

Prologue

He knew it. He had known it for a long time, for many years. And then he saw her, recognised her immediately.

It was her eyes. Unmistakable. Deep lakes full of innocence. How naive she was.

Even now, standing in front of the window of a jewellery shop, lost in thought as she looked at the display, unaware of how close he was.

But this time it would be different. A deep hatred shot through his body. He enjoyed the feeling, savouring the coldness that filled every fibre of his being.

He took a deep drag on his cigarette, then carelessly flicked the butt onto the street and slowly blew out the smoke, watching as it playfully dissolved into the swirls of summer air.

He grinned maliciously to himself and strolled casually towards her, a charming smile on his sun-tanned face.

She had no choice.

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Laura screamed! Fear of death flooded through her like hot acid, making her heart pound desperately. His face hovered close above her, his breath reeking of brandy and cheap crisps. His fat cheeks, criss-crossed with red veins, loomed towards her, repulsing her more than she could put into words, making his face look bloated and unhealthy. The malicious look in his cold eyes pinned her to the floor as he sat on top of her, enjoying her resistance, the futile attempts with her small fists to loosen the cable ties he had used to bind her to the leg of the dining table.

He rested his left hand next to her head so he could lean down close to her. To let her physically feel his anger, the cause of which she had never been able to fathom. She briefly noticed the stinking yellow sweat stain on his shirt under his armpit and tried unsuccessfully to avoid him.

“Did you really think you could escape me?”

The blade of the knife he held in his hand, ready for battle, flashed briefly in the light of the living room lamp. Laura desperately racked her brains for a solution. She still had minutes,

maybe even seconds, before his mood would change. It was important to keep an eye on his behaviour. It could save her life. As long as he was angry, nothing would happen to her. Things only got really bad when his anger gave way to complete, emotionless coldness. Then he was really dangerous, as she knew from experience. Her mind raced, going through all the possibilities.

But his gaze already flickered, his features relaxed. It was too late.

“NOOOOO!”

She sat bolt upright in bed, her pyjamas clinging to her, soaked with sweat. The blanket lay at the foot of the bed, kicked off in sheer terror while Laura had been dreaming. Gasping for breath, she sat up and ran her hand over her sweat-drenched face. Once again, she wondered when these nightmares would end, when the past would finally stop clinging to her like an overly persistent insect.

With trembling hands, she reached for the alarm clock on her bedside table. It took a moment for the blurry characters on the digital display to turn into red numbers telling her that it was nine o'clock on a Saturday morning.

Like every morning since their separation, as soon as she woke up, when the world entered her consciousness, even before she opened her

eyes, she felt the knot in her stomach, stubbornly reminding her that something in her life was wrong. That the hell she had gone through was still raging inside her and consuming her from within, and that the peace that now characterised her life was only superficial. Nothing had yet been able to fill the void that reigned within her. A void that she had initially perceived as a relief, as it had replaced infinite fear – fear of death. Fear was exhausting, paralysing. Void, on the other hand, felt almost harmless at first. Subtle differences that she would never have given a second thought to before, that she hadn't even suspected existed. Let alone how they would feel.

But void, she knew by now, was neither peaceful nor harmless. Void was pregnant with mistrust, fear and unpleasant memories that simply refused to go away, with too many emotions until the soul was exhausted and refused to serve. Hope, trust and the courage to move forward with a fresh start... all this was lacking in this void, turning it into a black hole that the soul couldn't fill.

With great effort, she pushed her leaden legs out of bed, peeled herself out of her clammy pyjamas with disgust, and shortly afterwards stood under the hot shower, still feeling dazed. With an exhausted sigh, she leaned her forehead

against the cool tiles of the shower cubicle and closed her eyes as the hard jet of hot water hit her shoulders and slowly washed away the last remnants of the nightmare. They disappeared down the drain with the lotus-scented foam of the shower gel as Laura soaped herself and enjoyed the feeling of the soft foam on her skin. It felt so clean, so pure. A stark contrast to her inner self. What she would have given to be able to shower from the inside, too. To simply wash away all the terrible memories until she felt fresh and recovered and ready to be someone else. Someone who hadn't been through hell.

Fifteen minutes later, she finally felt comfortable in her own skin again and applied body lotion generously until she was enveloped in a delicate vanilla scent from head to toe, slipped into her cosy dark blue loungewear, let her damp hair fall loosely over her shoulders and went down to the kitchen to make herself a cup of coffee.

As the appetising aroma slowly wafted through the room, she stood at the kitchen window and gazed pensively out into the small garden. Normally, the sight of it calmed her soul, temporarily easing the weight in her stomach. But after her recent nightmare, her plan didn't quite work out that morning. The feeling of still not being in control of part of her life, of not

being in control of herself, remained. The old conditioned fears kept coming back, still stuck in her brain like annoying, dried-up stains despite therapy.

Laura let her gaze wander over the lawn dotted with daisies and dandelions which lay lush and green in the mild morning sun, past flowering beds where fragrant roses and purple and white hydrangeas were doing their best to lift Laura's spirits, to the dense boxwood hedge at the back of the property which was slowly growing wild. She had planted it together with her ex-husband. Back when she had still convinced herself that she was happy.

I really must tear out that hedge, she thought, pouring herself a cup of coffee and sipping it with relish. For a while, she had tried to sell the house in order to make a completely fresh start, but then she had to realise that houses where a tragedy had taken place were virtually unsellable. So she had done the only thing left to do and convinced herself that this was her home and that she didn't really want to sell it, even though she continued to offer it on the market. That all that mattered was to fill it with enough positive memories until the dark shadows of the past would eventually disappear.

The fingers of her right hand rested on the cool ceramic surface of the sink, her index finger unconsciously scratching at a tiny bump in the material. It was a minor manufacturing defect that Laura found either annoying or comforting, depending on her mood.

The memory of a Saturday morning two years ago, when she had scrubbed a tiny dried bloodstain off the bump with an old toothbrush, had almost been suppressed. As had the silent tears that had streamed down her cheeks. At the time, she had blamed herself for everything. For the many little things that had made him lose his temper. She had allowed herself to be persuaded that men got angry sometimes. That it was normal, and that it was her fault. That her behaviour had provoked him.

That he couldn't help but give her a hard shove after she accidentally bumped into him and the hot tea from his cup spilled over his wrist. That Laura had fallen and hit her upper lip on the ceramic sink, causing a laceration – he really couldn't help that, which she was willing to believe at the time.

Since he was not to blame, it seemed only natural to him that she should clean up the mess herself – the spilled tea and, of course, the blood that had flowed from her lip like water from a tap.

The notification signal from her cell phone abruptly interrupted her dark thoughts. Startled, she flinched, set her coffee cup down on the countertop and reached for her smartphone.

It was an email from her boss:

Take a look at the attachment. Denton Corp. has given us the exclusive contract for an urgent property search. You must have made a big impression on someone, they specifically requested you for this job.

The deadline is Monday morning, it's urgent.

Your contact person is Michael Harris.

I'm counting on you.

Laura frowned and sighed deeply. She had actually been looking forward to doing a few things this weekend that had nothing to do with work. But when she thought about it and considered the knot of unease in her stomach, maybe it wasn't such a bad thing to be able to distract herself with work. *As usual*, she admitted to herself.

When she entered the office on Monday morning and carelessly dropped her handbag on the desk, one hand already on the computer to start it up, her secretary Louisa came rushing in after her.

“Good morning, Laura! It’s almost ten o’clock!”

“I know! I had to quickly revise the presentation for Denton Corporation this morning. That Harris guy, or whatever his name is, cost me the whole weekend.”

The frustration in her voice was hard to miss. Louisa would have liked to appease her colleague, but she had to add fuel to the fire: “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to swallow your anger for now. Mr Harris is already here. He’s been waiting in the conference room for five minutes.”

“Shit. Give me a second. Offer him a coffee! I’ll be right there.”

Laura took a deep breath in and out and smoothed her palms over the elegant black cotton skirt that, paired with a light blue, slim-fit blouse and black suede pumps, made up her outfit that morning. Another deep breath and she was ready to put on her professional face.

Shortly thereafter, she entered the conference room which was dominated by a large oval glass table. The man who was waiting for her there and now rose from the chair he had been sitting in shook her hand with a firm, confident grip.

“Miss Sands, I presume. I’m very pleased to meet you.” The words rolled off his lips in a smoky, dark voice.

She casually noted that Michael Harris was not unattractive - slim, wiry, with a slight gray tinge to his short black hair. His gray-blue eyes sparkled friendly and were accentuated by subtle laugh lines. He must have been in his early fifties, and his mouth seemed to be constantly smiling slightly suggestively as he leisurely sized Laura up, letting his gaze glide over her almost lasciviously. Lack of self-confidence was definitely not one of this man’s problems!

Laura cleared her throat and motioned for the man to sit back down.

“Has my assistant offered you anything to drink yet, coffee, tea?”

Still wearing that peculiar smile, he replied, “She already asked, yes. Thank you.”

As she sat down too, Mr Harris leaned back relaxed and stretched his feet out under the table. Laura didn’t know whether to find this charming or rude. Intuitively, she raised her eyebrow, and for a split second, a look of consternation flitted across her face before she regained her composure and finally turned to business.

“Well, Mr Harris... Mr Thomson has already given me a rough overview of what your company needs. Based on that information, I have selected two properties that could meet your requirements, both in terms of square footage and layout.”

Harris grinned at her defiantly. His eyes sparkled cheerfully. “You worked over the weekend? Just for me?”

Laura noticed the ambiguous undertone and was slightly annoyed. She would have liked to reply that she had hardly had any other choice, but she refrained from making that comment and replied with a cool smile: “Of course. It’s part of our customer service.”

She turned on the projector with the push of a button on the remote control. Immediately, the back wall of the room was flooded with a rectangle of white light.

“Very well-worded answer,” he replied with a grin and a challenging wink.

He’s making fun of me!

Laura suddenly felt uncomfortable. Flirting, double entendres... none of that had any place in her life anymore. She had shed that carefree part of her personality like a snake sheds its old skin. Such entanglements always caused problems, and she had already experienced more than enough of those, enough to last

several lifetimes. On the street or in a café, she could reject a man as rudely as she wanted. But a customer... that was a much more sensitive matter, which increased her discomfort.

Just start the presentation.

With suddenly trembling fingers, she searched through the papers on the table for the remote control until Mr Confident suddenly held out the item she was looking for. “Are you looking for this?”

She had to suppress an unpleasant shiver when their fingers accidentally touched as she took the flat piece of plastic from his hand. It had been a long time since she had found male closeness pleasant.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to start the presentation right away.”

He nodded, then finally turned his gaze to the projection screen on the long side of the wall.

In a matter-of-fact, calm and structured manner, she presented Michael Harris with the floor plans, photos and facts about the two selected warehouse and building complexes, looking at him as little as possible.

As the presentation came to its inevitable end, she felt obliged to turn her attention back to him.

“You have prepared well, Miss Sands. I appreciate that very much. I like both complexes so far.”

“If your company is also considering the option of building itself instead of buying, I have another suitable plot of land on offer. I’ve already obtained the floor plan, but I must admit that the infrastructure in this part of town isn’t quite as good...”

He interrupted her with a wave of his hand. “Very eager.”

Again that ambiguous grin. He was actually making fun of her! Before she could take offense, he continued,

“... but building is out of the question for us. Thank you very much for your efforts, though. When can I view the two complexes?”

“I’ll arrange viewing appointments with the caretaker and call you back later. Would that be okay?”

He stood up and smiled charmingly, looking deep into her eyes for a little too long.

“That would be fine, Laura.”

The sound of her name coming from his mouth sent a cold shiver down her spine. Instinctively, she took a small step back. In order not to let him see that he had thrown her off balance, she suddenly looked at him searchingly, almost defiantly, and asked, “Why did you specifically

ask for me to assist you? Our agency has more experienced brokers.”

He smiled, a little calculatingly, she thought. “You come highly recommended.” His gaze left no doubt that he had no intention of revealing the name of her benefactor, and she had no intention of giving him the satisfaction of another overly superior response.

“Well, I’ll be in touch later, Mr Harris,” she replied, extending her hand to him. He held it firmly in his for a moment until his warmth crept intensely up her arm and she became all too aware of their intertwined palms. What the hell was that supposed to be?

“Please, call me Michael.”

She smiled wryly and withdrew her hand as if there were a risk of serious injury if she left it in his care any longer. When he finally disappeared into the elevator, she breathed a sigh of relief and returned to her office to recover from his proximity.

Half an hour later, she picked up the phone to make the promised call after arranging an appointment with the caretaker of the first building. The receiver suddenly felt heavy in her hand. Something made her hesitate, even though she couldn’t have said what it was. She

took a deep breath, then pulled herself together and finally dialed Michael Harris' number.

"Harris."

"Mr Harris, this is Laura Sands."

There was a second of silence on the line before his hoarse laugh rolled into her ear, admittedly quite sexy.

"If I remember correctly, I asked you earlier to call me Michael."

He smiled audibly. Laura nipped the little flirtation in the bud and replied, "That's right... I have good news for you! I've been able to arrange a viewing for the second property I showed you for the day after tomorrow at noon. Would two o'clock be convenient for you?"

She heard paper rustling and a ballpoint pen clicking noisily several times. The feeling suddenly sent a cold shiver down her spine. The constant clicking her ex-husband had made with his pen during their divorce proceedings in court was still too present in her mind.

Click, click. Click, click.

After a while, the judge had asked him to stop this disturbance, whereupon her ex-husband had looked at him provocatively and repeated the game with a malicious grin, just to irritate the judge and make clear his lack of respect.

Click, click. Click, click.

Only when he was threatened with an extended prison sentence if he continued to disregard the court's instructions did the pen fall silent. However, the sound and the feelings associated with it were forever etched in Laura's memory. Click, click. Click, click.

She pushed the memory away and tried to concentrate on the conversation again. Or rather, on the silence that had now prevailed on the line for far too long.

"Mr Harris? Is two o'clock on Wednesday convenient for you?"

A clearing of the throat.

"To be honest, twelve o'clock fits better for me. Do you know Adamo's?"

"Yes, I know the restaurant. But what ...?"

"I'd like to find out more about you. I like to know who I'm dealing with."

Oh dear.

"I don't know if that's necessary ..."

"I'm looking forward to it! Have a nice day!"

Before Laura could respond, she heard a soft click. The line was dead.