She stands at the window in the dark, with

her back to the door. She's splitting the blinds apart with her fingers and is looking out into the dark night.

I come quietly into the room. I sidle up behind Lily, setting my hand on the small of her back and asking, "What are you looking at?" as I lean forward to set my chin on her shoulder, to see what she sees.

Suddenly Lily reels back, away from the window. She drops the blinds. They clamor shut. I've scared her. Instinctively, her hands rise up in self-defense, as if to strike me.

I pull back, ducking before I get hit. "Whoa there, Rocky," I say, reaching for her arms.

Lily's hands and arms remain motionless, suspended in air.

"Shit, sorry," she says, knowing how close she came to impact. The realization startles us both.

"What was that?" I ask as I gently lower Lily's arms. Lily isn't usually so jumpy. I've never seen that kind of reaction from her.

She says, "I didn't know it was you."

"Who did you think it was?" I ask, as a joke. She and I are the only ones here.

Lily doesn't answer directly. Instead she says, "I didn't hear you come up the stairs. I thought you were still downstairs."

That doesn't explain it.

"What are you looking at?" I ask again, gazing past her for the window.

"I thought I heard something outside," she says.

"Like what?"

She says that she doesn't know. Just something. We stand, quiet, listening. It's silent at first, but then I hear the voices of kids rising up from somewhere outside. They're laughing, and I know there are teenagers clowning around on the trail again. It wouldn't be the first time. They never do anything too bad, though we've found cigarette butts and empty bottles of booze. I don't get mad about it. I was a stupid teenager once. I did worse.

I go to the bed. I pull the blankets back. "It's just dumb kids, Lily. There's nothing to be afraid of. Come to bed," I say, but, even as she turns away from the window and slips under the sheets with me, I sense Lily's hesitation. She's not so sure.

NINA

I must have fallen asleep with the TV on. Whatever I was watching has given way to the ten o'clock news, which glows garishly in the darkness of the house, the volume obnoxiously loud. Lying on my side on the sofa, my eyes half-open, I watch it. Today, a midrise apartment building in the city caught fire and collapsed. There was a shooting on the south side. It's all bad news. The news puts this on because it's what people want to see. It's a sickness. It's not that the world is innately bad or that bad things happen more often than good things. It's that we're drawn to bad things. Death sells. I turn the news off. I hate watching it.

I push myself upright on the sofa, into a sitting position, rubbing at a kink in my neck. I must have been lying on it funny. Despite the nap, I don't feel any more rested. If anything I feel more tired. I just need to carry myself up to bed, but Jake isn't home yet and I don't want to go to bed before he is. I want to talk to him. I want to talk things out. Things got heated last night and I feel bad for it now. Looking back on it, it was mostly my fault, but, in the moment, I was being stubborn. I didn't see it that way. I said things I shouldn't have said and it's been eating at me all day. I thought over and over again about calling him at work to apologize, but I didn't want to interrupt him because he's so busy when he's at work, doing things that matter, like saving lives. He never likes it when I call him at work.

The papers I was grading are fanned out on the coffee table; I only got through a few of them before nodding off. They're for my honors English classes. We've just finished reading *1984* and the kids were asked to write about ways in which our modern society is Orwellian. I love reading their responses. I didn't mean to sleep for as long as I did. I told myself I was just going to close my eyes for a bit, and then get back to grading, but I must have slept for hours. I feel guilty now because I promised the kids I would have them graded by tomorrow. They put so much work into them and are anxious to know what they got. The honors kids are hard on themselves. But now it's dark outside and I'm tired, worried about what happened with Jake and needing him to come home so that we can talk.

I stand from the sofa and go to the kitchen for coffee. It's been a long time since I've pulled an all-nighter but a good night's sleep is not in the cards for me. I fill the Keurig's water reservoir, replace it on the unit and let it warm, checking my phone to see if I missed a call or a text from Jake. It's ten thirty-five at night. I don't know why he isn't home.

Jake saw patients in his office today. These days tend to be his shorter days because there's a predictability about them. Patients come in for consults or pre-op appointments. They have set appointment times, which may run over a few minutes if a patient is late or Jake gets behind, but never by more than a few minutes. The rest of the time, Jake spends these days catching up on paperwork. If anything, he's said, nonsurgery days are boring. Jake prefers being in surgery because that's when he's at his best.

Despite that, the days he performs surgeries are astonishingly long. He wakes up at four thirty in the morning when the alarm goes off on his watch. The workday starts just after dawn with rounds, prechecks and discussing patients on his list with the rest of the surgical team. They end sometimes as late as nine or ten o'clock. Surgery days are the most unpredictable too. While surgeries are sometimes planned, like removing a tumor, sometimes, like last week, a patient comes in with a gunshot wound to the head and Jake has to spend unanticipated hours trying to save a life. That gunshot victim died. She was practically dead to begin with. That's how Jake phrased it. There is a detachment in the way he speaks of his patients because there has to be. He can't get all emotional about it, otherwise he wouldn't be a good surgeon. There is a whole psychology about how doctors like him get through the day. It started in med school for Jake, where he referred to cadavers as things, not people, so he could cut into them more easily. For most people, seeing a dead body is a defining moment in their life; for Jake, it's frequent.

With this gunshot victim, Jake said that, even before she landed on his operating table, before he cut into her, she was fucked. Her odds of survival were infinitesimal, something like 5 percent, with even smaller odds of her having a good quality of life if she survived.

"That must have been hard for you, then, knowing she was likely to die and still doing the surgery anyway. It must feel futile," I'd said, trying to be empathetic because there's been a rift between Jake and me these past few months. He says it's my fault, and I've been trying so hard to be present in the moment, to not be distracted by other things when I'm with Jake.

He was drinking a whiskey sour. He lowered it to the table, his eyes watching me intensely over the glass. I think he took offense at what I'd said. I wasn't trying to suggest that what he did for a living was futile, but that was what he heard. What I did often felt futile too: talking for hours to students who were half-asleep and not listening.

"How could you be so sure she wouldn't survive?" I asked.

"With gunshot wounds, it depends mostly on the location and trajectory of the bullet," Jake said, sounding smart. "This bullet entered her head at the anterior temporal lobe. It traveled from one side of the brain to the other, crossing the midline, which is not ideal," he said, as if there was an ideal way for a bullet to travel in one's brain. "The bullet went in, but it didn't come out. It tore through both hemispheres, all four lobes of the brain before getting lodged in there."

"Did she die in surgery?"

"After."

"How?"

"Brain stem death."

"What does that mean?"

"The brain stem." I could see him thinking in his head how to dumb this down for me. I was grateful, not offended. Sometimes he throws out words like globulus pallidus and acoustic neuromas as if I should know what they mean. He's so used to tossing them around with ease among colleagues, he forgets I'm not one of them, that I didn't go to med school for years. "It's responsible for all the things that keep us alive. Breathing. Blood circulation. Digesting food. When the brain stem is dead, you are too."

"Like being in a vegetative state?" I'd asked.

"No," he said. He took a sip of his whiskey sour while I waited for an explanation. "It's different, because a person in a vegetative state still shows signs of brain stem function."

"How old was she?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Who shot her?"

"Her husband."

I wished I hadn't asked. I didn't want to know any of it. Unlike Jake, I couldn't be detached. I thought about it for the next twenty-four hours at least, wondering what happened between them to precipitate her husband shooting her in the head.

On surgery days, there is never any telling when Jake will be home. If an emergency surgery comes in, he stays until it's done. But today isn't a surgery day. He should have been home hours ago. I try calling him now, but Jake's phone is off or dead because it routes straight to voice mail. It's not like Jake to let his phone die. I leave a voice mail for when he has a chance to charge it, keeping it light, asking him to call me when he can. I don't say that I'm worried or that I'm wondering where he is because maybe I've mixed up my days and today was a surgery day after all. I've been distracted lately. My mother's health is failing. She's going blind and then, if that wasn't bad enough, the doctors recently found a mass in her left breast. We need to do a biopsy and see if it's malignant or benign. I'm a pessimist and so, in my head, I've already decided. It's malignant. If that's the case, we will have to decide what to do: keep the breast or get rid of it. My mother can't make a decision to save her life, which leaves all the decision-making to me. She's not that old to be going through all this but both things, macular degeneration and breast cancer, are in her genes, which means they're in my genes too. The doctor's appointments are endless: the general practitioner, mammographer, ophthalmologist and soon, a surgical oncologist. I've had to take days off work for them. The appointments fill the hours when I'm not teaching and, when I'm not with my mother, I'm thinking about and worrying about her, obsessing over decisions like lumpectomy or mastectomy, knowing if I make the wrong choice when the time comes, my mother will die for it.

Because of it, Jake and I have grown distant from each other. It was the impetus for last night's fight, how I care about everyone and everything but him. It's not true. But I can see why he would think it. Except that last night I'd turned it around on him. I devalued his feelings and made him feel bad for the way he felt. After screaming at each other, Jake took his pillow and slept on the sofa. He left this morning after hardly speaking to me and without really saying goodbye. Now he's not home and he's not answering his phone, and I'm worried I know why.