

## Prologue

This recurring dream. It always starts the same way. I stand in a spacious room. A living room connected to a kitchenette. I lean against the windowsill. Him. I know it's a man before he even turns around. He stands with his back to me, preparing coffee. The sun plays in his short, stylishly trimmed dark hair. The scent of fresh coffee and his heavy perfume fills the air. It electrifies and permeates me to the bone. Then he turns around with two mugs in his hands.

"Black, with milk," - he hands me a mug full of steaming brew. He smiles gently as he does so. Sparks dancing in his dark hazel eyes bore through and pierce all barriers, burning a mark of presence on my soul. I see love in them and something more. Something I cannot decipher. Perhaps it's just my imagination. As I study him like that—his figure, behaviour, mannerisms—the alarm clock rings faintly in the distance. The dream vanishes as quickly as it appeared. Always at the same moment, leaving a feeling of coldness, abandonment, and something else, perhaps longing. My heart races and I cannot calm it. A question lingers at the back of my mind: What if it's not a dream? If not a dream, then what—a glimpse of a past life? But one thing I know: his eyes. Oh yes, those eyes are unforgettable.

1

I drag myself out of bed, numb. I always feel this way when those dreams come to me. I am not entirely sure whether they are only dreams or flashes of memories, perhaps my past life echoing back from the void. Because I had everything. A loving husband, a wonderful home and a beautiful child.

Just now I hear the little one calling me from the other room.

"I'm coming, sweetheart," I say, shuffling towards the second bedroom, dressed in a stretched-out T-shirt, my hair messy and still holding on to scraps of sleep. My legs slide across the thick blue carpet. And for a moment I have the impression that everything is in its place. I will go to Sara's room. I will hug her, and then we will go downstairs together. Robert will be bustling about in the kitchen, making coffee and preparing breakfast for the little one.

And in that moment I feel the heavy truth, I wake from the lethargy. Robert is no longer here. Never again will I hear his laughter, feel his touch, or the familiar smell of his perfume. Because he is dead. He died in a car accident half a year ago, on his way to a meeting with a client. Some house projects were commissioned to his firm. Some idiot forced the right of way, the brakes failed, and so my husband died. The man who caused the accident was completely unharmed. But my husband was not so lucky. The ambulance, called to the place of the accident, could only declare the time of death. To this day I remember our last morning. As usual I got up early to go for a run before dropping the child off at school and throwing myself into work. Because a few years ago I had fulfilled my greatest dream, I opened a café and a patisserie. And so baking and preparing the place for the arrival of new guests – my daily duties. That day everything looked as usual. Training, breakfast together, saying goodbye. Dropping the little one at school and work. But that afternoon something changed. The air was heavier, I myself felt strangely nervous, I could not find a place for myself, but I blamed everything on the duties at home and at work. Only the ringing of the telephone pulled me from the numbness.

"I must answer this," I said briefly to Poppy, one of the co-workers.

"Don't worry, I will take care of everything. She replied"

So I answered the call that forever changed my life and the life of my daughter.

But now I go to the little one's room.

"What is it, darling? Did you have good dreams?" I ask.

"Mummy, I miss Daddy. Can we visit him today?"

"Of course," I say shortly and turn my gaze away so she does not see the tears dancing in the corners of my eyes. While I try to regain control of myself I prepare clothes for the nursery.

"Shall it be your favourite yellow dress?" I ask once I can control my voice enough.

Yes, Mummy," I hear the answer.

"What do you say to waffles for breakfast with lots of whipped cream?"

"And may I have chocolate syrup too?" I hear the squeaky childish voice.

"We will see what can be done," I say with amusement.

And now, young lady, march downstairs, we don't want to be late, do we?"

Breakfast and all the bustle pass in relative calm. Even before leaving I manage to start the laundry and the dishwasher, which at times can be no small feat. After dropping Sara at nursery I drive to the café to throw myself into work and for a while forget how heavy the sky weighs upon me. It is good that I have my place, because only there, for some time now, am I able to relax – at least as much as possible. Baking and preparing the café for a new day gives me for a moment a sense of control, a sense that I have power over something.

The day at work passes in an atmosphere of relative calm. Around 3:30 p.m. I leave, because today it is Poppy's turn to close the place. I go to collect Sara from the nursery. As I stand by the building I realise that on the way to the cemetery we must stop by the florist. And then – oh yes, I completely forgot – we were meant to go for dinner at my parents' house. Then the bell rings and a loud atmosphere begins to reign all around. And here she is, my princess. For the first time in many days I see her smiling, the way only a child can smile.

"Hey darling, how was your day?"

"Hi Mum, good. Are we going to visit Daddy? You promised," the little one blurts out as a greeting.

"Yes, I remember. We will just stop by the florist, all right? And I forgot to tell you, but today we are having dinner at Grandma and Grandpa's, I hope you are pleased."

"And will Auntie and the cousins be there?" asks the little one in an excited voice.

"To be honest, I have no idea. We shall see."

An hour later I park my Ford in my parents' driveway. I also noticed my sister's car. I think it's good. At least the children will have a chance to play. Before we even reach the front steps, Dad opens the door.

"Hello my treasures," he says with a warm smile. "I hope you are hungry, because Grandma has been going mad in the kitchen since noon," he adds cheerfully.

I heard all of that!" Mum shouts from the other end of the house.

In my family nest there is always noise, bustle – anyone who crosses the doors feels welcome right from the start. The only place on earth where I can forget my sadness, even for a moment. Here is my safe haven. Approaching the kitchen door, I hear my sister's heated conversation with Mum.

“She is so young and already a widow, the child has only just lost her father, and they had their whole life ahead of them. Will Sara even remember him? They are left alone in that house full of Robert. That will not help her, it is not healthy for her,” I hear my mother lament.

“Mum, leave it be. Eliza is an adult, maybe not today or tomorrow, but she will rise from this. So little time has passed. Let her grieve. Let her live through it her own way. And for the circumstances she is coping quite well,” replies my sister.

“Yes, darling, maybe you are right, but maybe – do you know what I mean – maybe your sister should seek the help of a specialist, someone who will help her through this. Think about it. Advise her, maybe she will listen to you.”

I enter the room. Mum is standing over the hob, and in the pot something delicious, as always, is steaming. My older sister Julia is sitting on the kitchen table. At the sight of me, the conversation suddenly falls silent.

“Don’t mind me. I won’t crumble into pieces, I am not made of glass. I will go on living, I have someone to live for. Besides, that is what my husband would have wanted for me – if it had been me, I would not have wanted him to torment himself for the rest of his life, but to try to build a loving home for our child. And besides, with time I will pick myself up. I am my parents’ daughter and Mum, please – I love you, but you do not need to worry so much. I will survive. Somewhere out there my happy ending is waiting for me. I do not yet know where or how, but I hope.”

“My little girl,” Mum says through tears, hugging me and holding me tight, just as she did when we were little. And I break down, overcome with emotions, an unrestrained flood of grief and tears. I had not even realised how much I needed to be here in this place and time, how much I needed someone to hold me and say they support me and that everything will be all right.

When we calm ourselves enough to return to the cooking, Mum wants to know how we are. As though years had passed since our last conversation, not merely hours.

“You know, Mum,” I continue slowly. “Everything will be fine. I believe it. After all, we have each other, don’t we? No matter what, we are always together.”

“Yes, you are right. That is what family is for.”

“I know, Mum, and every day I am grateful to fate that you are present in my life. But that is enough of this topic, let us talk about something ordinary – like my mother-in-law, for example.” I hear my sister groan.

“What has that harpy done this time? I don’t know why, after all she has said, you still speak with her.”

“Yes, I know. She is my child’s grandmother and she has the right to maintain contact with the little one. But I must tell you, today she called demanding visits with her granddaughter. I am to bring Sara, leave her there, and then, whenever she feels like it, she will bring my child back home. That woman drags me down, you have no idea. Everything must be done the way she expects. No wonder Robert kept his distance. Mum glances at me nervously, I return the look and continue. I know, Mum, what you are about to say – those grandparents also have the right to see their granddaughter. I agree with that, but on my terms. It is no secret that Alka never liked me. From the very beginning she made that clear. I was never good enough for her son. At the funeral she also made sure to spit out what she thought, that her beloved son died because of me. That if it were not for me, the child, and the house, he would not have had to work so much. As though I had

been sitting at home while he supported me. That woman brings chaos wherever she appears.”

“Oh Eliza,” Mum says. “Let me give you a piece of life advice. For now, for the good of your child, maintain contact with them, and when Sara grows up she will decide what kind of relationship she wants with them. Time solves many problems, let life run its own course, and much will become clear and fall into place.”

“Thanks, Mum. Advice like from the back of a cereal box. I’ll remember.”

Dinner passes in an atmosphere of cheerful commotion. The girls shout over each other and laugh – I think this is the cure for the present state. A loving family. As we are saying goodbye, the children come up with what they think is a brilliant plan.

“Grandma, Grandpa, may we stay the night at your house?” asks six-year-old Ania.

“My treasures,” Mum replies, “you have school tomorrow and my daughters have work. You know what...” she pauses. “How about we spend the weekend together instead? Girls, what do you think?” she asks, looking me and my sister in the eyes. “Your mums will have time to rest, and you three can stay with us.”

“I’m in,” I laugh, looking at my sister, who under the children’s gaze does not even attempt to resist.

“Ok. That’s settled. On Friday after school we will pick up the girls. And you, my dears, don’t worry about anything. On Sunday, as usual, we will see each other at the family dinner. All right?” Dad smiles.

“Well then, Let it be,” Julia laughs. “We’ve got the monsters off our hands for the whole weekend, sis.”

On the way home, Sara chatters about how excited she is to spend the night at her grandparents’.

By the time we arrive home it is past eight o’clock. A quick bath and bed. It has been quite a long and intense day. The little one falls asleep almost immediately. For me it is another story. Half the night I cannot find a comfortable position to sleep. And when at last I manage to drift into... Morpheus’s arms,

...those same eyes appear...