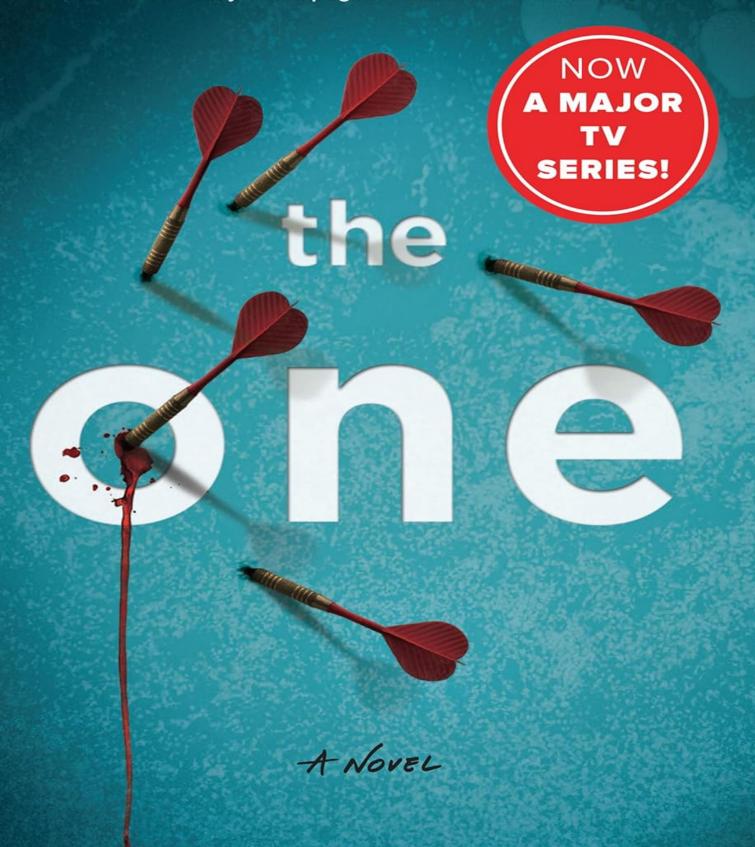
"A shock on every other page." -WALL STREET JOURNAL



JOHN MARRS

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Acknowledgements

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About the Book

About the Author

John Marrs is a freelance journalist based in London, England, who has spent the last 20 years interviewing celebrities from the world of television, film and music for national newspapers and magazines. He has written for publications including *The Guardian's Guide* and *Guardian Online; Total Film; Huffington Post; Empire; Q; GT; The Independent; S Magazine* and *Company*.

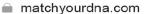
This is John's third novel, following his self-published successes: *The Wronged Sons* and *Welcome To Wherever You Are*. Follow him on Twitter @johnmarrs1 or on Instagram at johnmarrs.author

THE ONE

JOHN MARRS



'To love or have loved, that is enough. Ask nothing further. There is no pearl to be found in the dark folds of life.'—Victor Hugo, Les Miserables







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Chapter 1

MANDY

Mandy stared at the photograph on her computer screen and held her breath.

The shirtless man had cropped, light brown hair and posed on a beach with his legs spread apart with the top half of his wetsuit rolled down to his waist. His eyes were the clearest shade of blue. His huge grin contained two perfectly aligned rows of white teeth and she could almost taste the salt water dripping from his chest and on to the surfboard lying by his feet.

'Oh my Lord,' she whispered to herself and let out a long breath she didn't realise she'd been holding. She felt her fingertips tingle and her face flush and wondered how on earth her body would react to him in person if that's how it responded to just one photograph.

The coffee in her polystyrene cup was cold but she still finished it. She took a screengrab of the photograph and added it to a newly created folder on her desktop entitled "Richard Taylor." She scanned the office to check if anyone was watching what she was up to in her booth, but no one was paying her any attention.

Mandy scrolled down the screen to look at the other photographs in his Facebook album – Around The World. He was certainly well travelled, she noticed, and he had been to places she'd only ever seen on TV or in films. In many pictures he was in bars, trails and temples, posing by landmarks, enjoying golden beaches and choppy waters. He was rarely on his own. She liked that he seemed the gregarious type.

Curious, she looked back further into his timeline, from when he first joined social media as a sixth former and through his three years at university. She even found him attractive as a gawky teenager. After an hour and a half of gawping at nearly the entirety of the handsome stranger's history, Mandy made her way to his Twitter feed to see what he felt the need to share with the world. But all he ranted about was Arsenal's rise and fall in the Premier League, occasionally broken up by retweets of animals falling over or running into stationary objects.

Their interests appeared to differ greatly and she questioned exactly why they had been Matched and what they might have in common. Then she reminded herself she no longer had the mindset required for using dating websites and Apps; Match Your DNA was based on biology, chemicals and science – none of which she could get her head around. But she trusted it with all her heart like millions and millions of others did.

Mandy moved on to Richard's LinkedIn profile, which revealed that since graduating from Worcester University two years earlier, he'd worked as a personal trainer in a town approximately forty miles from hers. No wonder his body appeared so solid, she thought, and she imagined how it might feel on top of hers.

She hadn't set foot in a gym since her induction a year ago when her sisters insisted she should stop lamenting her failed marriage and start concentrating on her recovery. They'd whisked her away to a nearby hotel day-spa where she'd been massaged, plucked, waxed, hot-stoned, tanned and massaged again until any thought of her ex had been pummelled out of every back and shoulder knot and each clogged pore of her skin. The gym membership had followed along with a promise that she would keep up with the workout schedule they'd set up for her. However, motivating herself to work out regularly had yet to become part of her weekly routine, but she paid for the membership regardless.

She began to imagine what her children with Richard might look like, and if they'd inherit their father's blue eyes or brown like hers; whether they'd be dark haired and olive skinned like her or fair and pale like him. She found herself smiling.

'Who's that?'

'Jesus!' she yelled. The voice had made her jump. 'You scared me to death.'

'Well you shouldn't have been looking at porn at work then.' Olivia grinned, and offered her a sweet from a bag of Haribo. Mandy declined with a shake of her head.

'It wasn't porn, he's an old friend.'

'Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. Keep an eye out for Charlie though, he's after some sales figures from you.'

Mandy rolled her eyes then looked at the clock in the corner of her screen. She realised that if she didn't start doing some work soon, she'd end up taking it home with her. She clicked on the little red 'x' in the corner and cursed her Hotmail account for assuming the Match Your DNA confirmation email was spam. It had sat in her junk folder for the last six weeks until, by chance, she had discovered it earlier that afternoon.

'Mandy Taylor, wife of Richard Taylor, pleased to meet you,' she whispered. She noticed she was absentmindedly twiddling an invisible ring around her wedding finger.

Chapter 2

CHRISTOPHER

Christopher shuffled from side to side until he reached a comfortable position in the armchair.

He placed his elbows at ninety degree angles on the chair's arms and inhaled deeply to take in the scent of its leathery covering. She hadn't scrimped on quality, he thought, confident from both its smell and soft touch that it hadn't been purchased from a run-of-the-mill high street retailer.

While she remained in the adjacent kitchen, Christopher glanced around her apartment. She lived on the ground floor of an immaculately restored Victorian building that, according to a stained glass mural above the front door, had once been used as a convent. He admired her taste in pottery ornaments which were arranged on shelves built into the walls surrounding the open fireplace's chimney breast. But her choice of literature left a lot to be desired. He turned his nose up at the paperback works of James Patterson, Jackie Collins and JK Rowling.

Elsewhere in the room, a suede covered square tray was placed centrally on a chunky coffee table which held two remote controls. Four matching place mats had been perfectly laid around it. Her use of symmetry put him at ease.

Christopher ran his tongue across his teeth and it hovered over a sliver of pistachio nut that had become trapped between his lateral incisor and canine. When it failed to dislodge, he used his fingernail, but it still wouldn't move so he made a mental note to inspect her bathroom cabinet for dental floss before he left. Very little irritated him more than a piece of trapped food. He'd once walked out on a date mid-meal because she had a stray piece of kale in her teeth.

A vibrating from his trouser pocket tickled his groin, not an entirely unpleasant experience. As a rule, Christopher was quite fastidious when it came to turning his phone off at appropriate times and he loathed people who didn't extend him the same courtesy. But today he'd made an exception.

He removed the phone and read the message on the screen; it was an email from Match Your DNA. He recalled sending them a mouth swab on a whim some months earlier but had yet to receive a registered Match. Until now. Would he like to pay to receive their contact details, the message asked. Would I? he thought. Would I really? He put the phone away and pondered what his Match might look like, before deciding it was inappropriate to be thinking about a second woman while he was still in the company of the first.

He rose to his feet and returned to the kitchen to find her where he'd left her minutes earlier, lying on her back on the cold, slate floor, the garrote still embedded in her neck. She was no longer bleeding, the final few drops having pooled around the collar of her blouse.

He took a digital Polaroid camera from his jacket and used it to take two identical photographs of her face before waiting patiently for them to develop. He placed both photos in an A5 hard-backed envelope and then slipped it into his jacket pocket.

Then Christopher scooped his kit into his backpack and left, waiting until he had exited the darkness of the garden before removing his plastic overshoes, mask and balaclava.

Chapter 3

JADE

Jade smiled when a message from Kevin flashed across the screen of her mobile.

'Evening, beautiful girl, how are you?' it read. She liked how Kevin always began his messages with the same phrase.

'I'm good thanks,' she replied before adding a yellow smiley-faced emoji. 'I'm knackered, though.'

'Sorry I didn't text you earlier. It's been a busy day. I didn't piss you off did I?'

'Yeah, you did a bit but you know what a grumpy cow I can be. What have you been doing?'

A picture appeared on her screen of a wooden barn and a tractor under a bright, blazing sun. Inside the barn, she could just about make out cattle behind metal bars and milking equipment attached to their udders.

'I've been repairing the cowshed roof. Not that we're expecting rain yet but we might as well do it now. How about you?'

'I'm in bed in my pyjamas and looking at the weird hotels on the Lonely Planet website you told me about.' Jade moved her laptop on to the floor and looked up at her pin board of places she wanted to visit.

'Amazing aren't they? We need to travel the world and see them together one day.'

'It kind of makes me wish I'd taken a year out after uni and gone backpacking with my mates.'

'Why didn't you?'

'That's a daft bloody question – money doesn't grow on trees where I'm from.' *If only they did*, she thought. Her mum and dad weren't loaded and

she had to fund her studies. She had a student loan the size of the Tyne to pay off whilst her housemates from uni had all left to live their dream and travel America. The constant Facebook updates made her seethe, seeing their photos of them all having fun without her.

'I hate to cut this short babe but Dad wants me to help with the cattle feed. Text me later?'

'Are you kidding?' Jade replied, irked that their time had been cut short after she'd waited all night to speak to him.

'Love you, Xxx' Kevin texted.

'Yeah, whatever,' she replied, and put the phone down. A moment later she picked it up and typed again. 'Love you too. Xxx'

Jade climbed out from under her thick duvet and placed her phone on its charging mat on the bedside table. She glanced into the full-length mirror which had photographs of her absent friends who were off travelling taped to the frame and vowed to reduce the dark rings around her blue eyes by sleeping for longer and drinking more water. She made a mental note to get her red, curly locks trimmed at the weekend and to treat herself to a spray tan. She always felt better when her pale skin had a dash of colour.

She slipped back into bed and wondered how different her life might have been had she taken that gap year with her friends. Maybe it would've given her the courage to ignore pressure from her parents to return to Sunderland after her three years at Loughborough. As the first member of her family to be offered a place at university, they couldn't understand why employers weren't beating down her door with job offers the moment she graduated. And while the credit card bills and loans began to mount, she had little choice but to either declare herself bankrupt at twenty-one or move back into the terraced family home she thought she'd escaped.

She disliked the angry, frustrated person she had become but didn't know how to change. She resented her parents for making her return and began to estrange herself from them. And by the time she could afford to rent her own flat, they were barely on speaking terms.

She also blamed them for her failure to get onto the Travel and Tourism career ladder, and for making her spend her working days behind the reception desk of a hotel on the outskirts of town. It was supposed to have been a stopgap job but somewhere along the line it had become the norm. Jade was sick of being so irate with everyone and she yearned to get back to the life she had originally imagined for herself.

The only bright spot in each Groundhog Day was talking to the man she'd been paired with on Match Your DNA. Kevin.

She cracked a smile at the most recent photograph she had of Kevin that watched over her from its frame on the bookcase. He had almost white-blond hair and eyebrows, a smile that spread from ear to ear and his tanned body was lean but muscular. She couldn't have made him up if she'd tried.

He'd only sent her a handful of pictures over the seven months they'd been talking, but from the moment they'd first spoken on the phone and Jade had experienced the shiver she'd read about in magazines, she was sure there was no man on earth better suited to her.

Fate could be a bastard, she decided, having placed her Match on the other side of the world in Australia. Maybe one day she might meet him, if she could ever afford it.