

# The Ones That Stare

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# **An Excerpt from *The Ones That Stare***

**T**he clock read 7:35, yet Darien hadn't returned home. He used to have long days that started in the earliest of dawns and stretched beyond dusks. Lately, he hadn't had such days. Lately, he had busied himself with getting home to his wife. Now, with her gone, he hadn't need for punctuality.

Plus, he had other business to attend to for the night. Still, his absence on the street made Bernedette curious.

"Hm? Why isn't he home yet?" she asked herself as she stopped in front of his house and stood on the sidewalk. She stared through his front window. Favorite program? Not tonight. Tonight: static.

"Come on," she bade her dogs. They crossed to her house and slipped through the freshly locksmith-ed front door just as a car rolled onto the street.

*Kaduunk!* A gallon of oily, dishwasher-brown rainwater splashed from asphalt reservoir. Nearly hit a jogging Eli. He flinched at the beads of filth flung his way. The driver inside cringed, "Sorry! Sorry! Really sorry!"

Eli chuckled, shooed her and continued his jog—apology accepted.

The woman made a left into Darien's driveway, parked, exited the car.

Meanwhile, Bernedette undid her dogs' leashes and rubbed the giant Danes' coats. Sarah sniffed and scratched at the front door, prompting Bernedette to ask, "What, honey? What's wrong? We just came from outside. You need to go again? Huh? Does some little doggie need to go again?"

*Woof!* A no.

Bernedette pushed up erect, like an upright Buckingham soldier. Peeked out her living room window. Her eyes captured what her dogs' noses already had. "Who is that knocking on Darien's door?" she mumbled with sleuth's intent.

It was Hannah, the woman she saw that night but hadn't met. Her brows arched with recognition at the shape of the woman from behind. Bernedette had once thought her power of recognition a special gift. No matter how bundled-up someone was, or how they stood or walked, or what hair they had, she could recognize them. Face not required. "It's that girl," she breathed. Every young woman a girl to her. She let her tongue nip at her lip in salivatory anticipation. She had to know what happened. She had to know why she was there.

*Ba-rooo!* One of the dogs howled desire. Bernedette kept her gaze on the girl.

At Darien's house, Hannah rang the doorbell, knocked twice and called, "Hello? Hello? Is anyone home?" No answer fated to come, she waited an over-polite five minutes before walking back toward her car.

"No! She's leaving." Bernedette's voice vibrated against the pane. She hid half-eyed behind the curtains. "Hm? What should I do?"

*Woof!* One dog responded.

"You're right. I should learn who she is."

*Woof!*

"Alright, I'll feed you first. Come on! Hurry, before she leaves!" Bernedette dashed to her kitchen and yanked open the fridge. She stopped to grab her heated forehead. Winded. She hadn't jogged, let alone *dashed* in over a decade. Wet dog food, out. And into two bowls.

She crumpled the dog-food bag, threw it on the counter, and ran back to the front in time to see the car pull down the street.

The race on, she jettied out of her front door, locked it behind her, and glided to her car. In less than a minute she was in her car, gripping life into her steering wheel. She caught up with Hannah's car. "How do they do it in the movies?" she asked herself. "Three

cars behind. Yes, that'll do. That'll have to do. And what will you say to her once you stop? What will you say...?"

Bernedette hadn't a proper plan. She hadn't accounted for any scenario other than her succeeding. What if the girl didn't stop someplace where she'd be able to speak with her? What if she went straight home? What if she caught on to someone tailing her and called the police? A thousand what-ifs—questions left for fate. She only knew she needed to speak to her.

The harder she thought, the fewer good ideas came. She'd have to make chasmic leaps: total stranger, to knowing about the girl's association with Darien, to interrogating her about Sayen. Were she a social genius, she'd ably manage the transitions. Had she a brilliant light? Yes, once. It shone through from spirit to skin. However, a social genius? Never that. But she needed to know some things and the girl had the answers.

Ten minutes morphed into 20. Twenty into 28. Thirty-five... Forty-two. Each minute cost one strong beam of sun. Finally, it was a mariner's-blue night. A murky dew spritzed each car. Lefts. Rights. More lefts. More rights. A never-ending drive. It welcomed doubt. *Oh, she must know I'm following her, otherwise why the insane driving pattern? She must know. She must. No, you can't back down*

*from this. Press it, even if the situation becomes tense. What do you say? What do you say...?*

More lefts. More rights. As they drove—one safely lagging behind the other—Bernedette let her mind wander to darker twists. Who drove like this, taking short roads and sudden burst-turns to get off main streets? Where was this mysterious girl leading her? Into a trap? A trap of what doing, of what kind? Who was this girl leading her farther down a rabbit hole she so willingly tumbled into?

And then the girl pulled into a parking lot. And Bernedette knew most of her questions would soon meet answers.

Hannah parked in front of a lingerie store and went inside to escape rain's pattering. Look over her shoulder uncomfortably? Flee helplessly into the store? Feel her neck-hairs stand on end? Hannah did none of that. In all that driving, she hadn't noticed her shadow.

Bernedette sat in her car for a full minute, waiting. Through storefront glass, she watched Hannah browse. "Come on, Bernedette. What the hell are you gonna say to start a conversation?" Nothing came. How do you politely coax someone into an interrogation? Maybe you couldn't. "Oh, just do it already!" she commanded herself.

Out the car! Into the store. Darker inside than what it appeared from outside, the store had medium-dim mood lighting, mimicking lingerie-wearing conditions. Bernedette spotted Hannah perusing along the right wall, drifting toward the rear. The old woman then looked to the left to see the cashier ringing out another customer. The cashier welcomed Bernedette to shop the scant-fabric-ed wears.

With one scan of the store, the aging dog mom knew this store wasn't for her.

*They call this clothing? Wouldn't even cover a toothpick,* she thought, rubbing her hand over a thong. Years, decades even. It had been so long since she felt... She was the type of woman who knew she'd never love another man after her husband. She hadn't the strength to start over, be so vulnerable with someone again. One was more than enough.

“Don't lose focus, Bern. Keep your mind on task,” she instructed. Eyes up, she scoped the store. Hannah's eyes focused solely on the wall racks in the purple and black-coated store. Bernedette saw opportunity. Little time for stealth. She bypassed the mid-store displays—aromatherapy and massage oils—and traipsed to the back. She feigned looking at the wall-hung bustiers and leather garter belts.

“Come on. Closer. Closer,” she willed Hannah, hoping to bump into her to break ice. *Just a little...*

Bump!

“Oh! I’m so sorry. I should’ve been paying closer attention,” Bernedette apologized.

Reciprocated smiles. Hannah slid around Bernedette, saying, “It’s OK. Aisles are pretty tight.”

“Ha!” Bernedette stepped back but kept eyes on Hannah. She made sure the girl could feel her gaze tickling her neck and behind her ear. Her best acting job in years. Bernedette waited for the girl to turn back toward her. Then, she squinted, saying, “You look familiar. I’m sorry, but have we met before?”

“Um... I don’t think so,” Hannah shook her head. She stopped flicking through clothes and stood dead-faced with Bernedette.

“Pretty sure I know you, or I’ve at least seen you somewhere before.”

“Well, I do some acting. Maybe you’ve seen one of my commercials? I was in a gum commercial a few years back. Oh, and I’m in a Prilosec commercial. I also do some stage—”

“No, that’s not it,” Bernedette said, her façades more convincing than Darien’s. “Wait, I know. I saw you at my neighbor’s house a

while ago.”

“Your neighbor’s house?”

“Yes, 8495 Stillborn Street. You know it, right? Sure you do, you were there,” Bernedette led.

“Hmph,” Hannah hummed, neither offended nor defensive. Bernedette intrigued her.

“Yes, it wasn’t too long ago. I saw you dancing with him, through his front window.” Her smile evaporated and turned into an observant *Colombo* eye. She edged razor-close to creepy, witch-like.

Hannah grinned, replied, “So you like to spy on your neighbors?”

“Oh! Oh, no! No, no, no, no, no! I apologize if I made you feel intruded upon. I happened to be passing by at the time and saw you inside... in rather familiar clothes,” Bernedette backtracked.

“It was a joke.”

Bernedette chuckled, then added, “Bernedette, by the way.”

Hannah looked at the old woman’s outstretched hand. *Shake it. Eh!*

Changing her mind, she smiled and said, “Hannah.” Hannah believed Bernedette had a *diary* face. The kind of face that made you want to spill your secrets even when you hadn’t known her for any time. Beyond matronly, motherly kindness. She had a warmth

about her that reminded of a roadside inn in a torrential storm. Her spirit a safe haven for wayward travelers caught in weather's fury.

"Hannah, it's nice meeting you. So, you spent some time with Darien? You know his wife, too?" Bernedette resumed faux-browsing.

"Darien? Hm? So that's his name? I thought it started with an M. Anyway, no I never met her," Hannah explained.

"You didn't know his name?"

"Couldn't quite remember. It was foggy."

"Hm? No offense, but it seems like you would know the name of your date," Bernedette led the witness. *Come on, honey. Confirm it was a date.*

"Date?"

"Sorry, it looked like a date, what with the dancing and all."

"No. No, it definitely wasn't a date. He... I probably shouldn't tell you this," Hannah said, resuming perusing.

"It's fine. I guard secrets." Hollow, ghostly words. For a brief second, Bernedette sounded guilty of something heinous. Like she already knew what happened to Darien's wife. Like she needed to hide her own secrets. "Well, he hired me for a job. God, now that

sounds sketch. He didn't hire me for that kinda job. I'm not a woman of the night or a street vixen—"

"A hoe?"

Taken aback by the old woman's blunt verbiage, Hannah pointed at her and nodded. Bernedette then asked, "Then what are you, if you don't mind me asking?"

"An actress. Plain old actress. He hired me to act like his companion for a few hours. Didn't wanna be alone."

"Alone. Hm?"

"Said it was for some therapy. Looked a little depressed and I had sympathy for him, so I did it. Money helped, too."

"What about his wife? What'd he say happened to her?"

"Not much. He simply said she was *gone*."

"Gone?" Bernedette said with a smile and a lilt in her voice.

"Yeah. I got the feeling she was dead."

"Dead?" The word saddened her into a new low. *My god, Darien, what were you thinking?* Three minutes of standing silence. Contemplation overtook her muscles. She ran through every scenario that could lead to Darien's expressed status about his wife. She had suspected ill of Darien. This helped cement her feelings.

Bernedette stood in that catatonic state for so long that she didn't hear Hannah's calls to her. The girl finished shopping and departed with one purchase. When Bernedette looked up again, she spotted Hannah exiting into hard rain. "Wait." She sprinted after her.

Hannah stopped in the thundering wetness, keeping dry beneath her umbrella. Her older counterpart had no covering. It didn't matter. She needed only answers. She asked, "Those clothes, they weren't yours, were they?"

"No. They were his wife's. He wanted me to wear them."

"Why?"

She held up her hands and did air quotes as she said, "'To be more convincing' – His words. I guess he wanted me to look like her. Sorta wanted me to act like her, too."

"To look and act like her?" Bernedette mumbled to herself. It made no sense. None of it made sense. She'd think about it all the way home.

At home, she stood on her front stoop looking across to Darien's house as she saw one light on in his bedroom. What had he done? What hadn't she done?

To Be Continued In...

The Ones That Stare coming May 2020!

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