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DEADLY DATES

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Chapter I

The Idea

Rain is streaming down the glass panes.

Standing by the large windows of his room, Carl is watching the forlorn spectacle unfurl outside.

He has been single and out of work for over two years now. Sure, he has friends, plenty of them, but he doesn't feel like socializing. And he doesn't want to be alone either.

He once made a good living as a senior executive, travelling from country to country, always on the lookout for yet bigger deals.

When he lost his job, over the Vice-President Europe being replaced or something, he found himself heavily in debt. Groggy like a boxer on the ropes.

He wound up all alone in the stately late eighteenth-century mansion that he had extended all by himself while he still had a job.

His lavish – and rather eccentric – lifestyle at the time led him to build a 'panic room' in the basement, more precisely beneath the gigantic kitchen he had designed to indulge in his passion for the culinary arts.

The room was accessible through a secret passageway known only to him.

He had to react before weariness subdued his creative spirit into a nebulous, unproductive mush.

His dwindling income was inexorably steering him down the path of ruin.

Family and friends took turns to call him with well-meaning words of encouragement, “Don’t worry, you’ll bounce back”, “We have faith in you” and the like.

It was all in vain. Although going out would have helped shake him out of his incipient depression, Carl withdrew from all social interactions. He was feeling so desperately alone. And then, one day, he read something about new ways to meet people—simple and user-friendly dating apps.

Maybe they were the solution to his problems.

The sums he had to repay were commensurate with his formerly astronomical income, and whatever allowances he could claim only barely covered half of what he owed. He was stuck in a critical situation.

Snapping out of his glum reverie, Carl reached for his phone to search the Net for dating apps. They were bound to take his mind off his troubles.

A list of apps filled the screen within seconds.

He subscribed to one dating site to begin with, then to a few more. Most are free and, from what he’d heard, they’re a great way to meet potential love interests.

The questions asked upon registration were bound to pave the way for lies and deception, he told himself.

Subscribers were asked to describe themselves and the type of woman they wanted to meet.

Age, personal interests, and a photo – even better, several of them.

Joining the sites only took Carl a few minutes.

And then came the waiting, like a hunter stalking his prey – or hoping to break out of his loneliness.

Visitors started clicking on his profile within minutes. Carl – or should we say his dating-app persona – was quite successful, and feeling so suddenly attractive was nothing short of exhilarating.

A stranger clicks on your profile and boom – you're a different man!

And then, curiosity took over. Who was the woman behind Sophie49?

No picture. Maybe to conceal a homely physique? Perhaps.

Then again, perhaps not. Carl was still in the discovery phase.

One profile, two, three... he was on a roll.

He checked the women out and got into their lives, probing whatever they had decided to reveal.

They were probably lying, just like him.

He roamed a virtual realm where people confess their innermost secrets to perfect strangers. He was a priest in his confessional.

Many of these women were seeking absolution, and he soon realized that reciting a few Hail Marys at the opportune moment would work wonders to get his way.

Carl's idle mind started to hatch increasingly twisted plans to turn his jobless boredom into a somewhat dishonest, even illegal, occupation that may prove financially interesting.

He was so engrossed in chatting with the oddly familiar strangers online that he barely heard his phone ringing.

It seemed all of these women were bearing the burdens of life.

He imagined what his first encounter would sound like. And then his mind started racing, as if frantically searching to escape his loneliness and financial hardship. That's when the love interest became prey.

Carl: Hello, nice profile.

Sophie49: Thanks, yours is not bad either, lol.

Sophie49: What do you do for a living?

Yep, everyone was quite upfront from the onset here. Strangers talking like friends.

A world apart, where things moved very fast.

Where lying was a prerequisite to whet the interest of one's prey.

His former position as an international sales manager clearly sounded more exciting than being unemployed.

Carl: I'm a sales manager. You?

Sophie49: I'm a PA.

Sophie49: Are you single? Divorced?

Carl: I'm divorced, living alone. How about you?

Sophie49: Divorced too. I have a daughter, she's eight. Do you have children?

Carl: Yes, a daughter. She lives with her mother, quite far from here.

‘Here’ was the countryside, somewhere on the outskirts of Angers. Carl’s house was some 300 meters from the first road – if you could call it a road. More like a dirt path barely wide enough for two cars to pass.

Carl: Is your daughter living with you? Or do you have shared custody?

Sophie49: I have full custody. Her father lives far too, a few hundred miles away.

Sophie49: I live alone with my daughter, in a house.

He didn’t even have to go fishing for information – it just landed on his lap, including the times of the day when the woman’s house was empty.

And so his plan was taking shape, inexorably, as the vulnerable women fell hook, line, and sinker. A simple chat is all it took.

Still heavily in debt, he was fast running out of money. Those dating sites might just be the answer.

His profile soon attracted more and more ‘Sophie49s’.

With his background in sales, he knew how to smooth-talk these women who often feel confused after enduring more than their share of grief and failed relationships.

A first date with Sophie49 was set. It was all quite easy. This was a whole new game to Carl – why not mix his shady intentions with a bit of naughty fun after all?

The sheer naivety tinged with recklessness of his chat partners startled him as he grew more accustomed to navigating the inner workings of dating sites.

And so, while Sophie49 agreed to meet him for coffee at his place, the list of women eager to take things further kept growing.