

## Prologue

*When does a story start? When the action starts? When a life starts changing? Or when a life is formed? Surely a story isn't complete without the whole picture. A background canvas on which a life is slowly painted, building up in layers as the years add depth and character. But you won't care about that. You won't care about my whole history. You'll only want the juicy stuff - the dirt on Yvette Blake; my reasons for joining the Saviours. So, let's start with why I joined. Let's start with my darling wife Sophie - the mad witch who ruined my life.*

## CHAPTER ONE: BEGINNINGS (NOVEMBER 2010)

The best thing about trying to get money out of people for charity is that they usually trust you already. You must be a nice guy if you are working for such a noble cause and for peanuts as well, they assume. Because you already have their trust half the battle is won. Sure, they often walk past with no more than a 'sorry man' but pick the right ones and you're home and dry. Pick the guilty ones and they'll sign up without a fight. Sophie looked like one of those, and I saw her coming a mile away.

I saw her, eyes down, avoiding the sight of her short designer haircut reflected in the mirror-like windows. I heard her, expensive heels tapping quickly along the polished pavements of the financial district. I felt her, guilt emanating from her skinny form as she trudged through the crowds. She seemed to emit a wave of conscience. It shone like an aura around her tired thirty-something frame, parting the sea of investment bankers that laughed its way past the Big Issue sellers and beggars. She was just what I'd been looking for: a target, so I plastered on a smile, switched my eyes to 'puppy dog' and got ready to block her path. She didn't notice me until it was too late. She was too busy scrabbling in her posh

handbag for a coin to appease the beggar who was following her down the street. She handed him some change then rushed straight into my waiting smile.

“Afternoon miss, could you spare a moment?” I pleaded.

She tried to dodge me, swerving to the left, heading for the gap between me and the office-block windows. I sidestepped, eyelashes fluttering at maximum.

“Sorry, I’m late for a meeting,” she said, stopping but not looking up.

“Just a couple of seconds,” I entreated. “C’mon I’m having a really bad day.”

She snorted and looked up, her big brown eyes meeting mine. It was just for a second but that was enough. The jacket of her grey suit bunched up as she wrapped long, thin arms around her skinny body.

I winked, hoping my eyes were sparkling. “Thanks for stopping ... bet you’re having a better day than me.”

Her shoulders relaxed a bit, and her thin lips parted to expose gleaming white teeth. “I doubt it,” she said, eyes flickering to my name badge. “Listen, Aidan, I really do have to go, but I’ll catch you on my way home if you’re still here about six?”

“I finish at five ... but I could meet you for coffee?” I stammered, cheeks burning as I anticipated her scornful rejection.

A corner of her red-lipsticked mouth creased into a smile. “Oh ... okay then,” she replied. “There’s a Costa Coffee on Canon Street. I’ll see you there just after six.” And she was gone.

I watched her androgynous brown hair bobbing through the crowd, saw her long arms hanging awkwardly beside her angular body and thought how unattractive she was. Yet I felt strangely excited about seeing her again. I imagined her taking me out for dinner; back to some posh apartment; to bed. I daydreamed my way through the afternoon – I didn’t sign anyone up to that week’s charity! And all I got that night was coffee.

\*\*\*

Sophie arrived a few minutes after six p.m. and perched on her seat whilst I bought the drinks. She seemed tense, crossing and uncrossing her arms whilst she told me distractedly that she was an investment banker; that she lived alone; that she was too busy to meet at the weekend for a drink.

“Too busy doing what?” I asked. “Anything exciting?”

She squirmed uncomfortably in her designer suit and told me that *she* thought it was exciting.

I waited for her to elaborate, watching the dim lamplight reflecting in her glossy lipstick. She slowly rotated her half-full cup, studying the eddy of cold latte that swirled against its sides.

“How about you?” she asked, changing the subject. “What are you doing at the weekend?”

I drained my cup. “Pub probably,” I told her. “Maybe a club with my friend Terry.” The last bit was a lie, but I thought it might make me sound more interesting.

She smiled and said something patronising about being young. I told her twenty-five wasn’t young, and she said I wouldn’t say that when I got to thirty-three.

Looking back, I suppose I was hooked then. Snagged by the smell of her expensive perfume and the immaculate makeup that failed to cover the fine lines around her eyes. But mostly I was hooked because she ran. If she’d caved in that night, then I’d probably have run the other way - decided that she wasn’t worth it. But she didn’t cave in. She reluctantly agreed to meet me sometime the following week, even more reluctantly supplied me with her mobile number and then said she had to go.

I texted her the next day, but she didn’t reply. I called her the day after, but she didn’t

answer. And I forgot. I forgot that she was meant to be *my* target: some needy woman who would sign up to the charity, or better still, keep me. I forgot that I was supposed to be in control. She started to play on my mind and plague my thoughts. She turned into some enigmatic goddess in my brain, and I wanted to know everything about her. I hadn't experienced anything like it before. It was like a craving that niggled at me constantly, and by the following Wednesday – nine days after I had met her - I was getting desperate, so I texted her again.

I started with a nondescript message – something that I hoped would sound nonchalant: *Alright Sophie? Fancy a drink tmrw?*

You would have thought that she would be grateful! You would have thought she would have thanked her lucky stars that I was interested. I mean, how many thirty-three-year old's have a bloke almost ten years younger interested in them? Not many but she didn't reply for three days. She didn't reply until Saturday and then only to tell me she was busy. It was dismissive. It was rude. It was addictive, so I persisted.

*How about a coffee after work next Wed then? I'm buying ☺*

*In New York next week sorry*

*Next weekend?*

*Not back until Sun*

She eventually agreed to meet me for a drink the following Friday but said that she had better not have a late night as she had commitments on the Saturday.

I told her that sounded intriguing, but she didn't expand.

*See you Joe's wine bar, 6pm*

Read her message. And I couldn't wait.

\*\*\*

She wasn't there when I arrived at six, so I ordered a small glass of red wine.

"Seven pounds please," said the barman, looking distastefully at the crumpled tenner that I handed over. I lifted the sparkling glass to my lips, stifling a grimace as the most expensive vinegar in Britain hit my tongue.

The barman smirked and turned to serve someone richer with a smile that hadn't been there for me. "Good evening sir ... good week on the markets?"

I slouched towards an uninviting, plastic table in the corner, placing my glass carefully in the middle before removing my coat and slumping into the seat. And fifty minutes later, almost an hour late, Sophie arrived.

She peered through the window like an apparition, haggard and bedraggled, searching for me in the sea of suits and briefcases that filled the bar. She spotted me and waved, but I was cross, so I ignored her. And when she finally managed to open the door and reach me, I pretended to be surprised.

"I thought you'd forgotten," I said, downing my wine.

"Aidan, I'm so sorry. Thank you for waiting."

"I was about to give up."

She lowered herself tiredly into the egg-shaped chair and leaned back. "Sure, sure, and who could blame you ... I've had an awful week."

I rocked my glass backwards and forwards hoping that she would take the hint and buy me a refill, but she crossed her legs and studied the tip of her wet shoe.

I sighed. "What can I get you?"

"Oh," she looked up, "erm just a mineral water please."

"A mineral water?"

“I don’t drink ... at the moment.”

“Do you want to push the boat out and go for a J2O?”

She shook her head. “No, I ... I’m sticking to plain things right now.”

I shrugged and headed to the bar, hoping that they took debit cards and that mine wouldn’t be declined.

She thanked me weakly when I returned, drifting off into her own world and watching the rain snake down the dark window as I made banal conversation. *Wasn’t it awful weather? Wasn’t it dreadful about that earthquake in that country?*

I told her that the charity we were collecting for that week were emergency fundraising to help with the recovery effort, hoping that she would sign up or at least offer a donation.

“Oh right,” she replied disinterestedly. “Where was it again?” Then she asked how my week had been for the second time.

I turned the conversation to her. “So ... how about you?” I ventured. “What’s this thing that takes up all of your weekends?”

She started, taken aback. “I go to a group,” she replied hesitantly.

I waited for her to elaborate. She didn’t, so I said: “A group?”

She nodded.

“What, a rock group? A sewing group? What kind of group?”

She drained her glass discreetly, a bit at a time but with obvious purpose. “Sorry I can’t tell you the details ... yet,” she replied, glancing at her watch. “Anyway – I really must go.”

“But you only just got here!”

She stood up and edged her arms into her coat, buttoning it deliberately. “I know, but it’s eight o’clock, I really have to get going ... I’ve got a lot to do.”

I rose, perplexed. “Okay. Well, see you soon.”

“Sure ... I’ll text you.” Then she turned and went, waving through the window as she

passed.

I looked at my almost full glass indignantly then picked it up and downed it. The acidic contents burned my mouth, but I forced myself to swallow it, ignoring the disapproving looks of the other customers. How dare she, I thought, stuffing my hands in my pockets and stomping across the packed bar. How dare she show up late and leave so abruptly. How dare she string me along like I was nothing! Like she was doing me a favour. I rammed my shoulder into the stiff door and pushed my way out into the night. Well, that was it, I decided. She could contact me. I wasn't going to run after her. And I didn't. I held out for a fortnight, heart jumping every time I received a text. It was never from her, but I couldn't let her go, couldn't bear to be nothing to her. For two weeks the image of her pitiful, rain-soaked form kept me awake - I wanted her badly, so I gave in and sent her a text.

It took her days to get back to me. I was fuming by the time I received her brief message.

*Next Sun 12? Really busy at mo*

That was it. No apology, no kiss, nothing! I waited a day before texting back.

*Yeah ok. Where?*

*Sorry, Aidan. I have other plans now, but I can do the following Fri? I'll take you out for dinner. I owe you a treat I think x*

It was almost pitying if a text can have a tone. I agreed anyway, telling myself that a free meal was a free meal. That she *did* owe me. But if I'm honest I was dying to see her again - captivated by her mystery. And she'd added a kiss, which gave me hope.

\*\*\*

I arrived late for dinner at the poshest restaurant I had ever seen in my life. It was a different world. I felt like an imposter. I looked like one too, in the shirt I'd dragged out of the laundry basket and ironed; the shoes I'd only worn once to a job interview.

The guy at the front saw me for what I was. He looked me up and down then finished wiping the wine glass in his hand before asking if he could help. I told him that I was meeting someone. He asked what name the table was in, but I didn't know Sophie's surname. He raised an eyebrow and asked if I could see her. I couldn't, so he led me through the restaurant, as though escorting an unruly child through a china shop. Eventually, I saw her, huddled in a corner nursing a glass of white wine. She unfolded herself as we approached.

"Aidan," she said, rising stiffly from her chair and air-kissing my cheek. "So glad you could make it."

"Drinking today then?"

She looked at her glass, cheeks reddening. "Yes I ... felt like a drink. What will you have?"

And, as is usually the case, alcohol helped the conversation flow. Three or four drinks later, things were looking promising.

"Shall we get more wine?" I enquired as she sloshed the dregs of the bottle into my glass tipsily.

"Waiter," she called. "Same again."

We were still drinking brandy when the last table of suits left the restaurant. Still drinking brandy and talking about – everything - her childhood, her job, her rich indifferent daddy. The alcohol opened a floodgate, and the deluge just kept coming. I couldn't get a word in. Couldn't ask any questions as she babbled and slurred her way through her life history. The waiters circled our table, swooping to retrieve napkins, empty glasses, and coffee cups. Eventually, Sophie raised an arm for the bill. She stabbed defiantly at the numbers on the card reader and finally entered the right PIN - she was trashed. I couldn't let



her go home on her own in that state, so I offered to accompany her. She hesitated for a moment then agreed.

When she invited me in I thought that the ice maiden had cracked; that a couple more glasses of wine in her Regency apartment would seal the deal. I caught a glimpse of her antique king-sized bed and thought I'd wake up in it. But she didn't welcome me into her bed. She showed me into her cavernous lounge, dragged a duvet out of an old wooden chest and left me staring up at a chandelier from the sofa bed. She didn't even make me a cup of tea before she stumbled to her room and locked the heavy looking door with a definite click.

\*\*\*

She was watching me from a 'restored' antique chair when I woke up. I groaned, hangover needles piercing my temples.

"Tea?" she asked, uncoiling her long limbs and heading for the door.

"Please ... how are you doing?"

"Oh, fine considering the amount of poison I swallowed – are you suffering?"

"You could say that."

"My group leader's right, alcohol is evil. I hope I didn't embarrass you."

"No," I lied, "not at all ... What's this group then?"

She raised a dismissive arm. "Oh, it's nothing. I'm not sure it's really your thing, Aidan. Sugar?"

"Three, please ... how do you know it's not my thing if you won't tell me what it is?"

She slid through the door and craned her head back around the mahogany panels.

"Maybe I'll tell you soon. Maybe when I know you a bit better." And she withdrew her head and creaked away along the corridor, leaving me intrigued and irritated in a shaft of sunlight

that shone through a gap in the velvet curtains.

