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### YOU KILLED ME FIRST

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# YOU KILLED ME FIRST

**JOHN MARRS** 



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For John Russell, the better half of John²

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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If you burn your neighbour's house down, it doesn't make your house look any better.

Lou Holtz

If you're gonna be two-faced, at least make one of them pretty.

Marilyn Monroe



#### PROLOGUE

#### 5 NOVEMBER, BONFIRE NIGHT

It's a commotion of crackling, sputtering and popping noises that brings her back to life.

She opens her eyes but it's close to pitch-black in there, and when she tries to focus on anything, it's blurred. Her head is pounding like a pneumatic drill trying to penetrate concrete. How much did she have to drink last night, she wonders. She can't remember even the most hellish of hangovers being as debilitating as this. Or is it something more sinister? Has she been involved in an accident, injured her head and blacked out? Or did she suffer a stroke in her sleep? Is that why she can barely move or see a thing? Is her brain holding her body prisoner?

A scent of smoke follows. It's vague at first and she can't be sure if it's getting stronger because she's regaining her senses, or if something is actually on fire. Is it the house? The fear of God flashes through her. Her worst nightmare. She tries to sit up in her bed but she barely budges. She can feel her hands, fingers and feet moving but they won't lift up. Something is stopping them, a weight pushing her down, along with the rest of her body.

She's still so woozy, but panic, she learns, can be sobering. She tries to think rationally.

She's suddenly aware it isn't a mattress she's lying on. It's way too firm, icy cold, and her clothes are absorbing something wet.

Her vision is slowly returning, and she knows that wherever she is, she needs to get out of there. She curls her fingers in on themselves and realises there's something binding them together – it feels tight like cling film, but it won't stretch or tear. It's a heavier plastic wrap. She's wedged in more tightly than a tinned sardine. It's no accident she's here. Someone has put her here. Why can't she remember anything?

She is straddling the fine line between confusion and terror.

There's a terrifically loud explosion and she screams – or tries to. Something restricts her mouth from opening as it should. She's been gagged. She feels sick with fear, but knows that if she vomits, she'll likely choke on it. So she twists her head as far as she can from side to side, until she lowers the gag and it rests on her chin.

'Help me!' she yells as best she can, but even she knows how pathetic it sounds. However, the self-preservation instinct that's been both her downfall and her salvation all these years drives her on until another deafening explosion drowns out her whimpers.

She begins to cough. The smoke has grown slowly thicker. She wriggles and squirms to breathe in unpolluted air and it's only when her ear touches the ground that she feels something lodged inside it. Before she can figure out what it is, there are more thunderous outbursts, and through gaps in her prison, she spots the flickering of bright multicoloured lights.

Only then does it hit her with the force of a wrecking ball. She knows exactly where she is and why she can't escape.

It's November the fifth and the explosions are fireworks.

She is trapped in the middle of a burning bonfire.

She shrieks as she tosses back and forth, contorting her body. But the wrap she's cocooned inside limits her movements.

Suddenly, there's a vibrating in her pocket, like a phone, followed by a resounding ringing in her ears, and she realises what's lodged inside one of them – some kind of open-ear headphone device attached by a hook over the top. The ringing continues but she is powerless to answer it. Then she remembers it'll likely have a touch-sensitive tab that, once pressed, allows you to answer the call. If she can explain to whoever is trying to contact her what's happening, maybe they can help?

She rubs her ear upon the ground beneath her and nothing happens. She lifts her head up as far as she can and slams it down on the ground. It hurts her and it hasn't worked. She tries it again, and again, over and over, her ear throbbing with each collision. Meanwhile, all around her there are more and more explosions as the heat intensifies.

And then it happens. A voice manifests through the headphones.

'You're conscious then.'

'Please help me,' she cries, barely able to get her words out. 'Someone is trying to kill me and I need you to . . .'

Her voice trails off as the words sink in. *You're conscious then*. Whoever it is knows where she is.

'Please get me out of here,' she says.

'Do you think I'd go to all this trouble just to free you now?'

'I'll do anything,' she pleads in desperation.

This earns a laugh. And only then does she recognise her caller.

'I don't know what you think I did, but I'm sorry,' she sobs. 'I'm begging you, I'll do anything. Just help me.'

'I'm sorry, but I can't. You are going to burn alive in a bonfire of your own making.'

'What? Why? What did I do to you?'
The laugh is short and cuts like a blade.
'I'll tell you what you did. You killed me first.'

#### **PART ONE**



#### ELEVEN MONTHS BEFORE BONFIRE NIGHT

## CHAPTER 1 MARGOT

It's the sound of a beep-beep-beeping and a heavy engine that stirs me from my sleep.

I peek between the window shutter slats in my bedroom and spot a large removals truck parking outside number twenty-three, the house opposite. A second vehicle further up the street is blocking the junction, much to the irritation of parents on the school run. It hasn't affected me though, as my two make their own way there. Tommy and Frankie are self-sufficient, thanks largely to me ensuring they have limited expectations of what I'm willing to do for them. At the ages of eleven and twelve, they wash their own clothes, iron their uniforms, make their own breakfasts and lunches, and pack their schoolbags. That leaves me time to remain snuggled under my Bavarian goose-down duvet for longer than your average parent.

The front door is to the right of the new neighbours' property and under a wooden pitched roof porch, but I've yet to see so much as an elbow belonging to anyone aside from the removals men. However, there's a lot you can learn about a person you've never met by what they surround themselves with. Firstly, they definitely have children. At least two, as I've caught a glimpse of two bikes being carried into the rear garden along with two scooters.

I've googled the Land Rover Defender that's been parked on the driveway since I awoke and learned that model's worth at least £85,000. It could however be leased. I don't see any mud on the tyres so I assume that, like most Land Rover owners, it's more a demonstration of status than for practical use.

It's hard to get a good look at their furniture as so much of it is covered in thick bubble wrap. But there are a couple of pieces I'm sure I recognise – a dark wooden sideboard from Rockett St George that I've had on my online wish list forever, and a mahogany chest of drawers from Made. Neither come cheap. I side-eye the Ikea Billy bookcase in the corner

of my lounge that Nicu insists doesn't need replacing. I have a feeling its shelves might 'accidentally' break very, very soon.

Another thirty minutes pass and, to my frustration, I still haven't caught a glimpse of who's moving in. The house once belonged to Sue and Pete Cooper, and what she knew about interior design you could fit on the back of a Dunelm's receipt. I don't mean to humblebrag – but I will: I have a knack for knowing what goes where and why. My instinct is so on point, I could give Philippe Starck a run for his money. So when Sue asked me to help her, of course I said yes. I considered it charity work. Then, just as we'd finished, she announced she'd been offered a job at Microsoft in Texas, and within a month, they were on a flight and out of sight. Some people only think of themselves.

The house has been a rental property for the last couple of years. Three families have come and gone but there's no point in befriending renters because they're transitory. Apart from Anna, who seems to be hanging around for longer than most in the house next door to the one I'm watching. And when the last lot of occupants went on their merry way, Nicu scared the hell out of me by suggesting their replacements could be asylum seekers. I mean, I'm not entirely unsympathetic to their cause – war, poverty, displacement, yada yada yada – and I know they must live somewhere. But why here, of all places? I emailed the chairman of the parish council with my concerns and he all but suggested I was being racist, which is ridiculous. I'd swap a kidney for a date with Idris Elba.

To my relief, an estate agent's 'Sold' sign appeared in the front garden soon after. Months of noise, rubbish skips and tradesmen's vans followed as the place was gutted. The new owners replaced everything, installing a new Shaker kitchen and four bathrooms and en-suites. I took a photo of the empty boxes in the skip and looked up brands I hadn't even heard of. They aren't scrimping on the finishes. I hate show-offs.

Curiosity finally gets the better of me and I decide to head over there and introduce myself. On my way to the bathroom, I pass the Christmas tree I arranged in front of the picture window on the landing for the neighbours to admire. It is simply gorgeous. The kids have their own, covered in tacky, gaudy baubles with no uniform design or colour scheme, which remains hidden in the dining room. I shower, slip into a pencil skirt and casual T-shirt, apply a little make-up then run a wet wipe over my Pandora bracelet and the diamonds in my Tiffany wedding ring. It gives them an extra

sparkle. After carefully selecting an expensive bottle from the wine cupboard complete with presentation box, I'm ready to impress.

I'm halfway across the road when Anna's front door opens.

'Hi,' she says cheerily and raises a hand. 'You're up and about early. I don't think I've ever seen you before midday.'

Had it come from anyone else, I might have rubbed a little Savlon on that burn. But everything about Anna is harmless, unthreatening and enthusiastic. She's the kind of woman who'd lead a round of applause when the pilot lands her plane. However, we all know that too much sweetness can make you diabetic.

'I thought I'd pop in and meet our new neighbours.'

'Ditto,' I reply, although I'm a little rankled. As an original resident of the cul-de-sac, I think it's only fair I lead the welcoming committee.

'Moving house two weeks before Christmas wouldn't leave me feeling festive,' I say.

'That's why I've brought these,' she replies, and holds up a Tupperware box, gently shaking the mince pies inside.

I hold back my scowl. 'Did you bake them yourself?'

'Of course,' she says, as if it would never cross her mind to drive to an artisan patisserie in town, choose a handful of theirs and pass them off as her own.

'That's very Bree Van de Kamp of you.'

Her blank response suggests the *Desperate Housewives* analogy is lost on her. Sometimes she makes me feel much older than my almost forty years. I hold up my own welcome gift.

'Great minds think alike.' Anna smiles.

No, they don't. Because if they did, she wouldn't be punishing her body in that supermarket own-brand outfit.

We make our way up the brick cobbled driveway and towards the house. It's the largest one in this cul-de-sac, although not in the village. With six bedrooms – that's two more than Nicu and I have – plus a swimming pool, I've quietly envied anyone who's lived here.

The two oak front doors are open so I peer into the porch and hallway. The removals team are milling about unpacking furniture. Anna knocks with the impact of a squirrel tapping a walnut on a lawn, so I clasp hold of the black knocker and bang four times.

No one pays us any attention, and I'm about to do it again when a voice from behind us sends me leaping out of my skin.