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THE HAVEN

A SUMMER SUSPENSE MYSTERY

LJ ROSS



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CHAPTER 1

Wednesday evening

Central Television Studios, Dublin

Isolde Malone blinked several times, but there was no denying the truth.

She couldn't read the auto-cue.

The words swam in front of her eyes, nothing but a jumble of white letters against a black screen. It wasn't the first time it had happened lately and yet, according to the best optometrist in the city, she had perfect vision and shouldn't have any trouble reading at a distance, let alone the couple of metres separating her newsreader's

desk and the little black box that displayed her script.

Probably stress, her doctor told her. Try to take it easy.

If the programme hadn't been live, broadcasting to all of her native Ireland, then she might have laughed there and then at the thought of it. Until the past couple of months, she'd have described herself as the type of person who *thrived* on stressful scenarios, and she'd certainly never suffered any blurred vision as a consequence. It had taken years of drive and determination to climb the slippery ladder of success, but she'd done it and could now be proud of a career and lifestyle that was the envy of her peers. Isolde was the *face* of Irish television, with lucrative sponsorship and advertising deals on the side, a smart townhouse overlooking the River Liffey and a string of handsome men ready and waiting at the drop of a hat, if she wanted them. It was a good life, doing the work she loved, and she was grateful for it.

Yet all of that couldn't help her to read the screen, and precious seconds ticked by as the air fell dead.

Isolde? Wake up!

Go to the weather!

Owen, the show's producer, almost shouted through her earpiece and she came to attention, pasting a bright smile on her face.

"Ah—well now, I think it's time we found out what to expect of the weather this weekend. What can you tell us, Maeve?"

Her colleague and, as it happened, her friend and housemate, picked up the prompt seamlessly.

"Thanks Isolde, well, I can tell you that it's very good news for anybody hoping to get out and about this weekend, with clear blue skies expected from Saturday right through until Sunday lunchtime—"

Afforded a moment's respite, Isolde kept a smile on her face, mentally rehearsing the outro she planned to say, and was ready by the time the camera came back to her.

"Thank you, Maeve! We'll all have to remember our sunscreen, won't we?" She paused to smile at her friend, who knew the routine and said something about viewers remembering to stay hydrated. Then, Isolde smiled beautifully for the viewers at home. "Well, that's about it from us here at Channel One News; we'll see you bright and early for the morning

news at six tomorrow. Until then, a very good evening to all of you.”

She shuffled a sheaf of papers as the end credits played, her face composed into professional lines.

Breathe, she thought. *Just keep breathing.*

Three...two...one...clear!

As soon as they were off-air, she slumped forward against the desk, holding her head in her hands. Maeve hurried across the studio to slip an arm around her shoulders, concern writ large across her lovely face.

“Isolde! What’s the matter? Can I get you anything—a glass of water? Ah, hell with that, a glass of *gin*?”

Isolde raised watery eyes to smile at her friend. “No, I’ll—I’ll be all right, I just—”

“What *happened* back there?”

Owen O’Grady rushed to join them and, though his bedside manner might have left something to be desired, she knew there was concern behind the brusque enquiry—for her, and for the show he was tasked to produce.

“I’m so sorry, Owen,” she muttered. “I know this is the fourth time it’s happened in the past couple of weeks...I don’t know what to say. My vision just

suddenly...” She swallowed sudden, unexpected tears, and made a helpless motion with her hands. “It just *went*. I couldn’t read anything on the auto-cue, and I panicked.”

Sympathy flickered in his eyes. “Have you seen an optician about it?”

She nodded, miserably. “A doctor, as well. Neither of them can find anything wrong with me,” she said. “I’m exhausted all the time and I’ve not been sleeping too well, so they reckon it’s just stress. I’ve got another appointment with the doctor to talk about having a scan or some blood tests, in case...in case there’s something wrong with my brain. Apparently, if you have a tumour, it can affect your vision sometimes.”

Even saying the words aloud caused her stomach to perform a slow somersault.

“I’m sure it’s *nothing* like that,” Maeve said quickly, and gave her a reassuring squeeze. “There’s probably all kinds of reasons why you’re having problems with your sight, as well as the headaches and all that. Isn’t that right, Owen?”

He was a bit slow on the uptake, but got there in the end. “Aye—that’s right,” he intoned. “It’s probably nothing at all to worry about.”

Isolde looked between them, at their forced smiles, and felt even worse than before.

Owen reached across and took both of her hands, already hating himself for the decision he had to make. "Look, Isolde, I think... You know, with things being as they are..." He cleared his throat, awkwardly. "It might be best if you took a little bit of time off. A sabbatical—"

She opened her mouth to protest, but he overrode any objection.

"Just long enough for you to get to the bottom of things and feel better, that's all. We all love you here, you know that. The public love you too—don't they, Maeve?" Her friend nodded, vigorously. "You've got the best viewing figures in the whole of Ireland and the show's ratings have never been higher," he continued. "We'll all be waiting here for you when you come back, so don't worry about that."

Isolde wanted to believe he was right, and that she'd have a job to come back to after a short sabbatical, but she knew as well as they did that the public could be a fickle bunch and so could the management team at Channel One.

She also knew that he wasn't giving her a choice.

Summoning whatever was left of her pride, she gave him one of her trademark smiles and affected an air of blithe nonchalance.

"That's a grand idea," she said. "I'll take a few days away and be fit as a fiddle in no time."

"That's the spirit!" Owen patted her hand in a manner she found vaguely condescending.

"Do you want me to come home with you, now?" Maeve offered. "Just to make sure you're all right?"

Isolde smiled again at her friend. "Ah, no, I couldn't ask it," she said. "I know you've got a date with Rob after work tonight, and we can't have you missing that."

"I don't mind, really—"

Isolde shook her head. "Honestly, the pair of you are clucking around me like hens," she said lightly. "I probably just need a good night's sleep and a bubble bath. I'll be back on the horse by the end of the week."

"All the same, let me organise a taxi to take you home," Owen said, clearly unconvinced by her performance.

Since a dull, throbbing headache was making its way across her optic nerve, Isolde didn't bother to argue the point. "Thanks," she said softly.

With a heavy heart, she took one last, lingering look at her desk and then made her way back to her dressing room to collect her things.

CHAPTER 2

An hour later, Isolde stepped inside the little house she owned on an exclusive part of Dublin's waterfront. It was a vibrant part of town, thriving with families and young professionals, and usually she loved the buzz of it all. She liked that the coffee vendor at the end of the street knew her favourite tippie, that the newsagent always asked after her family despite never having met them, and that she never felt alone amid the hustle and bustle of the city. She and Maeve were both attractive young women who enjoyed life and shared its ups and downs together, laughing over a glass of wine or a takeaway in front of the telly, and the situation suited them both perfectly. Now, as Isolde toed out of the smart

heels she'd worn for work, she found she was lonely in the surrounding quiet and wished she'd accepted her friend's offer of company, after all.

Shrugging it off, she padded through to the kitchen, her footsteps silent against the polished wooden floor as she went in search of something to tempt her ailing stomach. The fridge was full of her usual favourites, but, after a cursory inspection, she let the door swing shut again and held a hand to her abdomen as it protested the very sight of food.

"What's the *matter* with me?" she whispered to the empty space.

There was no reply and Isolde felt a keening pain in her chest that, for once, had nothing to do with her mystery ailment, and everything to do with missing family.

Rhona and Gerald Malone had been divorced long ago, while she and her brother were still teenagers, and she supposed they were all the happier for it. She could still remember their raging arguments and the harsh insults they'd thrown at one another, while she and Luke had sought to drown out their voices with cartoons, or else leave the house in search of happier climes. Nowadays,

their parents lived separate lives, her father having taken himself off for a quiet life in the country, surrounded by acres of land and the occasional company of a neighbouring widow who stayed over from time to time and didn't mind talking about golf or football fixtures. Meanwhile, her mother had gone off in search of adventure on the Gold Coast of Australia, where she'd promptly met a man with a year-round tan and a lust for life to satisfy her own. Even her brother, Luke, had emigrated to England, of all places, and made a happy life for himself on the Cornish coast with his new wife, Gabrielle. She was glad they'd found the people and places that made them happy; she only wished they lived around the corner, especially now.

As if to reinforce her feelings, another stabbing pain ricocheted through her stomach, so strong she was forced to lean back against the counter to catch her breath. Once the pain subsided, she scrubbed weak tears from her eyes, then reached for the kettle.

"A cup of herbal tea," she muttered. "A bit of chocolate and a bath while I watch *Pride and Prejudice*. That'll do the trick."

Fifteen minutes later, she dragged her weary feet upstairs and balanced a small tray on a table beside the bath. Her muscles relaxed instantly as they hit the fragrant water, and she levered herself up to take a sip of tea, choosing to ignore the persistent shake to her hands and the feeling of acute tiredness that seemed to be her daily companion. She angled her smartphone against the teapot and settled back to enjoy one of her favourite period dramas from the 1990s, something she was sure would never fit with her current 'image' on television but which, she was also sure, she had absolutely no intention of changing.

There were few ailments that couldn't be cured with a good dose of Colin Firth, after all.

Shortly after Elizabeth Bennet was first introduced to the scoundrel George Wickham, Isolde's eyelids succumbed to fatigue and began to droop. She listened to the familiar voices playing on the miniature screen, allowing her limbs to float as the pains and frustrations of the day were overtaken briefly by the comforting nostalgia of one of life's little pleasures.

Then, she heard it.

A footstep, on the wooden floor downstairs.

Her eyes flew open, and she gripped the edge of the bath with slippery fingers, moving carefully into a seated position as she waited, her senses on high alert. After a moment, she began to think she'd imagined it, and that her mind was playing tricks at the end of a long day.

She froze, as the sound came again.

This time, a creak on the stairs.

Fighting the urge to hurry and thereby draw attention to her whereabouts, she stopped the programme and dragged herself up and out of the bath as quietly as she could. Grasping a towel, she wrapped it around her shivering body and cast around for a weapon with wide, frightened eyes. There was only an electric toothbrush and the teapot, but there was no time to grab either implement before the soft but distinct sound of approaching footsteps reached the landing outside. Fear stole the breath from her body and her eye fell on the door, which she'd closed out of habit but not bothered to lock. Galvanised, she dashed across the room to slide the bathroom lock into place, wincing as the sound seemed to echo around the tiled walls.

Seconds later, she heard the footsteps come to a standstill outside, and she clasped a hand against her own mouth, willing herself to stay upright as her mind raced.

Had one of those sad, lonely men who sent disturbing fan mail found out where she lived?

Her first thought was to find a means of escape, but there was only a small, high window in the bathroom, and she knew it would be a futile endeavour to try to get out that way, which left only one option.

If it came to it, she would have to fight.

Endless seconds ticked by as she stood there, plastered against the wall to the side of the doorway, while another person stood on the other side of it. She felt their presence, and, to her feverish mind, it seemed that she and the stranger were locked in a battle of wills, both waiting for the other to make the first move.

Then, the stalemate was broken.

In horror, she watched as the door handle began to turn this way and that, moving slowly at first, and then with more vigour, rattling against the doorframe as they tried to force it open.

Almost blinded by panic, Isolde snatched up her phone to call the police. Her fingers were clumsy against the screen and a sob escaped her lips as she dropped it on the tiles at her feet. She scrambled to retrieve it as the intruder began kicking the bathroom door, working hard to break it from its hinges as she stood there, naked and vulnerable, with nowhere to run.

She keyed in the digits but before she could hear the first comforting words from a police operator, the door gave way, splintering open to reveal a figure dressed entirely in black. Their face was covered by a ski mask, but their eyes locked with hers and she knew she would never forget the nightmarish silhouette so long as she lived.

If she lived to remember it, at all.

She opened her mouth to scream, the sound ending on a strangled gasp as the figure stepped inside, advancing towards her with slow, purposeful steps. She shrank away in reflex, the action causing her to slip on the wet floor underfoot, and then she was falling, down and down until her head met the hard marble floor with a *crack*.

The last thing she remembered was the shadow looming above her, a spectre without a name or a face.