

'BRILLIANTLY DONE
AND A MUST READ.'

LEIGHTON GAGE

LINDA JANSMA

Dutch thriller from award-winning author

HAUNTED



GOING DUTCH

The book cover features a close-up photograph of a young woman with long, wavy, reddish-brown hair. She has light-colored eyes and is looking upwards and to the right with a contemplative expression. The background of the photo is dark and out of focus. Overlaid on the lower half of the image is a dark horizontal band containing the author's name and the title. At the very bottom, there is a small logo and publisher information.

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From the Dutch award-winning author, Linda Jansma, comes a
thriller
that goes from heartbreaking to heart stopping in the blink of an
eye...

Haunted

Sixteen years ago, something terrible happened to Janine –so
terrible she never told anyone.

Now she is a successful business woman and owner of a famous
dance club in Amsterdam. With a wonderful husband and lovely
daughter Janine seems to have it all, until in one life-shattering
moment the love of her life is murdered in cold blood.

Completely devastated and alone, she fears her past is finally
catching up with her - threatening not only her own life but also
that of her daughter...

‘Enigmatic crime, an engaging protagonist and pulse-pounding
surprise drive Linda Jansma’s Haunted. This, the first translation of
one of her books into English, is both brilliantly done and a must
read’

Leighton Gage, author of the Chief Inspector Silva Series.

LINDA JANSMA

Haunted



GOING DUTCH

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In loving memory
TIMMY
1995-2010
Our little big man

Love has no defenses;
You only know it's love when it hurts.
~ Father Peregrine, The Hawk and the Dove

ONE

Utrecht, July 6th, 1992

She was barely sixteen. Too young, he thought. Much too young for the harsh world she dwelled in and definitely too young to be here in bed with him.

Reclining against the wall, propped up by pillows, he rummaged around between the clutter on the nightstand and grabbed a packet of Barclays. As he lit his cigarette, he glanced over at the naked body of the girl lying beside him. She was on her stomach, her face turned away from him, her left arm curled around the pillow. The sheet, draped loosely across her legs and right arm, left her back and creamy white buttocks exposed. Her breathing was quiet and regular.

He took a long drag of his cigarette, inhaling deeply before blowing the smoke toward the ceiling. This had been a monumentally stupid move. He should have dropped her off at the station right after he had picked her up – that would have been standard procedure. What had gotten into him? What had prompted him to take her home with him instead? Was it her curly red hair, framing her haggard though still pretty face?

Or her large blue eyes, dulled now from pain, but showing a tiny remnant of her former innocence, if you looked closely?

Or maybe it had been nothing but the tingling sensation in his crotch – an overwhelming, almost animal desire to fuck her. He knew he had wanted to ever since he had first laid eyes on her. It had given him sleepless nights for weeks. All he could think about was she. When he pictured her perfect body, her soft breasts, how he would enfold them with his eager hands and massage them until her nipples hardened beneath his touch – so vivid were his dreams that he inevitably woke up with an erection, mercilessly reminding him of how desperately he wanted her.

He closed his eyes, dragged deeply on his cigarette and let the smoke whirl around inside his lungs, leaning his head against the wall behind him. An illusion, that was all it had been. A deep, secret longing. Manageable, as long as he kept his distance. Manageable, as long as he realized it could never be. That it was impossible. Unethical. Immoral. So what had possessed him? It wasn't an illusion anymore. He had done it. He had fucked her. Several times. All fucking night, in fact.

He squeezed the tip of his cigarette between thumb and forefinger to extinguish it, tossed the butt on the nightstand and pulled the packet of Barclays toward him again in one fluid move. Empty.

'Damn,' he mumbled, scrunching up the empty wrapper in his fist before impatiently throwing it back on the nightstand. After another glance at the girl beside him, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose. He crossed to the window, leaned his hands on the windowsill and pressed his forehead against the cool glass to stare down into the narrow street below. How was he going to explain this? Marco would be furious. All right, she was no innocent lamb, far from it in fact – as she had so skillfully proven last night – but she was a minor. This could cost him his job. Maybe more.

He heaved a sigh, soundlessly thumping the windowsill with his fist. He needed another smoke. And a large tumbler of Scotch. Glancing over his shoulder he noted the

half empty bottle of Paddy on the nightstand. Not a good idea. Not today. At least not until he had talked to Marco.

He turned away from the window, picked his jeans and shirt off the floor and put them on. For a moment he lingered beside the bed, gazing pensively down at the sleeping girl. Lust. That's what it had been. Nothing more, nothing less. Leaning forward, he gently wiped a lock of soft red hair from her brow with his thumb. Pure lust, that's all. Or was it?

Then, abruptly, he straightened up, tucked his shirt into his jeans and hurried out of the apartment. When he returned with a new carton of Barclays ten minutes later, the bed was empty. The girl was gone, as were her clothes. And along with them the brand-new watch he had left on the nightstand.

'Damn,' he muttered.

TWO

April 10th, 2009, 7:48 a.m.

'Mom?'

I look up with a start. 'Jesus, Nicole, you scared the crap out of me!'

'Sorry.' She is standing in the doorway to my office, her backpack casually dangling from her shoulder.

I look at the big round clock on the wall. Twelve minutes to eight. Is that really the time?

'I sent you a text,' she says, 'but you didn't reply.'

Feeling a pang of guilt, I glance at the cell phone on the corner of my desk. I did hear it beep over an hour ago, but I never bothered to read the message.

'I'm sorry, honey, I'm terribly busy. I didn't have time to answer.'

'What are you working on?' She dumps her bag on the floor and moves to my side of the desk, standing behind me to look over my shoulder at my laptop screen.

'The Mercury Summer Festival in July. I've only got about three months left to prepare.'

Her face lights up. 'Can I come this year?' she asks. 'I'll be sixteen next week, after all.'

I shake my head. 'Forget it, Nicole. I can't go around breaking my own house rules. You'll have to wait until you're twenty-one.'

'Your rules suck,' she mumbles, sulking, and I give her a warning look, but she ignores it.

'What are you doing here?' I ask, closing my laptop and shoving it toward the middle of the desk. She knows I don't want her to come here all by herself, especially not this early in the morning.

'I've decided what I want for my birthday.'

The fact that she doesn't immediately come out and tell me what it is puts me on alert. 'Oh?' I ask. 'Let's hear it.'

‘I want a dog. A Labrador. Or a Golden Retriever.’

I feel a chill, as if the blood is freezing in my veins. No. No dog. Not ever. No cat. No rabbit. No hamster, no mouse, no rat. Nothing. Nothing at all.

‘I don’t think that’s such a good idea, Nicole,’ I say as calmly as I can manage. ‘You’re in school all day. Who will look after it when you can’t?’

‘I don’t need anyone to look after it. I’ll do it myself; I’m old enough to handle that. You won’t have to walk it, you know, if that’s what you’re worried about.’

‘That’s not the point. But I know exactly how this is going to end. You’re full of good intentions now, but before long you’ll forget all about them, and then your father and I will be stuck with a dog. We really can’t have that.’

‘Why do you hate dogs so much?’

‘I don’t *hate* dogs, sweetie. They’re just a lot of work. In two years’ time you’ll be going to college, and then what?’

‘I’ll take it with me. There are plenty of students who have pets.’

I keep my mouth shut. How can I tell her that’s exactly what I’m afraid of?

‘Please, Mom. Come on. I never asked for a dog before because I know how you feel about them, but I’m almost sixteen now.’ Standing behind me, she wraps her arms around my neck and presses her cheek against mine. ‘Besides, how could anyone refuse a future veterinary student a pet?’

I crane my neck and see her shining blue eyes, begging me. She knows exactly how to manipulate me, how to get anything she wants from me. But this time I’m putting my foot down.

‘I still think it’s a bad idea, Nicole. A really bad idea.’

She lets go of me and turns away, furious. ‘Dad says I can have one!’

‘Well, I’m using my veto right. End of discussion.’ I get up, grab my bag from beside my desk and put on my coat. ‘What time do your classes start?’

She doesn't answer and keeps her back turned, moping.

'Nicole?'

'Eight-thirty.'

'Want me to give you a ride?'

'Don't bother,' she snaps. She shakes her long red hair back and snatches her backpack from the floor. 'I'll take the tram.'

And before I have a chance to respond, she is out the door.

Barely an hour later I'm back home, sitting at the kitchen table. I'm still a bit upset that Nicole walked out so abruptly. I would have preferred to drive her to school myself. Amsterdam's Eastern Docklands are not the safest area for a young girl to wait for a tram. But I decided not to provoke her any further, and so I restrained myself and didn't go after her. She had come to the club all by herself, after all. And this wasn't the first time, either, so she should be fine. So why do I feel an invisible hand of worry wrapping itself around my throat when I consider all the bad things that could happen to her?

Albert puts a mug of coffee on the table before me. 'Let her have a dog, Janine,' he says, breaking the silence. 'If you don't give her one, she'll just get one from the pound as soon as she moves out.' He opens the dishwasher and starts loading it with the breakfast dishes.

'Did she tell you that?'

He shakes his head. 'No, but it would be naïve to think she wouldn't.' He glances at me briefly, teasingly, over his shoulder. 'She's headstrong, and we both know who she got that from.'

I look at his broad back, the golden curls in his neck, and smile. He's such a wonderfully down-to-earth man – one of the things that attracted me to him almost seventeen years ago. I was a bit wild and rebellious myself in those days, and it always felt like a breath of fresh air when he would calm me down with his serene, businesslike way of looking at things. That hasn't changed.

‘If I give her a dog, she’ll take it with her when she goes to college. She’ll be all alone out there, Albert, and vulnerable. She’ll grow attached to it. What if something happens to it?’

‘It won’t.’ He closes the dishwasher, pours coffee into a mug that says *Best Dad in the World* and sits down across from me. ‘Look. I realize what’s on your mind, and I know it’s hard for you to let go, but Nicole can take care of herself. You know her. You know what she’s like.’

‘Headstrong. You said so yourself. She won’t listen to me. She never listens.’

‘Janine, come on. She’s sixteen, she...’

‘Fifteen.’

‘Almost sixteen. She’s a teenager, and all teenagers are obstinate and rebellious. It’s a phase.’ He puts his hand on top of mine. ‘No one can fault you for being careful, but please don’t tie her down. It will only make her more rebellious.’

I think of my own childhood, a far from happy time, and I know he’s got a point. My way might only cause more problems. I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose between my thumb and forefinger. ‘Maybe you’re right,’ I sigh.

‘You’re just tired,’ he says. ‘You’ve been working all night. Get a few hours of sleep and you’ll see things differently, I’m sure.’

I finish my coffee and push the mug away from me. ‘Sometimes I think about selling the club,’ I tell him.

He almost chokes on his coffee before staring at me, speechless.

I shrug apologetically. ‘The long nights are starting to get to me.’

‘But only six months ago, on the club’s tenth anniversary, you said it’s your life,’ he says. ‘Aren’t you overreacting a bit?’

‘I’m not saying I want to sell right *now*,’ I respond, maybe a bit sharper than I intended. ‘It’s just something I’ve been thinking about.’

He gets up, silently collects the coffee mugs and puts them on the countertop. I can see I’ve shocked him, maybe even hurt his

feelings, and regret wells up inside me. The club isn't just *my* whole life, but his as well.

'I'm sorry,' I say quietly. 'You're right. I *am* tired.' I rise and wrap my arms around him. 'It was just an impulse, OK? I don't really intend to sell the club. Not anytime soon, anyway.' I gaze up at him, smiling. 'I'm too young to retire anyway.'

He bursts out laughing. 'Retiring at thirty-two? No, I don't think you'd be happy. You'd go nuts sitting at home all day.'

'Hey!' I give him a playful poke in the ribs. 'Who says I'm going to be sitting at home all day when I retire?'

'Me. And I'll be right beside you. I can picture it already: you and me together, two nosy old pensioners, watching the neighbors from behind the flowers in the windowsill.'

I can see the teasing sparkle in his eyes, and a lump in my throat makes swallowing hard. I put my hands on his freshly shaven cheeks and kiss him. God, how I love this man. I love him intensely and unconditionally.

THREE

April 18th, 2009, 5.56 p.m.

Club Mercury.

I crane my neck and stare up at the big neon sign adorning the façade of the enormous building. It's visible from afar in the dark, and it makes me proud. I've worked hard to achieve this.

I was twenty-two when I opened Mercury. A romantic, upscale modern club that offers music and dancing. A welcoming place. We host anything from weddings to stud parties and galas, and live music is the rule rather than the exception. All of these things soon awarded us the designation *one of Amsterdam's most trendy clubs*.

It was Albert who put me up to it. We had known each other for four years when he felt it was time for me to fulfill a dream I had been fostering for a long time. But I was unconvinced. It would take a lot of money, and I knew that my circumstances might preclude such a big loan, even if I did have a great business plan. Albert pushed me, saying he had some money saved up and that he would guarantee the loan with his own assets. The idea frightened me. My experiences with people who made me promises had not been good, and I had learned the hard way that nothing in life ever comes for free. But in the end he managed to convince me of his good intentions in a way I had never anticipated: he asked me to marry him. Even though his proposal overwhelmed me at first, and I wasn't sure if I would be able to commit to someone so permanently, I said yes. We had a quiet wedding. No fuss, no party, and the only people present were the civil servant and two of Albert's friends as witnesses.

Eighteen months later I had obtained all the necessary papers and diplomas, and a bank gave me a loan that we lumped together with Albert's savings. We found and bought a wonderful venue, an enormous warehouse built in 1921, situated in Amsterdam's Eastern

Docklands area. We hired architects, designers, artists, contractors, and engineers. Within a year they transformed the monumental building into something I wanted: a club in neoclassicist style with two dance halls, three smaller halls for weddings, parties or meetings, a large café-restaurant and an attractive outdoor area.

The grand opening was out of this world. The house was packed, and not just on the first night – the guests kept coming. The combination we offered of pleasant dining and dancing, both at the same venue, turned out to be a hit. Within three years numerous people had found their way to Mercury and the club had become a success. Albert, myself and Nicole, who was eight years old by then, could exchange our two-bedroom apartment in the east of Amsterdam for a big house in one of the more expensive residential neighborhoods of Amstelveen, not far from the city. In the years after that the club held its attraction for guests. We were booked solid night after night, and the four nights a week the nightclub opened its doors were usually so busy that we had to stop letting people in even before midnight.

Everything I had ever dreamed of came true. My club had become a huge success.

I'm still standing there, staring at the neon sign, when my cell phone starts to ring. Clumsily I rummage around inside my bag for it and check the display. It's Albert.

'I'm almost there,' I announce before he can say anything.

'How come you always do that?' I hear him say.

'What?'

'Answer my questions before I've even asked them.'

I chuckle. 'Because I always know exactly why you're calling.'

'Where are you?'

'Right outside,' I tell him.

'Have you got the present?'

'Yes. I didn't get it wrapped, though. Is that a problem?'

He laughs. 'You'd better come in,' he says. 'Nicole is seriously starting to wonder whether you'll be here before her friends arrive.'

'God, they won't be here for another hour,' I say, glancing at my watch.

'You know what she's like.'

'Give me ten seconds,' I say, ending the call. I drop my cell phone back into my purse and take another look at the neon sign, an image that continuously serves to remind me how happy I am. With my business. And with my family.

A soft whine makes me glance over. There it is. Nicole's present. A four-month-old Labrador. Innocent and endearing. A coat like golden velvet, and chubby as only puppies at that age can be. It gazes at me with beautiful, deep brown eyes, open and curious. Its short, stumpy tail starts wagging hesitantly. Oh God. It's starting to sink in what I've done. I've let myself be swayed. All those years I had sworn to never again allow anything into my life, besides Albert and Nicole, which might make me weak. And now I'm standing here with a puppy. A puppy that will depend on me, trust me. How could I have let this happen? Briefly I close my eyes, realizing I won't be able to leave the dog alone for a minute.

I hunker down, put my hand on its back and nod toward the big glass doors of the club. 'This is where you'll be spending most of your time,' I tell the dog. 'Better get used to it.'

Nicole is overjoyed when we introduce her to her birthday present in my office. She hugs me so tight she's cutting off my circulation.

'But there is one condition,' I tell her as soon as she lets go.

'Anything,' she says breathlessly. 'I'll do anything you want.'

'*Anything?*' Albert says, teasing. 'Will you take out the garbage for a whole year?' He knows how much she hates that chore.

'Do I have to?' she asks, making a face.

'You just said you'd do anything.'

'Anything Mom wants, yes. Not what *you* want.'

'Oh? So what I want doesn't matter?' Albert says, feigning injury.

She laughs, wraps her arms around him and plants a kiss on his cheek. 'You're my dad. That matters.'

I see his proud, contented face and smile. Albert and Nicole. Two peas in a pod. They are inseparable, and that fills me with a deep sense of satisfaction. Things could have turned out so very differently.

'Listen, Nicole,' I say. 'I don't want that dog to be home alone all day. When you're at school and your father and I need to work, I'm bringing it here with me. You can come pick it up after school. Is that a deal?'

'That's your condition?' she asks. She gazes wide-eyed at Albert and then looks back at me. 'I thought you couldn't stand dogs.'

'That's nonsense,' I say, but I don't elaborate. That's the last thing I want. To explain myself. Of course I would rather not have had the dog. But that's not the dog's fault. It's mine. Because I'm scared. Terrified. It's so defenseless. So vulnerable. *I'm* vulnerable, because of the dog. I should never have given in.

'But it's fine,' she says. 'I'm actually quite happy about that. At least this way he'll have some company when I'm not there.' She gets down on her knees and wraps her arms around the dog's neck. 'Isn't that right, Franklin?'

'Franklin?' Albert says.

She nods. 'I think he looks like a Franklin.' She buries her face in the fur around his neck, and the dog rolls over and sticks all four legs up in the air. Nicole rubs its belly, and the pup rewards her with grunts of pleasure and one fiercely kicking hind leg.

'Can I show him to Zara? She said she'd come early.'

That was to be expected. Zara has been Nicole's best friend ever since we moved to Amstelveen. She's a gentle girl of Moroccan descent. Her hair flows down to her shoulders in thick black waves, she has big dark eyes with long eyelashes, and flawless olive skin. Nicole and Zara spend a lot of time together after school and during school breaks. Since they've started high school they've been joined by Simon, a somewhat unruly Jewish upstart with a big

mouth, and Paulo, a muscular fellow, at least a head and a half taller than Simon, with night-black skin. I always smile when I see the four of them together. Including my redheaded daughter Nicole, they are the most ragtag multicultural bunch of teenagers anyone could imagine.

I allow it with a gesture of my hand. 'But bring him back here afterwards. The poor thing has been through enough already without your friends yelling and the noise of your party.'

She nods and kisses 'Franklin' on the head, and he returns a couple of sloppy licks.

I gaze at them silently and feel my stomach clench again. Damn it, why can't I just enjoy this? This fear is eating me up inside. I know I shouldn't give in to it, but I can't help myself. Let it go, Albert always says. Just let it go. That's the best thing you can do. Just a shame it's so bloody impossible.

FOUR

May 2nd, 2009, 7.29 a.m.

The club is silent. It's Saturday morning and the last members of my staff have left some time ago. I appreciate their hard work in making our club night another success.

I'm sitting by myself at a restaurant table, with the newspaper open before me and a cup of coffee at my elbow. Philippe, our head chef, arrived about half an hour ago. Even though the kitchen doesn't open until noon, he comes in around seven every morning, a strange habit he adopted from the very first day he came to work for us. His excuse, that we work à la carte and so he wants to make sure everything is shipshape before he turns on the stoves, has always seemed ridiculous to me, but I've come to accept it. And I don't mind. It's wonderfully informal.

I hear familiar noises behind the swinging doors to the kitchen – rattling dishes, clinking crystal, the door of the big cooler opening and closing – and I chuckle quietly to myself. Philippe is a hulking man in his early fifties, balding, with rosy cheeks and friendly, sparkling eyes. He is always very much present, even though I hardly ever see or hear him during opening hours. But now, in the almost preternatural quiet, I can hear everything he's doing. It makes me feel safe, for now at least I know I'm not alone. I don't handle loneliness well – I get scared easily. Nights, especially, can be hard on me sometimes. Silence, old memories making the walls close in on me, the overwhelming fear of being alone. It is one of my biggest weaknesses, a remnant from my past, from a time I would rather not dwell on.

'Here, doll,' Philippe suddenly says, appearing right beside me. He puts a hand on my shoulder while placing a croissant on a saucer on top of my newspaper. I look up at him and smile.

He wipes his hands on the rag dangling from his apron, gazes at me pensively for a second and then sits down across from me.

‘Shouldn’t you be getting home?’

I sip some coffee – it’s gone almost cold – and say, ‘Not yet. Nicole is coming over. I promised to take her shopping.’

‘After working all night? You’re nuts.’ He leans across the little table. ‘Why won’t you consider hiring a manager? You could cut back on your hours and spend more time with your family.’

‘A manager?’ I say. ‘No, thanks. Managers are a pain in the ass. If I hire the wrong one, the jerk could ruin my business. Besides, I don’t think it would suit me. Cutting back on my hours, I mean.’

‘But you’re working your butt off, Janine, and so is Albert.’

I smile at him warmly. ‘I appreciate your concern, Philippe, but it’s our own choice. We both love what we do.’

‘I’m not saying you don’t.’ He rests a fatherly hand on top of mine. ‘I’m just worried that you’re overexerting yourself and you’ll end up with a massive burnout one of these days. Which wouldn’t just hurt us, but you as well. And Nicole.’

‘That’s not going to happen, I swear,’ I say firmly. ‘I’ll go lie down in my office in a minute, have a nap before Nicole arrives, OK? And tonight it’s Albert’s turn to keep the place going, so I get to spend a quiet night at home. Don’t worry, I know my limitations.’

‘I doubt that,’ Philippe says. ‘The last time you said you were going to spend a quiet night at home you were back in your office by nine-thirty...’

‘I just wanted to pick up some documents I’d forgotten.’

‘... And then you stayed until the next morning.’

I sigh, feeling my mood sour. Not because of Philippe’s words, but because I know he’s right, and it annoys me. I just don’t like handing over the controls. I’ve worked hard to build up this business, and the thought of letting anyone else handle my affairs, besides Albert, goes against my grain. Sometimes I wonder why I prefer to do everything myself, and I’ve come to the conclusion

that it must be some form of perfectionism. I could lose everything I've worked for if every little detail isn't perfect, and in order to prevent that, I leave nothing to chance and keep a tight grip on the reins. Maybe too tight sometimes, I realize that.

Philippe gets up and shoves the croissant toward me. 'Eat up,' he says. 'And promise me you'll at least *try* to take things a bit easier.'

'Yes, Dad,' I say, laughing. It doesn't even feel odd to call him that. Philippe has been like a father to me for years now. He's the father I never had, or like I would imagine a father to be: patient, nurturing, but without being pushy. He allows me to make my own choices, all the while gently pushing me in the direction he has in mind.

He gives me an encouraging pat on the shoulder and then moves back toward the kitchen. When he reaches the swinging doors, he pauses and looks back at me. 'I almost forgot ... When I arrived this morning, there was a man outside the staff entrance. He was asking for you, wanted to see you.'

'Me? What about?'

Philippe shrugs. 'I didn't ask. I told him to come back during opening hours.' He winks at me and says, 'You're not having an affair or something, are you?'

I stare at him. 'No, thanks. Albert is quite enough for me.'

His laughter rolls around the restaurant and, shaking his head, he pushes through the doors and disappears into the kitchen.

I awaken startled from a low noise right outside my office door. Bleary-eyed from sleep I sit up in the narrow foldout bed. The wall clock tells me I stretched out on it, exhausted, over ninety minutes ago. I must have slept like a rock during that short time. I feel groggy, my eyes are grainy, and what I would like most is to drop back into the pillow and sleep for a couple more hours.

Yawning, I swing my legs over the side of the bed just as I hear the noise out in the hallway again. I rise gingerly, snatch my clothes

from my office chair and put them on. I don't know why, but suddenly my heart starts pounding. Glancing suspiciously at the door, with nothing but silence on the other side now, I tell myself to stop acting like a baby, that it's probably just the cleaning crew on their way out, but then the door opens slowly. I stifle a cry when I see Dick poking his head inside.

'Dick,' I say, breathing a sigh of fright and relief at the same time, wiping my mussed hair from my eyes with my hand.

'Hey. There's my girl!' he says, opening the door wider.

I'm too proud to let on how much he scared me, and so I don't comment on his idiotic way of entering. 'Stop calling me your girl, Dick,' I respond instead, tense. 'You know I hate it.'

'That's why I keep doing it.' He gives me such an affable grin that I burst out laughing. It's simply impossible to take Dick seriously, no matter how much of a nuisance he can be sometimes.

He's been working for me for nine years now. I remember how he first came in here, a young rascal, barely a year older than myself. Wide-shouldered, a shock of curls, twinkling eyes. And his guitar, of course; the Charvel 375 *de luxe* he was always carrying around. He was looking for a job, he said. Preferably playing the guitar, but anything else was fine, too, and although I doubted his skills at first, I never regretted hiring him. He started out as a barman, and within two years he was our regular disk jockey. Then, since making music was what he loved the most, he founded his own band, the Nocturnal Outlaws, and begged me to let him perform. I wasn't too keen on the idea. I had a reputation to lose and couldn't afford any fiascos, but Albert talked me into it. Dick's first show was a big hit, and in the five years since then he has been a regular guest on our stage. His music manages to create a unique atmosphere, making his performance nights memorable. He is now so popular that tickets for his gigs sell out long before the actual date.

'What are you doing here so early?' I ask.

He snorts. 'Coming to see you. Is there some law against that?'

‘On a Saturday morning, at this hour? Are you feeling ill?’

‘I just like seeing you, you know that.’ He grabs me by the waist, his muscular, tattooed arms lifting me effortlessly off the floor, and then he whirls me around a few times before putting me back down.

‘Such a shame you’re already spoken for,’ he says sincerely, and not for the first time. ‘We could have had a hell of a life together.’

‘Sorry, Dick,’ I say, laughing. ‘Albert beat you to it.’

He makes a dismissive gesture with his hand, like he’s chasing away a bothersome fly. ‘Don’t get me started on Albert. I still don’t understand why you married him.’

‘Maybe it’s because I love him?’

He narrows his eyes at me. ‘I’m confident you do,’ he says. ‘But are you sure he loves you back?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’ I ask coldly.

‘You’ve got money. Who says it wasn’t the money that made him...’

I don’t let him finish, stopping him by raising a warning finger in front of his face. ‘This is where I draw the line, Dick De Jong,’ I say sharply. ‘Don’t forget you owe him much of your success here at the club. If it had been up to me, you would never have set foot on the stage that first time.’

Yanking slightly too hard, I pull the rubber band from my tangled hair and tie it into a fresh ponytail. Albert and Dick don’t see eye to eye, I know that. Their relationship has been awkward and tense from the get-go. When Albert talked me into letting Dick on the stage, it was by no means inspired by friendship, but pure business sense. Somehow or other, Albert knew that Dick had it in him, that he could add something to the club, and he was enough of a professional to push aside his aversion to Dick. Something I can only thank him for now.

‘Sorry. You’re right,’ Dick admits. ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’ Then he playfully wiggles his eyebrows up and down a few times and adds, ‘My girl.’

I glare at him, already opening my mouth to tell him to cut the crap because he's starting to piss me off now, but then the door opens and Nicole walks in, so I restrain myself.

'And good morning to you, beautiful!' Dick exclaims. He wraps his arm around Nicole and gives her a cheerful kiss on the head.

'Get your hands off me, jerk,' she mumbles, shoving him off with an irritated expression on her face.

I'm about to reprimand her for mouthing off to someone over twice her age, but then I decide against it. After all, it's Dick's own fault, in a way. He knows what she's like, and this is by no means the first time Nicole responds to him this way. She has never been fond of Dick; from the very first time she met him, when she was seven, always stubbornly rejecting his efforts at befriending her. He should know that by now. She was never an overly affectionate child, and she still doesn't appreciate it when people she is not intimately familiar with touch her without invitation. Even as a baby she couldn't stand anyone but myself or Albert holding her, and she would scream her little heart out until she was back in our familiar arms.

On the other hand, she is very outgoing and makes friends easily, a personality trait that fills me with pride and trepidation at the same time. Pride, because everyone takes an immediate liking to her, something that has awarded her a great many friends in the course of her life. Trepidation, because I know how much misery it can cause, and I'm glad to know that there is a wide margin between friendship and trust within my daughter.

'What are you doing here anyway, Dick?' I ask again.

'I wanted to talk to you about tonight's show.'

'I won't be here myself tonight, so you'll have to take it up with Albert.'

'Great,' he mumbles, his voice dripping sarcasm. 'What time is he going to be here?'

I shrug. 'Around ten, ten-thirty, I guess.'

‘I can’t wait around that long. I’ll find him tonight, before we go on stage.’ He kisses me on the cheek and waves at Nicole, who nods stiffly, and then leaves my office.

I stand there for a while, staring pensively at the open door after he has left. He is and always will be a strange character. But despite his quirks I like him a lot, and it bothers me that he and Albert can’t seem to get along. I sigh, turn back toward the bed and fold it up into its cupboard.

‘Are you ready?’ I ask Nicole.

She nods. Her eyes shine with the prospect of adding a bunch of new stuff to her wardrobe. Especially since I’ll be the one paying for it, of course.

‘OK, let’s go,’ I say. I grab my purse and link my arm with hers. ‘Let’s raise some hell in downtown Amsterdam!’

FIVE

1.45 p.m.

I never thought I'd have to admit it – after all, I'm only thirty-two. But after going up and down the Kalverstraat three times, visiting every single boutique on the entire Nieuwendijk, and making a one-hour detour to the Heiligenweg, there's no avoiding it. I'm getting too old for this. Or I'm just tired, I tell myself when Nicole disappears into another fitting room with an armload of sweaters, shirts, skirts and blouses. I wait patiently until she reappears from behind the curtain and deigns me to tell her whether or not a specific article of clothing suits her. Not that my opinion carries much weight. She will choose whatever she wants anyway.

'This rocks, Mom!' I hear her exclaim. She opens the fitting room curtain and there she is, dressed in a short denim skirt and a white sweater that looks at least three sizes too small for her, exposing her midriff. My breath catches when images from my past flash in front of my mind's eye, and I immediately switch to rejection mode. This won't do. I won't have my daughter parading around in that outfit; no matter how great it looks on her.

'Come on, Nicole,' I say, 'those things are so 1990s.' It's a meager attempt to convince her not to buy the thing, and I'm almost sure she is not going to fall for it.

'Not anymore, Mom. Short tops are all the rage again!' She looks down at her bare belly, turns around and gives herself the once-over in the fitting room mirror.

'And when were you planning on wearing it? You can't very well wear that to school, can you?'

'Why not? Everybody's dressed like this.'

'So just because everybody's doing it, you have to as well?'

She tut-tuts impatiently, a signal that I've said something incredibly stupid, and demonstratively drags the curtain between us.

Oh well. She is sixteen. I can't very well forbid this, no matter how much I would like to. Don't tie her down, Albert said, as cool as you please. But that's easier said than done.

Around two-thirty, after we've stopped for a sandwich and a cup of coffee at a small, homely café and we're back outside with a pile of shopping bags full of clothes, make-up and God knows what else, I've had enough. My feet are starting to complain, just like my back, my calves and my heels. I want to go home. Fortunately, Nicole agrees with me.

We are just outside Amsterdam Central Station when my cell phone starts to vibrate. I stop, push a few bags I'm carrying into Nicole's arms to free one hand, and grope inside my bag. Albert's name lights up in the display.

'I hope you haven't forgotten that Franklin is here at the club with me?' he asks as soon as I answer.

'No, honey,' I say. 'But you know how Nicole gets when she goes shopping. It takes time. A *lot* of time.'

He chuckles.

'Laugh all you want,' I say testily. 'My feet are killing me.'

'So get a cab.'

'What for? We're almost there anyway. I can't wait to get home, put my feet up and lounge on the couch all night.'

'What you need is an early night. Get some sleep. You've haven't had a full night's sleep in weeks.'

'Hmm,' I say. 'I might just do that. If you promise to be there beside me when I wake up.'

'Deal,' he says.

'I'll see you in a bit.'

I hang up, put my cell phone away and then I notice a young man, standing outside the subway entrance smoking a cigarette

and staring at Nicole. He is about twenty-two or twenty-three years old, definitely not bad looking, maybe even handsome, wide-shouldered and sharply dressed. He looks very well groomed, but the way his eyes are devouring my daughter gives me the shivers. He winks at her, pursing his lips in a kissing gesture, and Nicole seems to find this funny, because she smiles radiantly at him.

I grab her by the arm, a bit roughly. 'Let's move on, shall we?' I say firmly, pushing her ahead of me.

'Mom! Give me a break!' She throws me an annoyed look, and then smiles apologetically back at the young man, who seems to be gazing after us with some amusement.

'I don't like it when guys look at you that way,' I snap at her.

'What way?'

'Like ... Like they're ... Nicole, he was almost undressing you with his eyes.'

'Jesus, Mom, I didn't know you were training to be Mother Superior.' She looks back once more and then says, 'He's a cutie!'

'Watch your mouth, young lady,' I warn her. Why is it that all young girls think nothing bad could ever happen to them? Why are they so easily swayed when a handsome boy smiles at them? Or is that just my own interpretation? Because I know how badly such things can end? Suddenly I loathe that young man. For how he looks at my daughter. For what he's thinking. Because it's obvious what he's thinking. OK, so she's pretty. Nicole is slender, with gorgeous ocean-blue eyes and flawless skin – a bit pale, admittedly, but that is due to her red hair, cascading down her back in windblown curls. Still, that doesn't justify him leering at her like that.

I imagine his eyes on her while she's wearing her new skimpy sweater and feel my stomach turn. I follow Nicole's example, look back at him and give him a stare that freezes the smile on his face. He saw it. The look in my eyes. I can't help the fact that it's no longer simply loathing I'm radiating, but hate. Pure hate.

Just a few more minutes before I can finally head home. I'm waiting for Nicole, who went to get Franklin, and then we can drive back to Amstelveen.

Albert is sitting behind his desk, engrossed in his work. I'm not sure what he's working on, but I suspect it's bookkeeping. Taking care of the financial side of things has always been Albert's job, because I was never any good at it. Not that it takes a tremendous amount of his time, since most of the work is done by our bookkeeper and his two assistants nowadays. But there are a few things he wants to keep track of personally, and he's working with such focus now that he doesn't even realize I'm looking at him. Albert is forty-six, but he has barely changed in the years since we got married. He is still tall, not excessively muscular, but well proportioned and slim – although he's starting to develop a slight paunch now. He still has the same tangle of light curls down to his neck, the same narrow face and high cheekbones, and fine lines around his deep blue eyes. The lines that make his face so striking may have become a little deeper, but then I guess there was no avoiding that, being stuck with me for all these years. After all, I'm not easy to live with, I know that. I went through a lot when I was younger; things that have damaged me on some level. Despite the fact that Albert is aware of this, it must be tough on him sometimes when I overreact in situations that don't warrant such an extreme response.

As for Nicole, that's where it gets even more complicated. Unlike Albert, she knows nothing about my past. I myself would prefer to keep it that way, but Albert has managed to convince me it would not be fair to Nicole. And so we agreed that we are going to tell her everything when she turns eighteen. The prospect frightens me. Who's to say that the relationship we have right now will not be ruined? Albert keeps telling me I need to learn to have faith in my daughter. Just like I learned to trust him, even though it was a long time before that happened. I don't know how many

times he assured me he would never hurt me. That he would never leave me. That he loves me for who I am. Gazillions of times.

Suddenly I remember Dick's words. *You've got money, is that why he married you?* Dick doesn't know what he's talking about. If anything, it would be the other way around.

'Albert?' I say pensively.

He looks up, a bit startled, almost as if he'd forgotten I'm there.

'Tell me something. Have you ever questioned my motives?'

'Your motives for what?'

'That maybe I married you for your money?'

'My money?' He sounds surprised. 'The little bit I had saved up?' He starts laughing, shaking his head, and looks back down at the paperwork on his desk.

'Well,' I say, a bit taken aback, 'you must admit it was enough to convince the bank.'

In the silence that follows he gazes up at me again, and the look in his eyes supplies the answer even before he does.

'Janine,' he says, sighing quietly before dropping his pen and getting up. He takes my face between his hands and gazes at me earnestly. 'If I had ever doubted your motives even the tiniest bit, or your love for me, we would never have gotten married. And I would never have invested in your dream.'

I feel stinging tears behind my eyelids, but I force them back. I'm not a sentimental crybaby, even though Albert's words touch something deep inside of me. He gives me a tender kiss on the lips, and I shiver. Then he wraps his arms around me, and I feel his hand crawl beneath my shirt. His other hand disappears between the top of my jeans and my panties.

'I don't think that's such a good idea,' I whisper between kisses.

'Why not?' he whispers back, without stopping.

'Nicole will be back soon.'

'So what? She's old enough to...'

'I'd just rather not,' I say quietly.