

'BRILLIANTLY DONE  
AND A MUST READ.'

LEIGHTON GAGE

# LINDA JANSMA

Dutch thriller from award-winning author

# HAUNTED



GOING DUTCH

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# Haunted

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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 6<sup>th</sup>, 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 pack 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 giv-

en 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 10<sup>th</sup>, 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.