

Eden

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For Marijke, as always.

# Preface

I'm a believer as much as a non-believer and mostly the type of person that thinks 'seeing is believing' – which puts the whole issue of faith into a rather strange perspective, according to me. Sometimes I envy people who are true believers, because in my opinion, a firm belief in something is the only thing that can bring absolute peace to your soul. Mostly parents raise you in certain religious beliefs, or sometimes people change their minds about the divine as they go through life. Whatever the case, I hope there is something up there. No one wants to live just one lifetime, but I will only know for sure when I see Him.

I'm also of the opinion that you should read a book for fun, which is why I'm warning people in advance. My story isn't meant to sacrifice sacred cows, but some scenes could be deemed offensive to readers, especially to people of faith. If you think that this is you, maybe it is wise to put the book aside now.

In case you don't, I wish you a pleasant reading experience.

Part 1

Retribution

I woke up in a dark, stifling room.

Still groggy with sleep, I stared at the floor. Drool dribbled down my double chin and splattered onto my naked upper leg. The fact that it was a naked leg only occurred to me after a few more seconds. Which wasn't surprising – my head felt like a bunch of elephants were playing musical chairs inside my brain. Everything was spinning, and with each beat of my heart my head nearly exploded. A haze danced in front of my eyes. A cold draft covered me like a blanket of ice, chilling me to the core of my soul. My body shook uncontrollably. My feet – which seemed rooted to the spot on the icy, concrete floor – felt numb, and my nipples would have made great clothes pegs. The blinking light didn't make the situation any better. On. Off.

Light. Dark... it was driving me nuts. In short:

This was not exactly what I'd call a glorious awakening.

*Where am I? What happened?*

I moaned. Without thinking, I tried to raise a hand to my throbbing head, but I didn't get far. A jab of pain in my wrists sent a rush of adrenalin through me, dissolving the haze and making me more alert. The throbbing faded into the background, and the elephants turned to mice. In the glare of the strip light above me, which challenged the darkness with every flicker, I saw that my arms were tied behind me against the chair. I didn't just see it – I *felt* it. Thick, chafing flax rope was strung across my body from shoulder

to thigh in the shape of an X, fixed to the same chair, and cutting into my flesh with each movement I made.

Not quite ready to face reality, I tried to wriggle free. Pointless, of course.

*What the hell is this?*

My heart was hammering like crazy. The temperature couldn't be more than forty, and yet I was sweating like a pig. I tried once more, putting all my strength into it – to no avail, but I wouldn't give up. A sharp pain lanced through me. My anger forced the pain to the background. Yanking on the rope, I got to my feet – or at least, I tried to tell my limbs to do so. It was a big mistake. My legs were also tied to the chair, and when I tried to pry them loose and stand up straight, I lost my balance. The chair started to tilt to the side, the two left legs lifting up from the floor, and I hit the floor with a thud.

At once, the elephants were back and I saw stars.

I struggled to sit up, but after a few seconds I was out of breath and I just lay there on my side, cursing myself for my stupidity.

All this time I'd managed to silence my surfacing panic, more or less. I once read somewhere that you can only keep a clear head if you suppress your panic, which could be the difference between life and death. There's a fine line between the two, the span of mere seconds, which I know from experience. But my fall caused me to lose that control. My body shook. "Help! Help me!" My cries echoed off the plastered walls of the bare room.

Then I saw her.

Naked, just like me. Long legs, bare stomach, full breasts. She was on the opposite side of the room, sitting on a chair, but she wasn't tied to it. I gasped for breath, wanted to beg for her help, but couldn't utter a single word. The silence that

ensued was deafening. I don't know what frightened me more – that silence or the woman.

On second thought, I take that back. The woman was definitely more frightening.

Her long, brown hair was tangled and dirty. Her amber-colored eyes were filled with sadness. And how I knew that this person was *me*, I still don't know today. I just knew. My eyes might have been able to deceive me, but I *felt* it, deep within me.

"How..?" I heard myself stammer. The strip light – off. On. Light. Dark.

The woman didn't reply. Was that a tear rolling down her cheek?

"What the hell is this?" I ground out.

Silence.

The woman's left arm started to move. Because of the damned blinking light – and the fact I was still lying on my side – the image of her moving looked even more sinister, like a stuttering silent movie. A gun in her hand. Frame one: the gun near her thigh. Darkness. Frame two: the gun close to her waist, her eyes filled with tears. Darkness. Frame three: the gun pressed against her neck, her mouth slightly agape, her head hesitantly shaking no, her tears. Darkness. Frame four: the gun against her temple.

*Jesus, no.*

"Wait!"

A bang, so loud it seemed to shatter my eardrums, while the sound of the gun clattering to the floor was pushed into the background.

The strip light. Off. On. Light. Dark.

In the glare, I saw the body – *my* body – lying motionlessly on the floor. Blood ran toward me like a meandering stream of water.

I screamed.

What are your options when you're tied to a chair on the floor in some dark hole? That's right – you don't have any.

It took me a good, long while before I'd calmed down somewhat. As calm as any naked, tied-up girl who'd just witnessed – from up close – her double committing suicide with a bullet to the brain could be, anyway.

*Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Don't look at the body.*

That helped – a little. But I wasn't sure the darkness was any better.

As controlled as I could, I inhaled the damp air. A sickening feeling came over me and only got worse when I started to consider what usually happens to a person's body once that person is dead.

*Rigor mortis, decomposition, maggots...*

*Don't think about that, I urged myself. By that time you'll be long gone.*

God, I really hoped I was right about that.

How long was I there on the floor, eyes closed and controlling my breathing as carefully as I could?

Seconds? Minutes? Hours? It felt like a lifetime was passing me by.

*This is all a joke, a nightmare. Once you open your eyes for real, the body will be gone and you'll find yourself spooning with Mark in your very own bed.*

I opened my eyes.

The strip light: off. On. Light. Dark.

My inner voice was a liar.

Soulless, wide-open eyes were staring at me, seemingly watching me. Which was nonsense, of course. On the other hand, it was just as nonsensical to wake up tied to a chair, facing someone who looked just like me and had a death wish. Because that's what it had been, right? Someone who just *looked* like me? Surely there was just one me. I hadn't been cloned and as far as I knew I didn't have a twin sister.

Maybe I should grill my parents about it – if I ever got out of this bizarre situation. It wouldn't be the first secret my dad had kept.

*Of course you're not that woman. The mere thought is ridiculous. She just happens to look like you.*

Naturally. Of course it was just a coincidence. What a load of horse crap. What the *hell* was going on?

My eyes darted across the room. I half-expected cameras mounted to the walls.

Because that's what it had to be, I reasoned. *One big, fucking joke. Well, ha ha. LOL supreme. Now could someone please show up to get me out of this mess?*

I knew it was no use lying to myself.

*Okay, think. How did you get here? What's the last thing you remember?*

It was a simple enough question. And yet, the answer came to me in fragments. It wasn't that I couldn't remember – because I certainly could – but it was like looking at a flickering movie reel, like my mind was being influenced by the wavering light.

Mark, pushing me up against the wall passionately. His hands sliding through my hair. His lips on mine. The shudder that ran through me the moment he pressed his warm body against mine. In that last memory, we made love, but something wasn't right about that picture. We were crying. Why on earth were we crying?

I racked my brain for the answer. The cold enveloping me didn't help. My body was shaking so violently that I almost started to think it was the floor that was trembling, not me.

*"... so sorry. We've detected metastasis from the primary carcinoma..."*

Mark's voice, whispering dejectedly: "*How long before she...*"

The doctor's voice, calm, clinical: "*Hard to say. Months, perhaps a year.*"

God, how I wanted to jump up from my chair and smack him in the face. There was no emotion in his tone. That hack was telling me my life was over like he was having a casual chat about his mother-in-law. But the reality was that somehow, it made sense. This was his job. He might have to conduct conversations like these on a daily basis. Wouldn't we all raise our emotional shields in that case? You had to not to lose your mind. But fuck it, this was *my life* we were talking about. I was special, wasn't I?

Funny, that. This feeling most of us seem to have – that we're different. Immortal, even. We always know death is waiting for us, but only when you actually turn that corner do you realize just how fragile life really is.

The realization that I'm still walking this earth and have the ability to write this all down while he, along with billions of other people, drew his last breath a long time ago... it's almost comical in a sinister way.

In my memory, I couldn't move as I sat there across from the doctor. His words rained down on me like the blows of a sledgehammer. Mark's hand in mine. He almost had to carry me out of that hospital.

I didn't tell my family. *Couldn't* tell them. I'd cross that bridge later, I reasoned, once we'd dealt with it ourselves. Made our peace with it as best as we could. But whether

I actually did or not – I couldn't remember. The mental images didn't reach that far. Nor did I remember anything that might explain my naked presence in this room. Had I been abducted? And if so, why?

I shook my head. It wasn't important right now. I had to find a way to get out of here.

*Think.*

I tried, I really did. And I launched so many attempts to free myself that the skin under the ropes got raw from trying.

*Just admit it, darling. You won't get out of this without help.*

So I did the only thing left to me at this point.

I cried for help.