



SAUL
PRIZER

SILENT
LEGACY

PART I

244
POLICE

This is a fictitious story. Any similarity to real events, places, or people is purely coincidental.

I

1

Near future. September 6

It was almost nine o'clock in the morning.

Having gone through some very eventful months and almost losing her self-confidence, the brown-eyed woman by the name of Lana Moore, walking with the energetic pace of a self-assured person, was on her way to 49 Olive Street, where she had an office.

Her flawless figure accentuated by a stylish business suit, gracefully floating through the rays of the morning sun, easily attracted the looks of passersby, causing them to follow her with their curious eyes—after all, it was Lana Moore herself, the city's diligent beauty and its modest celebrity.

Upon entering the building and swiftly walking up the stairs, Lana exchanged greetings with everyone she recognized and awarded them a smile. Having ascended to the third floor, she stepped into her office. Sitting there behind her desk and sipping fresh coffee was Juliana Spencer, Lana's assistant and her best friend, with whom she had already shared her crazy and astounding latest news.

"Good morning, Lana. How was your weekend?"

"Morning, Juliana. Fine, thank you. Despite it being somewhat sad, the days flew by very quickly. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Great! Anything new?" Lana peeked at the computer screen.

"No, nothing yet. Silent and quiet."

"OK. Going to make some coffee—you need anything?"

"No, thanks."

Lana turned her computer on and went into a tiny kitchenette installed behind the door in the corner of the office.

In a few minutes, sitting at her desk with a cup of hot coffee, she was scrolling through a short list of new emails. Suddenly, Lana spotted a very important message. She began reading it immediately.

"Oh my . . ." she soon muttered.

Abruptly raising her eyes, Juliana glanced at her colleague.

"Oh my God!" Lana said slowly, stretching out the words, as she stood up and stared at the monitor.

In a split second, a worried Juliana was standing next to her.
“Did something happen?” she asked, alarmed.
“No . . . Forgive me if I scared you,” Lana said, excited. “Come, read it yourself.”
Curious to know the cause of her boss’s reaction, Juliana quickly read the message, which was open in full-screen view.
“Good God . . .” she murmured, covering her mouth with her palm.
Stunned by the news, Juliana looked at Lana in total disbelief.
“*Incredible!*” Lana emphasized cheerfully.
“*Unbelievable!*” Juliana responded.
Embracing each other and jumping for joy, they squealed like two ecstatic teenagers.

2

Seven years ago

A new inmate was brought into the prison cell. He looked somewhat startled and sluggish even though he seemed to be a well-built man.

“What shall we call you, fella?” asked one of the three convicts as soon as the cell door closed.

The convict asking the question was a man dressed as a woman. He had long dark hair and a pale face with highlighted eyelashes, neatly shaped eyebrows, and slightly colored lips. Lying on the top of the right bunk and resting his head on a hand, he did not take his spry eyes off the new inmate.

“Glen . . . Glen Norton,” Glen said.

“Welcome, Glen,” greeted the prisoner with a feminine appearance and nodded toward an empty place on the bottom of the left bunk. “My name is Andrea,” he added, coming down and sitting next to one of the other inmates, a robustly built man who was staring at Glen but did not utter a single word.

The new cellmate placed his modest belongings on the bottom bunk next to the left wall of the cell.

“Don’t be scared, Glen. We won’t hurt you,” reassured the man sitting next to Andrea with a resonant voice.

He was wearing prison pants, socks, and a white sleeveless shirt, which barely covered his abundantly hairy chest. With a noticeable belly, chubby cheeks, big nose, and half-a-span-long, grayish, slicked-back hair, the man looked rather stern and was, without a doubt, in his sixties.

“My name is Oliver Paxton,” he said, introducing himself. “Over there, that’s Joe Sanders.” He nodded his head toward the last resident of the cell, who was lying in his bed

above Glen. “Don’t pay attention to him because you won’t get any from him either. Nothing personal.”

Glen glanced thankfully at Oliver and Andrea, sitting next to each other, then at Joe, stretched out on his top bunk. Lying there was a dried-out sixty-year-old man with gray hair and a pointy beard. Staring quietly at the ceiling, he didn’t pay attention to anything.

“Nice to meet you,” Glen said, turning back and starting to make his bed.

“Joe is too tired of life . . . old vagabond. He doesn’t talk to anyone—just ignore him,” Oliver added.

For some reason, Glen thought that Joe probably didn’t even realize that there was a new guy in their cell.

Through a small, high window, the inmates could see a storm raging outside. Waves of wind, fused with drops of rain, knocked against the thick glass of the window. Glen did his utmost best not to think about the two and a half years he would have to spend there, but right then, during his first moments in a prison cell, accomplishing that was the hardest thing to do.

“Oliver is the man of our cell, and we all got to do as he says,” Andrea said, interrupting his thoughts, while stroking Oliver’s hairy chest right in front of him.

“Got it,” Glen answered politely.

Trying to hide his astonishment at Andrea’s actions and accept the prison environment the way it was, Glen could not remember how men who dressed like women were referred to. *Transvestites? Transsexuals? Bisexuals? Who the hell knows. Right now, best not to bother anyone and not to look openly surprised—that should help me stay out of trouble.*

Having made his bunk and arranged his scarce personal belongings, Glen was relieved—his first minutes in prison were a success.

And thus the story of the incarceration of a humble prison newbie, Glen Norton, and his coping with the new environment began. This first trouble-free experience was reason enough to overcome his fear of imprisonment and constant anxiety and gradually transition into life behind bars, run by its own rules.

3

Present day. January

Upon his arrival home, a man found an important letter. In addition to the regular bill for the services provided, the envelope contained a personal letter from the woman who headed the institution that had sent the bill.

Having skimmed through the message, the man became concerned. He paused and carefully reread the letter.

After short but intense contemplation, he grabbed the phone and dialed the number of the institution. When a secretary answered, he introduced himself and asked to speak to the director.

“One moment, please,” the secretary answered.

When the director responded, the caller politely introduced himself again and asked to clarify the situation at hand, which he had been notified of by the letter.

Five minutes into the conversation, he once again realized the gravity of the situation and found out a couple of additional details not mentioned in the letter.

“I understand,” the man said.

“Is there anything else you would like to ask?” the director inquired.

“No. Thank you.”

“Do not hesitate to call me again if you need anything—and good luck.”

“I won’t. Goodbye,” he responded, lost in his thoughts, and then hung up.

4

Three years ago

Despite feeling disconnected from reality, Kenton Collins couldn’t help but notice how wonderful the weather was. It was only the second half of March, yet today happened to be unusually bright and warm.

Looks like spring is early this year, Kenton thought as he drove.

Lately, the weather had not been all that pleasant—even though it hadn’t snowed for a while, the wind in the city was piercing cold, with frequent showers and little sunshine. Nevertheless, it seemed that today the weather was purposely splendid, lifting up the already-excellent mood Kenton was in.

Even though he had plenty of time after his shift, Kenton did not go home; he’d had enough of being alone in an empty house, waiting to reunite with his family. Instead, he drove out of the city and stopped at one of the diners on the outskirts, where he ordered a large sandwich and a glass of sparkling water.

After taking his time to eat, Kenton drove straight to the airport to pick up his wife and three-year-old daughter.

Having spent all day thinking about his family finally coming home, Kenton was excited and felt a constant adrenaline rush. He was looking forward to the time they would spend together and did not mind being a couple of hours early.

Today, having tremendously missed his wife, Agnes, and his daughter, Maria, Kenton was more than ready to end the painfully prolonged loneliness, which in the past two months had become a dreadful routine.

Stepping out of the car at the airport parking lot, he once again felt the warmth of the day and paused to sink into a blissful moment: the birds, feeling the breath of spring, cheerfully scurrying about; the trees, reaching for the sun with their leafless branches, as if trying to grab the sky with their bony fingers; and the whole ground, greedily drinking in the surrounding warmth.

Kenton took a deep breath of air, filled with the sounds of birds.

What a beautiful spring!

He slowly turned toward the arrival gate and started walking. The thought of seeing his loved ones was warmer than the spring sun.

Looking forward to reclaiming his happiness, Kenton entered the airport. Having checked the arrival time of the flight and wandering around a bit, he found a suitable spot to watch the planes.

Kenton sat down. Thinking about his family life, he felt very happy that he and Agnes were already thinking about a second child. He sighed as he remembered the burdening feeling of longing to be together during the past two months.

Returning to reality, Kenton glanced at his watch. Nearly an hour of waiting had already disappeared—it seemed that in the face of the inevitable reunion, the time just flew by.

Wanting to stretch his legs, Kenton took a walk around the airport and stepped outside for a short while. As the moment of their meeting approached, despite all the years spent with his wife, he felt like a youngster before a date, hoping to make the best impression on his girlfriend.

After about half an hour, he slowly walked to the information boards, where he saw that the flight he was waiting for had been delayed.

Suddenly, an implacable sound, growing louder, came from someplace far away.

5

Present day. March

Kenton slapped the button of the screaming alarm clock pulling him out of sleep. The dark bedroom was instantly filled with silence. It was clear that the pleasant moments he had just experienced were merely a dream.

Trying not to think of anything, Kenton closed his eyes. If only for a second, he wanted to catch up with the events that had passed before his very eyes a moment ago and to feel again the excitement and unspoken beatitude they granted to the soul.

Unfortunately, all he could get was a flow of fixed images spinning in his head, which was not the continued experience he craved.

Feeling awake, Kenton lay down for another minute. He made his peace with the fact that he would not be able to catch the dream.

Too bad. He sighed.

It had been a very lifelike experience—to the tiniest of details—which ruthlessly reminded Kenton of his reality. Feeling down, he knew that the new life he built through a lot of suffering and pain might not be able to hold the weight of the most painful memories of his life—the tentacles of pain and heartache, dwelling deep inside, still had the power to push their way through to the surface and, with a single blow, cut the thread of new purpose he had nurtured during the past several years.

Kenton felt helpless. He was frail and vulnerable; the stable condition he normally succeeded to maintain was on the verge of suddenly dispelling, exposing him to the abyss breathing of death. Kenton knew, were he to slip even slightly, he could go down and vanish forever.

But no matter how hard it would get, Kenton was not going to give up. Just as he was used to, he would think about the most pleasant memories, which he could touch in a manner so close to reality by having such a clear and realistic dream, and that gave him strength.

When Kenton regained his balance, he looked at the electronic alarm clock—eighteen past six, the early morning of March 10. Even though he had to go to work, he was not in a hurry to get up. No longer afraid of being crushed, Kenton once again remembered the most painful experience of his life—the events that took place three years ago.

6

Seven years ago

Glen was trying to take the life in prison the way it was settled before he arrived. So he always called Andrea by her female name and never asked what her male name was.

He had soon found out that Oliver Paxton, whom Andrea was friendly with, was the shot caller of those doing time for various sex crimes. Because Glen was sentenced for sexual harassment and illegal stalking of a woman, he also belonged to the clan led by Oliver.

He was happy to be around his new friends: no one bothered him, and there were no hints of sexual tribute, which was a relief.

His only enemies were the inmates incarcerated for other crimes. Always looking for weaknesses and trying to provoke, they hated Oliver Paxton and his people and did not miss a chance to bully them, but the conflicts rarely turned into real fights. This made Glen feel safe around his mates.

In the first month of his sentence, Glen had already experienced harassment and insults but took it reasonably well. He tried to stick to his people and was learning the prison rules of conduct, and thus the interest in him was gradually fading.

While in prison, Glen was occasionally visited by his older brother, who was worried about him and was the only person in his family who did not turn away from him due to the conviction. Glen was happy to tell him that he was beginning to settle in there and feeling rather well.

Oliver Paxton, the leader of his clan, was a principled and strong man who acted decisively and boldly. He was the one who should be given credit for the fact that Glen had someone to watch his back and was not left on his own.

Glen wasn't sure whether the relationship between Oliver and Andrea was love or just a friendship, but he wouldn't ask questions of this kind. He quickly got used to their fondling and open display of affection.

In the evenings, Oliver would softly knock on Andrea's bunk, and she would climb down to him. Together they would gently caress each other, whispering something to one another, but there was no sexual intercourse, and they never even kissed on the lips.

Settled above Glen, Joe normally made no meaningful sounds. Every now and then he would grumble angrily under his nose, or, frustrated with something, he would start walking up and down the cell and snarl out in a language only he could understand.

Oliver mentioned that sometimes Joe would get anger attacks, but during the first two months with him in a cell, Glen didn't happen to witness anything of the sort.

7

Seven years ago

Glen's relationship with Andrea was amicable.

She would curiously ask about different details of his past and wasn't shy to inquire about rather personal things. When Andrea had a chance, she would tell what she heard to Oliver.

This did not bother Glen one bit—he had nothing to hide, and besides, Andrea was more than happy to share her own stories.

She would always praise Glen for his friendliness, tolerance, patience, and understanding and often mentioned that she and Oliver were lucky to have such a fine new cellie.

As their trust grew, Andrea did not miss a chance to complain about her conditions in prison: she was constantly out of skin-, hair-, and nail-care products; accessories; perfume; and various other toiletries, which she would carefully name. But the way Glen

saw it, even though she had a very limited range of commodities, Andrea did a great job and had perfectly mastered a feminine demeanor.

Andrea spent a lot of time improving her looks, and of course, she couldn't help but talk about it with Glen, who was always in her sight. Even though this didn't really interest Glen, he would politely listen to her chatter. That's how he found out about Andrea's dream of getting real breasts.

8

Three years ago

That fatal day, feeling blissfully excited, Kenton was waiting for the arrival of his family. As the waiting time was coming to an end, it turned out that the flight was delayed.

After a while, there was a public announcement for people waiting for this flight. They were instructed to gather at the designated administrative office. Kenton did just that. There he saw a group of about twenty people who were expecting answers; the room was filled with uncomfortable silence.

Many questions rushed through Kenton's mind: *Why are we here? How long do we have to wait? When will they make another announcement?*

Soon they saw an airline representative, who expressed his great concerns and regretfully announced that the aircraft had disappeared from the radars monitoring the airspace.

To Kenton, it sounded like a strange and ludicrous misunderstanding. In his head, the thoughts were feverishly chasing one another: *Are they sure they are talking about the right plane? This must be another stupid mistake they made . . . How could a plane flying my family disappear? Nonsense! This just can't happen!*

Before he could understand that these thoughts were merely the denial of a possible ruthless reality, Kenton heard a new announcement: "The plane crashed."

Kenton felt dizzy. It was difficult to make sense of the news—it was the most absurd thing he had ever heard.

His consciousness, like a safety device, rejected the tangibility of this possibility. To believe it, he felt he would have to be coercively convinced.

Suddenly, the lights became too bright, and Kenton could no longer bear the weight of his body. His heart seemed to have lost its rhythm. Kenton felt raging anger and an insurmountable desire to escape from this horrifying reality, yet his body was paralyzed with total weakness while his thoughts plunged into nowhere.

Kenton collapsed, but someone next to him managed to grab him just in time.

When he regained consciousness, standing up on his feet, Kenton was a man whose life was savagely and mercilessly mutilated.

Three years ago

The first year after the loss of his wife and little daughter was the worst.

Kenton had resorted to different kinds of help, listened to the advice of friends and relatives, and believed that he could find the answer on how to move on, yet it seemed impossible to accomplish. As time went by, the pain of loss was tearing his heart apart, and he could not manage to escape from the firm clutch of despair. The pain did not go away, and Kenton never found the comfort he was looking for.

Numerous attempts to change something often resulted in rage and outbursts of anger, which could only be suppressed either with alcohol or dissociation. Driven to desperation, Kenton had several times seriously considered suicide, but that did not look like a real solution to his problems.

Do I really need to kill myself? Well, that's just foolish, he reasoned.

Kenton sometimes felt that he was being lied to during therapy sessions—all professionals suggested that he should try to let it go, but to him, that looked like a betrayal of his late wife and daughter.

As there was no significant improvement, Kenton became skeptical about the abilities of regular assistance, rejected the rehabilitation, and quit seeing all the therapists.

That shit doesn't help—can't lie to yourself! he decided.

Even though he was sometimes disgusted by his own pitiful existence, Kenton could not find it in himself to get used to the new reality.

Life is, apparently, over. The only thing left is to perish, he thought occasionally.

Unable to suppress the anger and hopelessness he felt about the situation, Kenton reached the end of his former self. Six months after the loss, he felt like he had two options: to embrace death or wait for a miraculous alleviation.

Something needed to happen.

Seven years ago

Glen's relationship with Oliver Paxton was not as close and open as that with Andrea—it took time to develop and was only gradually gaining certainty. Glen never felt, though, that Oliver disliked him, but for some reason, the leader of the gang was not in a rush to display his acceptance. Glen himself was always friendly and helpful toward Oliver and was ready to fulfill any of his orders.

One day, in the common area of the prison, Oliver got surrounded by the inmates from the rival clan. Hating those sentenced for sex crimes, they started insulting and threatening him.

As soon as he saw it, Glen quickly rushed toward Oliver and stood bravely between him and the closest bully. He was ready to defend his leader and, if necessary, fight for him.

The inmates, who were hoping to provoke Oliver to start a fight, saw Glen's determination and decided to walk away before it escalated into a real conflict.

Shortly after this episode, Oliver opened up to Glen, listened to his advice, and called him a friend. He even admitted that he once suspected that Joe, the weirdo, was a spy sent to his cell by the prison administration. Although these suspicions were not confirmed, Oliver remained cautious and took his time to begin trusting the newcomer Glen, which he apologized for.

Glen understood it perfectly and did not hold a grudge.

11

Three years ago

Having lost his social and personal identity and not being able to find a new one, Kenton had unexpectedly found the energy to start changing his circumstances. He resolved to part with the remains of his previous life, and each change made life just a little bit easier.

Feeling relief, Kenton began looking for more opportunities to change. Soon, he made a decision to leave the environment and people surrounding him, in whose eyes he looked like an outcast unfit for life or a goon losing all ability to reason.

After the tragedy, Kenton immediately got out of the family house and sold it. For several months he had been crashing in cheap motels, guest houses, and other random places but never considered getting a permanent home.

I am no different from a stray dog, he sometimes thought to himself.

One late-autumn afternoon, dawdling on the outskirts of the city, Kenton noticed a small area untouched by the real property developers. It was situated near the chemical industrial complex on the eastern side of the city and contained several houses, temporarily or permanently occupied by people looking for shelter. These were folks who, for all kinds of reasons, had ended up on the outside of the middle-class hallway and eventually were stuck there.

Running away from his circumstances, without much contemplation Kenton made up his mind to settle there and soon moved into the second floor of one of the shabby and uncared-for wooden houses. This was a perfect place for a man trying to distance himself from a recurring past and unable to fit in the present.

This place was different from any he had ever lived in. The house had minimum amenities, a dominating unpleasant smell, dirt, and disorder, but Kenton hardly noticed any of that. He was renting a tiny apartment with only the essential furniture and domestic appliances.

Many of Kenton's neighbors would often gather in a bunch to drink the cheapest booze or spend time trying to figure out the source of the next inebriation. They were the category of the local residents who couldn't care less about their privacy and who would meet at a place of any member of the group for a common goal of getting wasted. Through the old, thin walls, one could often hear their emotional speeches, quarreling, singing, and even the rhythmical pounding of the cheapest kind of love. Partway through the night, all these sounds usually transformed into unanimous snoring.

Kenton's days became totally opposite to his previous life, slowly withdrawing into the distance on the one-way track of the arrow of time.

12

Two years ago

Living in a new place, Kenton could finally take a break from the long searches and attempts to make peace. He felt good about making the changes and was satisfied with the new beginning.

After several months of living on the outskirts of the city, Kenton felt somewhat better and was able to find a day or two without the heartbreaking pain of losing his family. He finally had a stronger point of reference for a new life, even though he hardly thought about any specific future plans. For now, he was satisfied with being able to loosen the grip of the pain and moving away from that horrific state of "in between."

For the longest time, Kenton's best medicine was alcohol, and drinking it had become some sort of routine. It was an excellent medium for diluting and melting down the anger and despair—and for distancing himself from the people of his past.

In his new place, Kenton always had someone to drink with and was never condemned for such conduct. Sometimes it seemed that none of the specialists he saw on numerous consultations and therapies could compare to his drinking buddies, who supported his right to get angry and feel grief and injustice. Here he was not a patient, and no one acted like they knew his problems and understood what he felt or pretended that they could help him. On the contrary, the majority of the people in his new surroundings had experienced their own personal losses and had broken life stories, which they openly revealed to each other and then had a drink, feeling the relief they needed.

Even though Kenton realized that the new lifestyle was degrading and that he had deteriorated physically, in terms of mental stability and tolerance of his own existence,

this was the first time his life was bearable again. The face he saw every day in the mirror was always unshaved, appeared exhausted, or had dark circles under the eyes, but Kenton was not the man he used to be; therefore, these changes were more than acceptable.

He quit his former job and was not looking for a place in society. Now everything was utterly different.

Regular people were rare guests around his new home—usually only if they were lost. Almost everyone had forgotten that this neighborhood existed, but if people happened to drive past, they would look around with a certain disquiet and drive off without slowing down.

Kenton could only remember one car coming there to visit someone.

Probably lost, he thought automatically.

Sometimes, when going for a walk, Kenton would circle around the array of massive buildings of the chemical industry rising in close vicinity. One day, he stepped inside one of the two abandoned hangars, slowly crumbling away just outside the fenced territory of the adjacent manufacturing facilities, on the farther end of the complex.

In there, through an all-consuming disorder, he was able to discern a rather spacious underground area, but due to the lack of light, he only managed to make out its dimensions and not its purpose.

Interesting. What was it used for? Kenton wondered. *Could this have been some kind of a shelter during the Cold War?* Kicking the trash, he went outside and never came back. Behind the factories, there were cultivated fields, which were separated by the highway leading to the country's capital. Just over half a kilometer to the north, Kenton could clearly see a stretch of forest and a small lonely cottage snuggled at the edge of a field. There was nothing else to rest one's eyes on.

Winter and spring went by almost unnoticed. Then, after a chilly and windy June, came rainy July, which was eventually replaced by a warm and beautiful August.

It had been nine months since Kenton moved to the outskirts of the city. Here he was living a life of new routines and had a little place he called his own, and he wasn't planning to change a thing.

At first sight, August 26 was nothing special—it went by just as consistently and monotonously as any other day at the end of summer. In the evening, the falling dusk of soft colors overflowed the land, preparing it for the night.

When the sounds of the late sleepers finally subsided, there was no sign of anything noteworthy. However, it was this night that Kenton's house suddenly blazed up in a raging fire.

Following Glen's confrontation with Oliver's enemies, significant changes took place in the cell.

One evening, after everyone had settled down, Andrea quietly descended into Oliver's bunk, and the two of them went on whispering for some time. She then asked something that made Oliver pause for a second and nod in approval. Andrea lit up with joy.

"Storytime!" she shouted delightfully.

Glen couldn't understand what was going on.

"Glen, you know . . ." Andrea wanted to say something but felt too emotional. "Just listen, and you'll understand!" she blurted out after a short pause and then, overwhelmed with joy, returned to her bunk, whispering to herself: "Oh, God, how I missed listening to stories."

Oliver began his narration. He spoke about the times when he was free, meeting with his friends and acquaintances, living comfortably and feeling great satisfaction, being able to make anything of his life he wanted. He wasn't very specific about self-realization, but his story made an impression anyway. Glen and Andrea listened carefully to his every word. Oliver created a stirring atmosphere for his audience and was able to keep their attention focused until the very end of the adventure.

It was a beautiful and inspirational recital about Oliver's life before prison and his great flights. When he finished, the cell was filled with silence.

"Bravo! Oliver, my dearest." Climbing back down, Andrea hugged Oliver and pecked him several times on the cheeks. "You are amazing! I've missed this so much!"

"Great story! I enjoyed listening to it," Glen complimented.

Lying above him, Joe displayed no interest and was already asleep.

"Thank you, my friends," Oliver said, turning to Glen. "I am happy that you enjoyed it. I devote this piece of autobiography to you and only you." Grasping his words and looking into his eyes, Glen nodded in accord.

"And now I bid everyone a good night," Oliver said, yawning. Andrea said good night and returned to her bunk.

Thinking about what he had just heard, Glen turned toward the wall. It made him think about his rather simple life in comparison to Oliver's experiences and opportunities. But because he did not completely understand the storyteller's fancy, he hadn't yet been able to properly appreciate his narrative.

Since that evening, Andrea and Glen had heard more of Oliver's stories, to which they listened with growing excitement. Every time Oliver mentioned something extraordinary, Glen looked him in the eye, wondering whether it was even possible.

Without interrupting his narration, Oliver would simply respond with a friendly wink, which was to be understood as the truth.

As Oliver spoke, the speculations on the possible episode's denouement anticipated by the audience would range through the cell, and although they usually turned out to be unfounded, at the end of the story came the words of praise and admiration.

As time went by, Oliver spoke less in equivoques and was more open about his past. The most private affairs, although never completely unveiled, he would call the "little sins of his life."

It seemed that the arsenal of Oliver's stories would never become exhausted. Glen and Andrea were waiting to hear the end of the unfinished stories and beginning of the new ones as if they were a new episode of their favorite series.

Having around such an artistic and charismatic character like Oliver Paxton, the prison routine of Glen and Andrea was diversified close to a maximum, and they couldn't ask for more.

Glen could hardly believe that a person of such accomplishments would be sentenced to do time in prison.

Oliver was very proud of his achievements and had obviously enjoyed the roles he had held as a free man. The sweet praise of Glen and Andrea was music to his ears, and he was eager to regain his freedom in just half a year's time.

When released, Oliver wanted to see Glen as the leader of the inmates sentenced for sexual offenses. He was going to soon announce his plans to other members of the gang and promised to plead for him if anyone grumbled about this decision.

Oliver was determined to be more careful after leaving prison and hoped to never have to end up behind bars again.

Glen was excited. It felt like he had reached everything that could be achieved during the incarceration, and he couldn't wait for the day to come when he was declared Oliver's successor. Believing his time of glory was approaching, he was impatient to share the news with his brother, whom he expected to visit him shortly.

14

Two years ago

Kenton woke up.

There was something wrong. His body felt weighty and constrained, fixed in one position. His eyes were timorously getting used to the light, although it was not at all bright, and his head was as heavy as lead.

It took some time before Kenton could arrange his thoughts and find his bearings. His arms and legs were uncontrollable, his entire body was numb, and he had hardly any energy.

Suddenly he noticed a moving silhouette next to him. Kenton attempted to look that way but was only able to shift his gaze. Then he felt a touch on his shoulder.

“Good! You are awake! Try not to move too much—keep still,” a familiar voice said.

Kenton was unable to respond.

“It’s me, Germund, your former colleague. You are in a hospital. But don’t worry—everything is going to be fine. The doctor will be here any minute,” Germund said, pressing the nurse call button.

Kenton’s eyes got used to the light, but his head was still empty.

Germund? Looking at his companion, Kenton tried to recollect. *Germund. . .*

The doctor on call entered the ward. After greeting the patient, he examined the readings of the medical equipment Kenton was hooked up to and, seeing that everything looked all right, told Kenton about the surgery performed on the left side of his body. The doctor assured that the worst was behind him and promised that Kenton would be able to walk and use the injured left arm. But he first needed to get better.

He asked Kenton to move the toes and fingers of his left leg and arm, and with a lot of effort, Kenton was able to do just that.

“Wonderful!” the doctor exclaimed.

Thoughtful, Kenton kept shifting his glance between Germund and the doctor for a few seconds.

“A-any-one e-else got hu-u-rt?” he asked in a breaking voice.

“One resident died in the fire, but I don’t know exactly who. I need to check that. And you’ll get better,” Germund reassured.

The doctor made it clear that the patient needed to rest and should no longer be disturbed.

“I will leave you two for just a minute. If you need anything, press the nurse call button placed on your stomach. Now get some rest and get better, Kenton. And don’t worry about anything,” the doctor said before leaving the room.

With his right hand, Kenton found the remote control on his stomach and felt the button.

“Last night on patrol I was called to the scene,” Germund explained. “I saw your name on the list of victims, and after verifying it, I was sure it was you. It’s been ages, brother.” He winked amiably at Kenton, who did not take the eyes off him, and added: “I am free today, so I stopped by to see how my old pal was doing.”

Kenton carefully examined the features of his former friend. The gray, inch-long hair accentuated Germund’s elongated face with a strong nose, warm blue eyes, and a square-shaped, somewhat protruding chin. Standing there next to Kenton’s bed and amiably smiling was the well-familiar profile of Germund Keel, a thin and tall man in his forties.

“He-ll-o, Germ-mund,” Kenton stammered, trying to force out a smile.

Understanding that he was finally recognized, Germund responded with a grin.

“I am fine, brother, get some rest and get better. I promise to come back soon to see how you are doing. Bye, now!”

“By-ye.”

Having gently patted Kenton’s shoulder, Germund hurried out.

Left in the room alone, Kenton suddenly felt extremely tired. It was still hard to arrange his thoughts, and everything seemed rather incoherent. His body was pumped up with medicines that made him feel not quite like himself.

Kenton could not recollect anything about the fire just yet, but it was nice to see his old buddy again, who looked just like he remembered: that same gray hair, friendly blue eyes radiating happiness, and a wide smile. He was most likely that same curious, restless, and terribly impatient guy, like a teenager craving adventure.

Having been visited by Germund, Kenton felt guilty for severing his relationship with his former best friend.

How could I have forgotten him? Germund really didn’t deserve it, Kenton thought, drifting away.

15

Two years ago

The next day Kenton began to faintly recall the events of the fire: having been woken up by the noise of the burning flames, screams of the people, and sirens of the approaching fire trucks, he had jumped out of bed and felt his way down the stairs, submerged in smoke.

When the blaze blocked his way, Kenton hesitated and tried to find a way to escape from the burning house, but being held back by the thick smoke, he had lost consciousness and could not remember anything after that point.

During Germund’s visits, Kenton was able to find out more: the fire originated on the ground floor in the apartment of Oden, a former locksmith, and spread quickly through the house. All the residents, except Kenton and the deceased Oden, got out in time. Knowing that there were still people trapped inside, the neighbors tried to help them but were driven away by the rising flames of the raging fire.

The firefighters who arrived from the nearby chemical industrial complex were informed about the people inside the blazing house. Thanks to their prompt reaction, they managed to quickly locate and pull out Kenton, who was found unconscious, crushed by a burning timber beam. His left arm and leg were broken in several places, and his left shoulder was injured and burned.

Kenton perfectly realized how close to death he came. It was a miracle he was still alive.

Having to spend most of his time in bed to allow gradual recovery, Kenton was finally regaining clarity of mind and had plenty of time to contemplate everything that had happened. During that fire, Death made a stop at his side. It could have claimed his life, dispersing his being into the unknown without even giving it a second thought, making all his life endeavors, however joyful or painful, end. Coldly and mercilessly. Forever.

Frequently remembering the loss of his family, Kenton finally found a new perspective—having spent so much time being angry about the imaginary injustice, he now realized that what he had felt was nothing more than self-pity and selfishness and that he had no right to assume the role of a victim. Also, most importantly, to sink this low.

Kenton felt like he was being redeemed from the misfortunes and delusions of the past and was now simply enjoying being alive.

Even though his body was broken, physical ailments were now a secondary issue. Kenton was growing stronger inside, and upon recovery, he was planning to find a way to catch up with those several lost years and was ready to take on the responsibility for his life again.

It seemed that the changes happened at exactly the right moment.

16

Seven years ago

Life in the cell gained a new level of mutual trust and understanding.

Having heard about a dozen of Oliver's stories, sometimes parts of them spread over several evenings, Glen learned a lot of new things. Although he had only spent a few months in prison, it was enough to alter certain attitudes of his.

Like being set ajar along with the opening prison gate, inspired by Oliver, a yet-undiscovered corner of Glen's subconsciousness had filled up with new ideas and desires he couldn't wait to bring to life.

Lately being swept away by these thoughts and having just finished listening to another of Oliver's stories, one evening Glen was about to fall asleep when, unexpectedly, he was interrupted by three prison officers entering the cell. It was then that Glen heard the heartbreaking news about his family and was asked to come to the visiting area, where his brother was awaiting him. With Oliver and Andrea curiously watching him go, without hiding his worry, Glen was escorted from the cell and rushed to the unscheduled meeting.

Entering the visiting room, Glen saw Hubert Nilsson, the captain of the city's police department, standing there with a smile. The chief of the prison himself was standing right next to him.

Glen was surprised.

After the officers accompanying Glen left, Hubert was the first to break the silence.

"Hello, Bruno . . . Or should I say Glen?" he said, grinning widely and extending a hand.

"Man, it's been sooo long! Is it really over?" Bruno shook hands with both of his companions.

"Oh yes! It's over. You don't need to go back to your cell, so relax," Hubert assured, chuckling.

"When they said that there was an accident with the family, I was so worried, as if it were true."

"Good thing you remembered the secret code after all this time," the prison chief pointed out, laughing.

"So tell me, what is going on?" Bruno asked impatiently.

"OK. The information you gathered was thoroughly analyzed. We have identified the suspects and set up an action plan," Hubert reported. "It took some time, but we've got up to a dozen men—a bunch of perverts. The police raids are taking place as we speak. And I have already received reports that the operation is running successfully."

"It actually worked." Bruno exhaled with relief. "I'll be damned."

"The news will soon reach Oliver, so going back to the cell would be an unnecessary risk."

"Well, and so be it. I am bloody excited to be Bruno Brawling again!" Bruno added cheerfully.

"Great work, Bruno," the chief of the prison commended. "I had informed one trustworthy person in each shift on duty about you. We were ready to jump in if it came to that. I am glad everything went smoothly. I bet Hubert will agree with me: you deserve a long vacation."

"I concur," Hubert added.

"Thank you both."

"Well, shall we? I'll take you home," Hubert offered.

"Gladly," Bruno agreed.

After a few formalities, which lasted a couple of minutes, a massive metal door opened before Bruno and Hubert. The chief of the prison and the head officer of the shift on duty, who knew about the mission, saluted Bruno as he left the prison.

Two years ago

After spending nearly two months in the hospital, Kenton finally had the cast removed from his left leg and was making his first attempts to walk. Despite the pain, he was happy to be able to move around without help.

His left arm and shoulder had to stay in a cast a little longer.

Kenton was not afraid of disability and looked at it as at an inevitable reality he would have to grow accustomed to. Knowing perfectly what a tenacious place one's past can be, he focused all his attention on the future and started planning things he wanted to do once he was released from the hospital.

First of all, Kenton was ready to change his lifestyle and, definitely, his place of residence. He also wanted to regain his former physical condition and reclaim his position in society. Arranging the details of the future changes in his mind, Kenton was determined to go through foul or fair to achieve his ends.

While at the hospital, Kenton was visited by friends, relatives, and acquaintances. He asked them to forgive his behavior and was enjoying a warm and intimate interaction, just like he had a while ago.

As the day of his discharge was approaching, Kenton was paid a visit by his former boss.

Hubert Nilsson seemed not to have changed at all: an earnest-looking man of forty-five, wearing a shirt with the top button undone under a suit jacket, always with a clean shave and his short hair neatly combed to the side. Even though his outward appearance was not particularly memorable, he was a very sensible and well-organized person. Hubert had an entire police department under control.

"Hello, Kenton. You look good," Hubert said as he shook Kenton's hand, starting the conversation.

"Thanks, I do feel better. Not being packed in a cast will do that to you."

Kenton offered his guest a visitor's chair and took a seat on the bed.

"I hear you are about to leave this place," Hubert said.

"They promised to let me go in a few days. To tell the truth, I can't wait to get out of here. I feel I have stared enough at the hospital ceiling."

Hubert smiled.

There was a brief pause. Kenton's gut told him what Hubert was most definitely thinking about at that moment.

"I know what you're thinking, Hu," Kenton said, addressing him just like he used to. "Where will I go? What will I do? You know, this might sound cliché, but I am ready to start a new life. I know I've been doing it all wrong, and it is time to pull it together."

“So the rumors are true—the old Kenton is back!” Hubert said, smiling. “And where does this new life of yours begin, stranger?”

Kenton looked Hubert in the eye.

“I am not yet sure how, but first of all, I want to get my job back.”

This put Hubert on his guard.

“I know it’s too early to be speaking about it. Let’s meet in a few months. You will see a different me,” Kenton added assuredly, referring to his physical condition.

“Well, if you’ve set your mind on it, I am sure you’ll get to where you want to be.”

“So you don’t think that my wishes are unreasonable?”

“Certainly not!”

“Thanks, Hu!”

“You bet. Your return depends on you and you alone. By the way, make sure you are ready not only to get back in shape but also to retake your qualification exams.”

“No problem—I will start cramming right away.”

“If you keep up this attitude, your coming back will be just a matter of time.”

“Thank you. I feel very determined!”

Having changed the topic, the two went on talking about the good old times. Four years of working side by side left many a moment to remember, and Hubert had quite a bit of new news to share.

A whole hour flew by unnoticed. Glancing at his watch, Hubert stood up from his chair. Before leaving, he offered his assistance with anything Kenton could need and promised to support his return to work.

Kenton thanked him again, and the two said goodbyes.

18

Seven years ago

An increasing number of sexual assaults against children and teenagers had been reported in various cities of the country. According to the testimony of the victims, it was established that they had been exploited by different persons, with changes in the schemes, places, and times of the attacks.

The most horrifying part was that two kids were still missing.

For a long time the police had no leads, but by pure coincidence, a certain Oliver Paxton was taken into custody. He was suspected of being one of the organizers of the assaults against children, but the evidence was only circumstantial.

Charges had been brought against Oliver, but he hired one of the best lawyers in the whole country, which made it impossible to lock him up for good. He was sentenced to just two years behind bars.

That was his first conviction.

The parents of the victims and people supporting them found this extent of justice insufficient and fiercely insisted on taking further action.

This was when the little-known detective Bruno Brawling came into play. He ventured to go undercover and infiltrate Oliver Paxton's prison cell, where he was supposed to win his trust and possibly acquire information that would help to keep the suspect behind bars and catch his allies.

Many older and more experienced officers thought that Bruno was just a rookie who wanted to make a name for himself and that his mission was hardly feasible, but however tiny the possibility of success he was offering, it couldn't have been neglected—taking down the gang of child molesters spread throughout the country would be an extraordinary reward.

Soon after, Bruno received the green light for his venture.

Not knowing how long he would have to spend in prison and holding no guarantees of success, Bruno Brawling ignored all the skepticism directed toward him and was determined to find more evidence. He was there to return with a victory.

Knowing that the prison walls had eyes and ears everywhere, and seeking not to compromise his cover during the lengthy months of the operation, Bruno temporarily severed all relations with people he was close to and would only meet with his “older brother,” to whom he would pass on Oliver's stories and a few words about himself. The only person outside the police who would learn some news about him was Bruno's father, who lived on the outskirts of the capital city.

Before long, Bruno realized that the road to Oliver Paxton's trust led through his girlfriend, Andrea. As a result, he would spend much of his time with her. He would listen to her with empathy, giving compliments and encouraging her when needed, without asking for anything or expecting a thing in return.

Even though sometimes Bruno had to listen to Andrea going on and on about her femininity issues with his teeth clenched, his display of amiability did not go unnoticed.

He successfully passed for a timid prison newbie, Glen Norton, looking to find his place and a few friends.

Keeping his guard up and constantly feeling the penetrating look of Oliver Paxton, Bruno managed to go on for months without slipping once. Finally winning his subject's trust, he took the seeds he had smuggled in there in his head and planted them in the loosened soil of prison life.

It did not take long before Oliver Paxton started holding his late-night storytelling gigs, which were nothing less than true stories of the crimes committed by him and his accomplices—sexual exploitation of children, which Oliver referred to as the “little sins of his life.”

Bruno quickly deciphered the true meaning of these tales.

Oliver would usually avoid giving away any details. However, he occasionally mentioned the methods they used to lure their victims, a facial feature of his accomplice, a car model, or the name of a town where the criminal activities had taken place.

Bruno systematically communicated these facts to a police officer pretending to be his older brother coming to see him. However, to understand where the made-up embellishment details stopped and the real facts began, police had to meticulously and elaborately check out all the information revealed by Oliver Paxton.

In a couple of weeks, after the first story was told, the police had enough evidence to charge the first suspects. In the meantime, without showing the slightest sign of impatience, Bruno continued to gradually gather information, presenting more and more details of this dark jigsaw puzzle.

It took nearly two months until Oliver Paxton had said enough.

Based on the collected evidence, the state police joined its forces and set in motion an extensive operation, which led to the arrest of a few dozen suspects.

Pinned down by the irrefutable evidence and attempting to save themselves, most of the men in custody were willing to testify against Oliver Paxton, who turned out to be the brain of the criminal organization infesting the entire country.

They were now officially dealing with a high-profile case.

Sadly, to the unbearable pain of the parents and relatives of the missing children, after a long search, the police discovered their bodies.

While still at the hospital, it suddenly hit Kenton that the changes he was contemplating were a long and tedious process, and that was a bloody truth.

First of all, he needed to literally stand up firm on his feet, then go on tirelessly strengthening his long-neglected body, crippled by the recent injuries. Kenton soon began

to endure multiple exhausting and excruciating sessions of physical therapy, constantly dripping with sweat while exercising and balancing his diet.

Even though it took longer than he expected to regain his strength and endurance, after working out persistently, Kenton soon felt the first signs of progress. His return from the dreary past was also alleviated by the fact that since he was brought to the hospital, he hadn't consumed a single drop of alcohol.

Having completed the long rehabilitation program, Kenton could still feel physical impairments on the left side of his body, which he had come to accept and was prepared to live with for the rest of his life. However, in order to work again as a detective, he had to meet certain professional and physical requirements.

With the assistance of his trade union and Hubert Nilsson, Kenton succeeded in having his unilateral withdrawal from the position be considered as a prolonged rehabilitation, and he passed his professional aptitude test.

Upon his return to work, Kenton received a grand welcome from his former colleagues, nearly as someone who rose from the dead. Being surrounded by such delightful people, he felt happy and guilty for crossing them out of his life, if only for a short while.

Due to his limited physical abilities, Kenton was not required to respond to calls around the city. Despite this, he saw his return to work as a natural development of life, not as a setback in his career.

Kenton remained faithful to his somewhat reclusive life. His colleagues never had any trouble talking to him, but people's attention would quickly wear him out. Therefore, it was easier to find out more about him from Germund Keel—probably his only true friend—than from him personally.

21

Seven years ago

“On behalf of the entire department and all people gathered here today, I would like to thank you for your impeccable service,” thanked the head of the department, Captain Hubert Nilsson, after listing Bruno's merits at the end of his speech. “It is only thanks to your dedication that we crushed this criminal swarm, and it's going to be a long while before Oliver Paxton sets foot anywhere outside a prison. This operation was a smashing success. Well done!”

The hall exploded with thunderous applause and shouts of commendation.

Having got up on the podium, Bruno addressed the crowd: “Thank you so much, dear friends. I am glad to have been able to contribute to the well-being of our society. The success of this operation must, without doubt, be credited to us all. I have only done

my part of the task because, acting alone, Glen Norton would not stand a chance!” Bruno said his words of gratitude and shook hands with Hubert, who was standing next to him.

“Good job,” the captain of the department whispered, taking over the microphone.

“Please welcome Lieutenant Bruno Brawling,” Hubert said, announcing his promotion.

The hall was overtaken by another round of applause.

“Congratulations,” the captain said in a hushed voice and shook Bruno’s hand.

“Thank you, sir,” Bruno responded and went off the stage.

The official part of the gathering had ended. The guests, including the country’s prime minister and the head of the Homeland Security Department, were cheerfully conversing, enjoying the food and, of course, the drinks.

Bruno was making rounds through the crowd, shaking hands, raising glasses of champagne, accepting people’s praise and compliments, and exchanging a few words here and there—nobody doubted that the end of this operation would be the beginning of his spectacular career.

While still standing on the podium, Bruno was combing through the crowd with his eyes, hoping to spot his girlfriend, Agnes Stiffler, whom he had last seen five long months ago.

As soon as he was out of the prison, Bruno wanted to go see her more than anything, but he was hopelessly swamped by all kinds of procedures and requirements, so he only managed to call her.

Agnes did not sound like herself. Bruno as well, even though he had been waiting for this for so long, felt strange to be chatting with her again. He couldn’t wait to see his girlfriend and to pick up their relationship where they had left off; therefore, he had invited her to this small event and was hoping she would come.

However, Bruno did not yet see the most desired face. He was also constantly checking his phone, but there were no missed calls or messages.

Desperately scanning through the rest of the people, Bruno unwillingly reconciled himself to the idea that he might not see his beloved this evening and couldn’t wait for this gathering to end so that he could rush off to see her, and this time nothing was going to stand in his way.

As if on purpose, he was approached by the head of the Homeland Security Department and the prime minister himself. Having praised him for solving a case of such magnitude, they suggested a face-to-face talk, promising not to keep him long.

Bruno agreed. The three entered a separate room, leaving the prime minister’s bodyguard standing at the door.

The prime minister stayed only a few minutes. Thanking Bruno for the service to the country, he offered his help and asked to contact him immediately should a challenging situation arise.

Apologizing for his busy schedule, the prime minister left, as he needed to return to the capital city.

Bruno's conversation with the head of the Homeland Security Department lasted a little longer. He was briefed about the growing crime throughout the country and informed about a secret police unit being formed to give the appropriate response. Implying that he was looking for officers, the head of the department offered Bruno to join the unit forces in his residence city.

When asked about the job, he explained that if Bruno accepted this position, his duties would involve gathering, sorting, analyzing, and verifying information. He would also have to respond to the inquiries of other members of the unit, ensure a prompt exchange of information, and participate in meetings and organized raids.

In order to do his job, Bruno was promised exclusive access to a number of national databases, video surveillance cameras in public places, and their video archives. The head of the department also mentioned a rather generous salary.

Tempted by obviously extensive powers and relatively little control, Bruno knew he would accept this offer, but for now, he promised only to think about it.

After giving him forty-eight hours to decide, the head of the Homeland Security Department said goodbye and left.

After nearly a half-hour-long conversation, Bruno was finally able to leave and immediately took off to see Agnes Stiffler.

Excited about meeting her, he didn't even notice the pouring rain. He was hoping that a five-month break would not stand in the way of their relationship and felt guilty about being away for so long. Bruno was planning to apologize and was ready to do anything to make up for his absence.

While driving, Bruno was drawing a detailed picture of Agnes in his mind, but upon his arrival, the woman opening the door exceeded all possible expectations.

Large and warm emerald eyes, short hair cut above the shoulder line, forehead covered by a lock of hair falling to the side, pretty little nose, smooth and proportional cheeks, and soft red lips. She was astonishingly beautiful.

"Bruno?" Agnes was surprised and a little confused.

"Hello, Agnes, darling. How are you holding on? It's been so long . . ."

"Hello, Bruno . . ." she stammered.

Bruno wanted to embrace her and passionately kiss her, apologize for his long disappearance, go inside and be with her . . . So many emotions were trapped inside!

Standing there in the doorway, Agnes seemed to be unable to decide what she had to do. Missing her terribly, Bruno made a step closer.

“I’ve missed you so much,” he said, trying to embrace her and give her a kiss.

Agnes gave in to the embrace but gently moved her face away from the kiss on the lips and stood there with her arms fallen to her sides.

Kissing her on a cold cheek, Bruno pulled away. Seeing that his beloved was feeling constrained, he decided to hold his emotions back and give her some space.

“I’m sorry, Bruno,” Agnes said guiltily. “I am getting married.”

Her words struck like lightning. The rain gushing over Bruno’s head suddenly had become cold and disgusting.

“You’ve been gone for so long . . . I didn’t know how long I would have to wait. Please, forgive me,” Bruno heard her say before he even managed to regain balance.

Suddenly his justifications and apologies for not being by her side for nearly half a year lost all sense. The achieved results and his popularity, despite the noble cause, became equally meaningless. All that mattered was that he wasn’t there.

Having regained his senses for just a moment, he took a hopeful step toward Agnes.

“Please, give me one last chance,” he begged, holding her hand. “I promise, you won’t regret it. I will—” Bruno was unable to finish the sentence.

“I am pregnant, Bruno,” Agnes said with a sad look in her eyes, crushing his last hope. Her words caught Bruno off guard. He was astounded.

They didn’t want to compromise the operation; that’s why nobody told me.

Now it hit him. He had truly lost his love.

“Please, don’t be upset, Bruno. You will find a better woman than I’ve ever been, believe me. I know it sounds trite, but we can stay friends.”

Unexpectedly standing there in the doorway was her fiancé.

Looking at him, Bruno was about to lose it. He wanted to grab him and slam him into the mud, but for Agnes’s sake, he managed to control himself. Clenching his teeth, he turned around and walked to his car.

“I am sorry, Bruno!” Agnes shouted after him.

Bruno didn’t look back.

“Agnes, darling, let’s go inside,” urged Kenton Collins, her future husband.

23

Seven years ago

Having exposed Oliver Paxton, Bruno had instantly gained recognition, promotion, and attention. He met with a number of high-ranking officials, got heaps of invitations to

various events, and was now treated like a celebrity. It was a time when his professional dreams were about to come true.

However, this sudden and constant attention started to annoy and irritate Bruno; therefore, he soon began to decline all new invitations.

The sounds of trumpets glorifying his merits, echoing throughout the entire country, just like professional recognition and occupational advancement, were not at all important—in his mind, Bruno was tirelessly chasing his lost love.

What made it even worse was that Agnes was engaged not just to anyone, but to the detective Kenton Collins, his coworker, whom Bruno had easily outrivaled at the beginning of his relationship with Agnes and who was out of the picture before Bruno had disappeared for the five long months.

During the prison operation, Bruno's feelings toward Agnes had fully matured, and he felt like he finally found the love of his life. This made his loss particularly painful. Kenton Collins, that skunk, unable to handle competition with dignity, weaseled his way in when Bruno was not around.

"It was you who put your career before your relationship," Kenton had said as justification. That was a coward's way out. Bruno was deeply disappointed with this impudent bastard, who stabbed him in the back and then dared to plead innocent.

Having lost Agnes, Bruno now despised all forms of people's weaknesses and their failures. Kenton only helped him to recognize the shortcomings of others.

However often he thought of Agnes, Bruno was never mad at her. He was grateful for her openness and felt that it also wasn't easy for her to see things end up the way they did. He did not hold a grudge against society, either, although he lost his beloved woman by sacrificing for it.

The only thing that helped Bruno to feel the pain was somewhat bearable was that in the past months, he hadn't seen Agnes and was slowly getting used to it.

24

Events of the past

The echoes of the glorious operation had soon subsided, and people gradually lost their interest in it. Aside from being promoted and given a new position at a secret police unit, no other changes took place in Bruno's career.

Having already lost Agnes, Bruno wasn't about to let his job slip out of his hands, so he kept working side by side with Kenton. Obviously, he wasn't planning to leave either.

If he doesn't like something, he can only blame himself, Bruno thought, contemplating their future relationship at work.

Although he was truly grieving the loss of Agnes, however hard it was, Bruno found the strength to forget her and move on.

One of the things that helped him was hard work.

Having been granted access to the government servers and databases by the head of the Homeland Security Department, Bruno felt like he'd been given the "golden key" and buried himself in work.

Even though the secret unit didn't have much work, this position not only allowed Bruno to forget his sorrows but also captured his professional interest.

Bruno continued to improve his qualifications, was a regular at a gym and in martial arts training, and never hesitated to show what he had.

He also was a witness in the case proceedings that concerned Oliver Paxton. The accused obviously had many influential acquaintances and was doing all he could to defend himself, but the case was solid. The police were in possession of conclusive evidence, testimonies of the gang members, and of course, there was Bruno, so it was unlikely that the defendant would ever manage to wriggle out of justice being served.

After more than a year had passed since the prison operation, the court hearings had finally come to an end. Eighteen accomplices of Oliver Paxton had been charged, but only two of them were sentenced to more than ten years behind bars. Oliver himself received the death penalty. Even Bruno didn't expect such a severe outcome, but in light of the double murder, the punishment seemed appropriate.

Bruno often thought about the time spent in prison and recalled many of Oliver's stories. He had never completely understood where the narrator's imagination ended and the truth started. Therefore, he highly valued the work of the police intelligence, who found the end of the thread in the labyrinth of Oliver's narratives and weaved a flawless case against him.

Among other people, Oliver had several times mentioned the city mayor, whom he called a most loyal comrade and a true friend. Having devoted a lot of attention to the mayor in his stories, Oliver presented him as one having a peculiar style of operation and as an intelligent and artistic person whom he respected and loved like a brother.

Bruno had forwarded Oliver's exact words to the detectives, but despite an extensive investigation, they were unable to find even the tiniest hint of any of these statements being true.

Being enticed by Oliver's stories and enjoying the privileges of his new position, Bruno had carried out his own investigation on the mayor, but he discovered nothing incriminating.

Looks like Oliver Paxton was just bragging, he decided.

Bruno did not, however, exclude the possibility that Oliver indeed knew the mayor, but if the latter really were the closest accomplice of the offender, other members of Paxton's clan, trying to save their necks, would have undoubtedly spilled the beans.

Either way, thinking about what Oliver said and searching through the databases, Bruno had accidentally discovered another fact that everyone else had overlooked—even the investigators of Paxton’s case were unable to see it.

Bruno had quickly processed the matter. Unwilling to become the epicenter of a new scandal, he decided to keep it to himself and, if it ever came to it, use it as a trump card.

As time slowly slipped by, one day the city was crushed by the news of a passenger plane crash. Among the fifty-two victims were Bruno’s former love Agnes Stiffler and her three-year-old daughter.

Bruno was devastated. The tragedy somewhat unexpectedly revealed that even after four years, he was still in love with Agnes, and thus his heart was suddenly filled with immeasurable pain.

After this horrific event, Bruno often thought about her and would let his imagination run. He could remember, to the smallest of details, the times they had spent together, her laughter and the plans for the future they were making.

Unwilling to show his sorrow, Bruno avoided being seen mourning Agnes’s death but hated Kenton Collins more than ever before.

25

Present day

Bruno Brawling, a thirty-four-year-old man of average height, in good physical shape, with an ordinary clean-shaven oval face and shortly cut hair, had the character of a true champion.

From the first sight, he seemed humble and moderate, but those who got to know him better could feel his radiating energy and dominant personality—Bruno was a charismatic man who did not recognize any authority and could not stand any signs of weakness.

He was one of the best detectives in the city. Intelligent, devoted to his work, and having received a multitude of commendations and saved many lives, Bruno Brawling was a known professional and a real hero.

When doing his job, Bruno never felt constrained—he would act as he deemed necessary. Knowing his own value, he did not pay attention to such trivial things as being late to work, disregarding certain procedures, or having disputes with coworkers. Bruno had a personal understanding of honor and truth and lived by his own standards, which he trusted more than the regulations of the police or the code of the legal system.

His own misdemeanors Bruno justified by the experience gained on the front lines of the battle against crime, and he was well aware that the public was better off not knowing everything he did.

He had no intention of explaining his decisions. It sufficed knowing himself why and what was being done and, most importantly, not getting caught.

Bruno preferred to work alone, and even though he did not care about any authority, he respected the professionals he came across irrespective of their field of occupation.

Able to find a solution in any situation, Bruno performed his work flawlessly, and his results often exceeded any expectations. Each goal was a new beginning to Bruno, who concentrated all his energy and wisdom on achieving it, never afraid to take risks.

Bruno was always available, never avoiding working overtime or leaving any matters unfinished. Nobody could ever keep up with his work tempo.

The rational and intuitive sides of his personality did not have particularly strict boundaries, which was one of the traits of his character that allowed Bruno to make decisions that would seem too complicated to others. When looking for answers to the most complex questions, he fully relied on his instincts and always trusted his intuition.

It was yet another attribute explaining his lasting supremacy.

Bruno's most notable quality was his desire to win at all costs. Anyone who knew him couldn't help but notice it. This characteristic of his was legendary among his colleagues—Bruno would never give up or throw in the towel, not even in the most hopeless situations. Unwilling to accept failure, he systematically challenged the circumstances and persistently sought out the most advantageous outcomes. Bruno did that even in the most ordinary situations, where nobody would bother but him.

Bruno was utterly obsessed by the ambition to maintain his superiority and, if properly motivated, accepted any challenge. Most of the time keeping it to himself, he made an impression of a man able to tackle any difficulties; however, under this guise, there was nothing else but long hours, weeks, and even months of hard work—any amount of time required to complete the task.

Proud of his achievements, Bruno did not hesitate to demonstrate his ability to control any given situation and show that he was the toughest guy around, ready to take a new dare.

Always pushing the boundaries and feeling absolute supremacy over Kenton, Bruno often picked on him and even bullied him. He was still angry about losing Agnes, even though he could not complain about the lack of female attention. None of his dates, however, developed into long-term relationships.

Bruno's relationship with other men at the station, aside from that with Kenton, was quite reasonable, but with him working alone most of the time, they usually had only a few encounters. Preferring to interact with others only in the most important job-related matters, Bruno hated to be unnecessarily disturbed and could be easily angered and become verbally offensive.

When wishing to ask something or exchange words with him, his colleagues usually approached Bruno in the common-use premises, where, being cornered by the looks directed toward him, he often responded in a decent manner.

There was a prevailing opinion among Bruno's coworkers that having tasted the glory, he was now suffering from the delusions of grandeur. Nearly everyone at the station was tired of his disrespectful demeanor, competitiveness, and simply appalling behavior. Many could not wait to see him fail to achieve one of his goals and hoped that having experienced a leastwise minor humiliation, Bruno would lose his status. But, however annoying, he was still a superstar and a hero they could never measure up to; as a result, they had no choice but to continue putting up with his repulsive character.

Bruno himself was well aware that his coworkers were counting his victories and felt their adverse expectations, but that didn't scare him or stop him from accepting new challenges.

Back in the day of the high-risk operation against Oliver Paxton, Bruno actually deserved all the glory, praise, and promotion, but sadly enough, everything had changed, and in the eyes of his colleagues, now he was simply an asshole.

Although detesting Bruno, the majority of the men at the station were rather afraid of him. Also, Bruno Brawling was famous and popular among women; therefore, quite a few of his coworkers secretly envied him.

In Bruno's opinion, his teammates, just like the majority of people, clearly lacked professionalism. Moreover, being way too sensitive, they never managed to control their emotions, and their reaction to his ordinary—or, as he often saw it, funny—remarks was exaggerated.

Seven years had gone by since Bruno's glorious moment. Having lost his former friends, he was left alone on the other side of the barricade, but that didn't bother him at all.

Unable to find a woman who could replace Agnes in his heart, Bruno was still single and living alone. However, he didn't avoid short-term relationships and occasional one-night stands.

Many people who knew Bruno wondered why he stayed at the same workplace, whereas the capital city could have offered him much better career opportunities and a chance not to be around Kenton Collins, whom he hated so much.

Only a few knew that Bruno had a very good reason to stay.

II

26

March 10

Having lingered in bed a bit longer, Kenton finally got up.

Making his way to the bathroom, he relieved himself, washed his hands and face, and started brushing the teeth.

Having rinsed his mouth and dried his face, Kenton hung the towel and looked carefully in the mirror. He saw lively brown eyes, a pointy chin speckled with two days' growth of whiskers, grayish temples, and a broad forehead, leaving the impression of a somewhat harsh man.

Kenton smiled to himself and returned to the bedroom.

Even though some time had passed since the fire, its aftermath was still clearly felt: his left arm was much weaker than the right one and got tired quicker. His left shoulder was rather weak and fragile.

Kenton took his time to do his morning exercise, which helped to get on with a new day.

Putting some clothes on, he went into the kitchen and made breakfast. Often feeling lonely, Kenton once again thought about getting a dog, but even though he was convinced that it would help him cope with his loneliness, he feared that the poor animal would have to stay alone for long hours, and that was not an option.

Finishing up his breakfast, Kenton gathered his things, locked the house, got into his car, and drove off to work.

While driving, he once again remembered the dream, and his mind drifted into the past. Tuned into it, he didn't notice as he arrived at his destination.

Having parked the car in the underground garage, Kenton went inside, walked up to the second floor, and entered the police station where he had an office. Settling into his chair, he leaned back, closed his eyes, and crossed his hands behind his head. Then, slowly running his hands over his head, he covered his eyes, gently massaging them.

Even though many months had passed since his loss and Kenton had regained his balance, he sometimes still felt mournful.

Now was one of those moments.

With a deep sigh, Kenton shifted in the chair, scanned over the office, and stretched out his injured arm in the air, at the same time massaging the shoulder.

Standing there in the doorway was Hubert, the head of the department.

“Hello, Kenton. How are you?” he greeted.

“Fine, thanks.” Kenton rose up from the chair, and they shook hands.

“I stopped by to let you know that we are having a quick meeting in half an hour to discuss a couple of matters.”

“OK, I’ll be there.”

“You are a good detective,” Hubert complimented on the way out. “I am glad you are back.”

“Thank you,” Kenton said, baffled, wondering why the chief decided to praise him now.

Did he notice my moment of weakness?

Kenton never wanted anyone to see it. For months he had been emotionally stable, and the thoughts about the loss of his family were by far not as intense as before the fire. Momentary setbacks, like the one he experienced this morning, were just a result of a temporary cause, in this case, a vivid dream. Kenton didn’t want anyone to notice it, start asking about it, or try to comfort him or offer support.

Soon after he stepped out of the office to go to the meeting, but he decided to swing by the kitchenette and get some coffee. Standing there and waiting for the cup to fill up was detective Bruno Brawling. They were in the room alone.

Crap! Kenton cursed, but he didn’t try to avoid the encounter.

Pretending that the situation didn’t bother him in any way, Kenton was patiently waiting for his turn to use the coffee machine.

Turning slowly in his direction and not saying a word, Bruno looked him in the eyes. Picking up his cup and slowly stirring his coffee, he didn’t think of moving away—he was plotting his assault, and Kenton knew it.

Preparing himself for what was about to come, in his thoughts, Kenton encouraged him: *Come on! What are you waiting for?*

“Say, Kenton . . . it must be hard!” Bruno said cunningly.

Kenton didn’t utter a word.

“I mean,” Bruno continued philosophically, “how did you survive all this time without getting laid?”

He was speaking calmly, staring into his cup and continuously stirring the coffee.

Kenton didn’t move, patiently waiting for the insults to stop, as usual.

Bruno took a sip. He obviously enjoyed the situation where he could slowly berate Kenton.

“Why the hell did you come back to work? You are a cripple—no one wants you here!” Bruno said angrily, coming at him again as if Kenton had actually just returned.

“You should have stayed in that den of drunkards—it was the perfect place for you! I’m sure there were a bunch of women worthy of you,” Bruno added without sugarcoating his words and standing still in order not to spook Kenton away.

It was clear that he wanted to continue his angry rant as long as possible.

Knowing that Bruno was trying to provoke him, Kenton was usually able to ignore him. But today, having had to relive the painful loss, Kenton realized he might lose his cool.

“What are you waiting for? Come on, hit me!” Bruno urged.

Even though his opponent was physically much stronger, without thinking about possible consequences, Kenton was ready to strike.

Right at that moment, peeking through the door of the kitchenette, appeared the newcomer, Martin Silverberg.

“What’s up, guys?” he said in his cheery voice, instantly loosening up Kenton’s determination.

“Are you done?” Kenton asked, holding an empty coffee cup and looking at Bruno.

Irritated by losing the opportunity to continue mocking Kenton and furious about his question, Bruno glanced scornfully at his two coworkers and whispered irefully: “You turds!”

Caught off guard, Martin looked at Bruno, who, shifting his gaze from Kenton to Martin, shouted out a curse of an even higher caliber: “Fuck you, Kenton! And fuck you too, Martin!”

Before anyone had a chance to respond, Bruno left, hitting Martin with his shoulder on his way out.

27

The police station where both Bruno Brawling and Kenton Collins worked was located in a two-story building designated for the police and had a well-developed underground infrastructure: a parking lot and archive, storage, and lockup facilities above it.

The reception area, interrogation rooms, a small forensic laboratory, several offices, and a common room with patrol workstations were situated on the first floor.

The common area on the second floor was the workplace of several police officers, including detectives Bruno Brawling and Kenton Collins and the head of the department, Hubert Nilsson, where each of them had their offices. It just so happened that no women worked there.

Each of the aboveground floors of the building had a kitchenette, a lavatory, and a small cloakroom.

The men working around Bruno got on well with each other. If they had a free minute, they would discuss recent sporting events, city news, and department gossip or share personal stories. At least once a month, they would gather for drinks, a round of pool, poker, or bowling, and they enjoyed each other’s company. Hubert Nilsson would sometimes join them as well.

Lieutenant Bruno Brawling, a loner, angry at almost the entire world, spent his free time in a way known to him alone and never told anyone about his hobbies. His colleagues were convinced that Bruno had no normal life whatsoever.

About the other detective of the department, Kenton Collins, who wasn't such an obvious introvert, the team members would usually find out more from his best friend Germund Keel than from him personally. However, unlike Bruno, Kenton would occasionally join in their chatting and spend some time with them outside the office.

Kenton disliked speaking about his conflict with Bruno and had never complained about it, but even though left with no answers, his colleagues would help him to avoid direct confrontation.

Bruno never purposely tried to cross Kenton's path, either, but gladly used the occasional encounters to dress him down.

During these clashes, as if paying tribute for luring Agnes away, Kenton never fended off the attacks. He was once hopelessly in love with this amazing woman and did not feel any guilt for being with her. However, he perfectly understood how Bruno felt in losing Agnes and acted with restraint during their run-ins.

Avoiding one-on-one encounters with Bruno was the only way he would fight against Bruno's outbreaks.

28

March 10

It was a regular shift-changing mood at the department. Almost all officers ending their work had returned to the station, and the first men to relieve them were beginning to arrive.

Forty-six-year-old Eric Hudson, a trade union representative with many connections in the city, gave a sign to the men who were about to leave to stay a few minutes longer. He wanted to discuss an important matter.

Sitting there at his office desk behind a wide-open door was Bruno, fussing with some documents. Removing some of them from the desk and placing them in a folder, dropping them into a drawer, or leaving them in a pile on the table, he occasionally peeked at a computer screen and, after moving the mouse around, would step out of his office to fetch the freshly printed sheets from the printer.

Everyone had to wait until he was ready to leave.

It took a few minutes for Bruno to finish up his work. He then locked the office and, as usual, without uttering a single word, self-assuredly walked out of the premises.

Captain Hubert Nilsson was out on police business.

Finally having the opportunity to announce the special news and being impatient to discuss it, Eric Hudson addressed everyone present: “Some of you might have already heard it, but today Mario the Scavenger wrote a rather promising article about the favorite guy at our department, none other than Bruno Brawling himself, and the charming Lana Moore.”

Eric pulled out the newest issue of *M. K. H. Limited* and placed it on a table.

“I must admit, not a bad shot,” he added.

The men crowded around to have a look.

Bruno Brawling and Lana Moore—a new celebrity couple?

asked the title written in bold letters in a nonperiodical newspaper published by Mario K. Habbermann, known as Mario the Scavenger.

Flaunting on the cover of the paper was a photograph of Bruno Brawling chatting away with the beautiful Lana Moore taken during some party. The article suggested that Bruno was pursuing her attention and reported several instances of the two meeting in public.

“However useless this newspaper is, looks like this time it’s working to our advantage. By the way, a few days ago, my brother happened to see Bruno having lunch with—you guessed it—Lana Moore herself,” Eric continued.

In a split second, the room was filled with a unison of swearing, amazement, and curiosity: “No way! Are you for real? Wow . . . Get the fuck outta here! Unbelievable!”

This news, if true, could enrich the lives of everyone at the station. Bruno’s determination to become Lana Moore’s significant other would definitely be considered as a major event.

Even though Bruno Brawling was well known and popular among the ladies, knowing how special Lana Moore was, his task would neither be easy nor simple.

It had been a while since Bruno had set himself a goal of this magnitude; therefore, after hearing this rumor, the humming and murmuring persisted for some time. However, as soon as a new shift set in, the officers went about their business.

Walking down the stairs at the end of his working day, Kenton had overheard his colleagues already talking about betting for or against Bruno.

The topic did get his attention too.

Wow, Bruno . . . Well done! If it’s true, I hope you get lucky, he thought.

Always looking flawless, she literally radiated kindness and benevolence. Mesmerizingly self-confident, she attracted attention anywhere she went and instantly won the admiration of everyone around her.

She was known and loved by many—her name was associated with the noblest deeds and initiatives realized for the good of the city and its people. Fully deserving the unfading gratitude of society, she always showed her sincere willingness to help and support. She was the famous Lana Moore.

Her acquaintance was a great honor.

If a perfect woman did exist, then twenty-seven-year-old Lana Moore was one of the best candidates for the title. Enchantingly beautiful, well educated, intelligent, perceptive, and constructive, she created and implemented sponsorship ideas, each one better than the other, without ever bringing herself into prominence.

Also, she was a marvelous embodiment of femininity, every man's dream.

Lana filled the niche between the business enterprises operating in the city and its financially or socially vulnerable residents. She developed and realized public initiatives pertaining to youth employment and support of the lonely and the poor, organized the cleaning or renovating of forgotten historical landmarks, and brought about many other positive changes. Her deeds made her more popular than the city mayor.

Companies contributing to the funding of her projects had gained the image of socially responsible enterprises, earned people's trust, increased turnover, reduced costs on advertising, and benefitted from the added value granted by the ever-grateful society.

Lana Moore was single and lived alone. She was very busy and simply had no time for a serious relationship. It was true, though, that her criteria for men were probably unspeakably high.

March 11

Because of constant mocking and cockiness, Bruno had been drawing an enormous amount of hatred toward himself from his coworkers. Nearly all the men at the station wished to witness his public humiliation, and Bruno was well aware of that.

As soon as the hints of his possible friendship with Lana Moore had emerged, it gave rise to an avalanche of speculation—many had discerned a possibility to see Bruno fail in achieving his goal.

Wishing to know whether the news printed in *M. K. H. Limited* had any ground, his colleagues needed to talk to Bruno personally and directly ask him about it. The one who usually dared to do that was Eric Hudson. He had a ready tongue and was quite a negotiator, when necessary, quickly turning into an insolent fellow boldly asking the questions everyone was concerned with.

Dying from curiosity, the men had been hanging around the common area, waiting for Bruno to show up, with hopes of speaking to him, but as luck would have it, he stayed in his office, and it seemed like he wasn't about to come out any time soon.

Finally, he stepped out and headed toward the coffee machine.

Without wasting a second, Eric Hudson started a conversation: "Listen, Bruno, there was an article published yesterday about you, and—"

As soon as Eric opened his mouth, he and Bruno both were instantly surrounded by every single person in the room.

"And?" Bruno cut the dialogue short.

"It said that you are planning to pursue Lana Moore's affection."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. They claimed to have seen you together on more than one occasion . . ."

"So what?"

"Well, we are wondering whether it is true."

"If you really want to know, I can confirm that I did get together with her several times."

"It said that you seek her attention and want to become a couple."

Bruno stopped for a minute. All the men around him were holding their breath—conversations like this were very rare.

"So what? Are you trying to say that Lana is out of my reach?" Bruno said out of the blue.

Eric knew immediately it was his chance to step in.

"Well, it is Lana Moore we are talking about—don't you think she is a hard nut to crack?" he asked with a slightly provocative tone, knowing all too well how important the image of the conqueror was to Bruno.

Some of the men following the conversation exchanged glances.

"Not at all," Bruno snapped, demonstrating, as usual, his infinite confidence in his own abilities. Then he added: "She will be my girlfriend if I so want."

"So you are not denying your intentions?"

"Have I ever backed down?" Bruno blurted out, as if responding to an insult.

Those were the exact words Eric wanted to hear. All the men were feeling the excitement rising inside them after hearing such a straightforward statement.

"People think she is out of your league, Bruno," Eric persisted.

"Fine! It means I will once again prove these wimps wrong."

“Very well, Bruno. We all heard it,” Eric said with relief, running his eyes over the group of coworkers who witnessed this dialogue.

Almost everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

“In the meantime, leave me alone with your collective sense of insecurity!” snapped Bruno.

“Whatever you say, Bruno. Good luck!” Eric said, ending the conversation.

Bruno did not respond and went to get his coffee.

The men looked at each other again, their eyes shining with astonishment—Bruno dared to get close to Lana Moore herself!

Secretly feeling respect for the accepted challenge, soon everyone went about their business. Now they would have something to talk about.

31

At the onset of the economic recession, the businesses that used to generously fund the projects conducted by Lana Moore had to face shrinking markets, lowered purchasing power, and a drastic decline in turnover. Because of these changes, enterprises started reducing the number of their staff, suspended development, and cut down expenses to the minimum.

Many companies operating under such circumstances were struggling to survive. They had to stop sponsorship of successful aid projects or significantly reduce the volume of support being provided. As a result, the business affairs of the nonprofit organization Karis Panti, managed by Lana Moore, were deteriorating, as were the realities of many other economic participants.

Despite the obstacles, Lana continued to manage a number of projects, systematically searched for new sponsors, and was not about to surrender her never-ending battle for the well-being of the city and its people. Having rather extensive experience, she was not afraid of new challenges and wanted to bring her career to a higher level. Lana knew exactly what she wanted—to become the minister of social affairs—but having been daringly dreaming about it up until now, forced to halt or cancel about a dozen support initiatives, she knew better than ever that to even consider any career advances, she needed a major jump start.

But right now, she wasn’t sure what it could be.

The only aspect of the possible change Lana was concerned with was that she would have to leave her beloved city and move to the capital city. She knew how hard it would be.

Aside from a new career, Lana also sometimes thought of starting a family and dreamed of having children, but up until now hadn’t found her significant other. Being famous and desired, she received a lot of attention and could not easily tell men’s true intentions; thus, she carefully considered every pursuit of a possible relationship.

Sometimes she thought that her expectations were too high, but however discouraging the failed attempts at finding her second half were, Lana wasn't ready to lower the bar, either to others or to herself.

Not at all sure which of her dreams would come true first—a career change or starting a family—Lana was patient and hopeful about her future.

She shared her plans and dreams only with her assistant and best friend, Juliana Spencer.

32

Spring

Martin Silverberg, a fresh graduate of the police academy, was the youngest man at the station. A genuine, six-foot-tall, skinny man, he was devoted to police work and followed regulations to the letter, but right now, he was eager to win recognition.

It had been nearly two months since he started his job. Martin hardly came across Bruno Brawling and had the most impartial position toward him; thus, he was perfectly suited to keep the bets made in the challenge.

When discussing Bruno's determination to win Lana Moore's attention, the men often recalled his legendary campaign against Oliver Paxton, which had become a sort of a benchmark. No one doubted that the man who, back then, set off on the greatest challenge without any guarantees of success would this time, as well, go to the top of his bent to reach his objective, which made some of Bruno's colleagues approach his decision with caution.

To top it all off, Bruno was capable of surprising anyone who underestimated him.

However, despite his strong image, the majority of men at the station, without hesitation, put their money on his failure to become close to Lana Moore—by voting “against,” they simply had a chance to express their attitude toward him and an opportunity to make some cash.

With the most votes cast against him, in the case of Bruno's success, the pot looked to be rather promising, making it an easy decision for some men to bet on his victory. Feeling excited, several of his colleagues placed their bets multiple times.

Martin Silverberg was suddenly swamped with new duties: he had to collect and look after the cash, keep accurate records, and follow all the news related to Bruno's challenge.

Just as expected, Martin himself remained impartial and made no bets.

Hearing all these conversations about Bruno's dare would remind Kenton about his lost wife. He didn't hold a grudge against Bruno and did wish he would one day find his share of happiness.

Kenton was even hoping that if Bruno were to be in a relationship with a woman like Lana Moore, he would back off and become an appeasable member of the team again. Obviously, he didn't share these thoughts with anyone, not even with his best friend, Germund Keel.

Bruno Brawling and Lana Moore were prominent personalities who were ready for sacrifices in order to protect their ideals. However, despite their similarities, these were two entirely different individuals, and one could only guess whether they could even have a future together.

Interest in Bruno's new challenge was enormous, but little did anyone know that their enthusiasm would have to be put on hold.

33

June

In the first few months, there'd been a great deal of anticipation buzzing at the station about Bruno's dare. The team, hungry for news, was dying to know when and what step Bruno would take to approach Lana Moore and how his endeavor would end.

Although everyone assumed that Bruno would choose a long-term strategy to achieve his goal, it sometimes seemed that his challenge that had started so suddenly might end just as abruptly.

Be that as it may, for the longest months, no one heard any news about Bruno's progress or failure: there were no more articles, no new gossip arrived, and no one had ever seen Bruno and Lana together again.

At the end of May, Bruno was investigating a complicated murder case and was completely buried in work. He really didn't feel like commenting on any questions related to Lana Moore, and all his colleagues were left with was to patiently wait for action. Uncertainty, however, didn't silence talks about the subject.

Even though Hubert Nilsson, the head of the department, knew about Bruno's dare, he decided to preserve his impartiality as the chief of the station, showing no interest and never questioning anyone about it.

Three months had passed since Bruno had accepted the challenge. There were no signs of anything happening whatsoever. Everyone tried to keep their cool, but one man was about to lose his patience.

That man was Germund Keel.

It was a quiet afternoon at work. Kenton glanced at his watch—another twenty minutes before the end of the shift. He had just completed a case report and had no other urgent tasks pending.

Having read again the document he'd written, Kenton was editing its last sentences as he saw Germund standing in the doorway of his office. He had already changed out of his uniform and was about to leave.

"Hey, buddy. Got any plans after work?"

"Nothing special. Anything on your mind?"

"Here is what I was thinking: I am an ordinary police officer. You, on the other hand, are the only reasonable detective on this floor—"

"Half a detective at best," Kenton interrupted. "I hardly leave the station!"

"Look, everyone is done for today . . . both us and Bruno. So I thought, why don't we grab a beer," Germund said, leaving his true intentions unrevealed.

"And?" Kenton asked, looking his friend straight in the eye, anticipating some kind of suggestion.

"And see how our fella Bruno is doing," Germund added.

Kenton suddenly understood the motive behind this proposal.

"Seriously? Are you crazy? You're offering to spy on him?" Kenton asked, keeping his voice down.

"Why not? Is that such a bad idea? It's been a while since he accepted the challenge—and still no results! We've been waiting forever. Besides, I am dying to know what I can expect from my bet."

Looking Germund in the eye and knowing perfectly well how stubborn he could be, Kenton realized that he wouldn't be able to talk his friend out of it.

"All right. Let's do it."

"That's my boy!" Germund whispered with excitement.

"Wait! I am not doing it out of curiosity but only because I know that you would do it by yourself anyway, and I have a feeling that you would get into trouble," Kenton warned.

"As long as you are in. Drinks are on me!" Germund said with a wink.

Having agreed to leave at the same time as Bruno, they were waiting at their desks.

At the right moment, Kenton shut down his computer, grabbed his jacket, and walked toward the exit, bumping into Germund there like it was a coincidence.

The two kept on talking while maintaining a safe distance and following Bruno, who had just left work and went down to the underground parking garage.

“We might see this bastard lose!” Germund impatiently blurted out while getting into his car.

Kenton did not respond.

Two friends were now driving behind Bruno’s black SUV. After leaving the garage, Germund was trying to keep a couple of cars between them and did his best not to create an impression of a chase.

Bruno was heading toward the city center, exactly where Lana Moore was working.

“Looks like we just got lucky,” Germund muttered.

“You think he is going to see her?”

“I sure hope so!”

And indeed, Bruno reached Olive Street and was getting close to Lana Moore’s office with the mystical name Karis Pantí. He parked in a free space, got out of his SUV, and looked left and right at the approaching cars, as he was about to cross the street.

Seeing Bruno standing right in front of them and wishing to avoid passing by him, Germund quickly turned right into an alley just off Olive Street and parked the car in the first available spot.

As soon as they got out of the car, the two went back and saw Bruno already on the other side of the street, slowly heading toward Lana’s office. They rushed after him.

Having chaotically crossed three lanes of traffic, the two were following Bruno, who was now slightly ahead. Walking along a wooden fence surrounding a construction site for the buildings at 43 and 45 Olive Street, Bruno stopped at some street kiosks and was very near his supposed destination.

Thinking that Bruno was about to visit Lana Moore, Kenton and Germund quickly sat down at a street café at 41 Olive Street and made themselves comfortable on a summer terrace.

Sitting at the table, they cast their glances through the street section all the way up to 49 Olive Street, but Bruno was nowhere to be seen.

“Do you think he managed to walk into Karis Pantí in such a short time?” Germund asked, perplexed.

“I doubt it. It took us less than twenty seconds.”

“Damn it! He was clearly heading into Lana’s office!”

“We should have stayed on the other side and watched him from there.”

Germund quickly murmured their order to the waiter who had just come by their table.

“I agree. So be it.” He exhaled a sigh. “Let’s stay here. Maybe we’ll spot him again.”

“I wouldn’t bet my money that he didn’t notice us.”

“Possible. Bruno Brawling is a deceptive son of a bitch. By the way, how much did you bet against him?”

“Nothing so far, but that doesn’t make me less curious about whether he will succeed.”

“So true.”

“What about you?”

“\$500!” Germund proudly blurted out.

Kenton nearly choked.

“Are you trying to set a record of money wasting?”

“I am as calm as death—I’m going to win,” Germund said with confidence.

They then were served the beer and snacks they had ordered.

“On the other hand, having in mind all that craziness at the station, your bet doesn’t sound that unusual,” Kenton reasoned aloud. Then he added: “I might also take a shot, even though I am not much of a gambler.”

Germund nodded in accord.

Sipping their cold drinks amid the roaring noise of the city center, the two men were indifferently watching the passersby and entrances to the shops, hotels, and business offices, keeping their eyes on Bruno’s SUV still parked on the other side of the street.

“Imagine Bruno and Lana suddenly walking by, holding hands,” Kenton said casually, breaking the silence.

Unwillingly digesting this scenario, Germund gave it serious thought—but just for a short while.

“By sitting here, we are giving him a perfect opportunity to show off,” Kenton added.

“Nonsense! I will never believe that Bruno has a chance, not even remotely.”

“You might be right, but I wouldn’t write him off just yet,” Kenton admitted.

“I know you are talking about Bruno’s talents, and I agree. You know, I’ve never met Lana Moore, but I am more than sure that she is just too damn good for him. I trust her intuition and believe that she will quickly find out what a bastard is trying to get close to her.”

“Maybe so, but whatever it is, Bruno is far more successful with women than any of us at the station.”

“You’re right, but Lana Moore is not the kind of a woman you put your arm around and parade down the street. She’s nobody’s trophy. Don’t you think you’d first have to really charm her to get her attention and devotion, and only then would she go out with you? Does Bruno look anything like that kind of man to you?” Germund asked rhetorically.

“Well, none of us knows what she is looking for in a man, but I do believe she is not so easy to get.”

“That’s why I don’t believe that they could end up together.”

“In principle, I agree with what you’re saying. However, the fact that we haven’t heard a thing about Bruno’s progress is a clear sign that he’s plotting something.”

“I don’t care what he does. Lana Moore will turn him down like a cheap suit—mark my words.”

“Maybe,” Kenton said with a laugh.

“I’ll drink to that!” Germund said, raising his mug.

The two clinked their glasses and took a gulp of beer.

Having ordered another round of lager and more snacks, they went on chatting about other things and ended up spending nearly an hour at the table.

Bruno was still nowhere to be seen, even though his car was where he left it.

“So, where is our friend?” Germund said, returning to the main topic of their conversation, tired of sitting still.

“Something tells me we won’t see him anymore today.”

“I personally,” Germund began, releasing a burp, “have only been paying attention to beautiful women, and I assure you, Lana Moore wasn’t one of them.”

Kenton responded with a grin.

Slightly disappointed, Germund emptied the glass of nonalcoholic beer, which he did not particularly like, and placed it on the table. It looked like he was ready to call it a day.

“I can’t think of anything else than that Bruno saw us and decided to hide,” Kenton said.

“But he was heading right where we wanted him to . . . Damn! How did we manage to lose him?” Germund ranted.

“If Bruno had even the slightest suspicion that he was being followed, we didn’t stand a chance. You know how intuitive he is.”

“True. So no news about his progress. Whatever . . . Shall we head home?” Germund suggested.

“I see no point waiting.”

“All right, let’s get out of here. I will take you back,” Germund said, standing up and leaving thirty dollars on the table.

“Let’s go.”

35

June

Kenton and Germund were mostly silent on their way home, each immersed in his own thoughts.

Germund would have been happy to see Bruno being rejected by Lana while he was drinking his first glass of beer, but sadly enough, that didn’t happen. The development of Bruno’s challenge was confined to only waiting and a lack of information, and that wasn’t pleasing at all. Germund was eager to lessen the suspense lasting these long months; thus, he continued contemplating other measures he could initiate.

Kenton was a little tired and wasn't thinking about Bruno's affairs as much. Recollecting Germund's thoughts about Lana Moore, he realized that his friend didn't care so much about winning the money as he did about her being unattainable for Bruno. For some reason, Kenton thought that to Germund, a man of an older generation, Lana Moore was perhaps a symbol of all the best that the younger generation had to offer: diligence, integrity, altruism, and inner strength. Therefore, seeing Lana on the very top of this picture, Germund probably considered Bruno's intentions toward her as a real battle between good and evil.

Knowing that spying on Bruno was at the very least unethical, Kenton was well aware of the risk arising from such activity—it could end up in serious professional problems, something neither of the two needed.

Having shared his thoughts with Germund, he suggested to give up the idea of ever following Bruno again and agreed with his friend's suggestion to keep today's pastime to themselves, which they decided to refer to simply as going for a drink on Olive Street. In any case, nothing else happened.

36

One of the most favorite events in the city, the Midsummer Festival, used to be celebrated on a Saturday in the middle of July, with festivities throughout the next day, but eventually, the townspeople started celebrating it earlier, moving the unofficial beginning of the festival to Friday afternoon.

The city's businessmen responded promptly to the changing people's moods: special discounts were announced earlier than usual, and there were increasingly more of them, while the organizers of the events would start decorating the city at the very beginning of that week.

The opening of the Midsummer Festival was then officially moved to a Friday afternoon, with celebrations continuing on Saturday and ending early Sunday morning, once the last participants had exhausted their zest. These traditions caught on quickly and were observed to the present day.

The festival opening was announced by a young woman who, just like the legendary maiden Flora, loved the city and cared for it in every possible way. For several years in a row, the townspeople had bestowed this honor upon their beloved Lana Moore, who had become a true embodiment of Flora during the festivities.

During the opening ceremony, she and other actors of the main event, called "The Silent Legacy," stood on a decorated moving platform that carried them slowly along the streets filled with cheering people. The procession ended at the city's largest stadium, which, for a couple of days, was turned into the epicenter of the festival.

There Flora would read the names of “The Silent Legacy” actors and proclaim the official opening of the Midsummer Festival.

Bowing down to the crowd and wishing all a good time, she would disappear behind the scenes until the next day.

To the delight of the young and old, there were puppet shows, carousels, games, stands with delicious food and candy, and lots of other enticing things to do—the uplifting atmosphere of the festival allowed the city to plunge into the spirit of celebration.

37

Once upon a time . . .

Legend has it that a long time ago, in the days no one can remember, wretched times befell the city—the raging forces of darkness and evil and the creatures dwelling in the backyard of their world surrounded it in a tight circle.

Threatening to turn every single building to ruins and kill every last living soul, the menacing enemy demanded to be worshipped and served for eternity.

Having withstood multiple attacks over centuries, the city met its new enemy with the full might of its glorious military tradition—the armies, led by the finest commanders, bravely faced the stray evil, but however courageous and grand, they were unable to repel the supernatural and had fallen in the unequal battle.

The enemy persisted with its demands.

In the face of the terrifying danger, the townspeople were losing hope and were consumed by fear, and the city’s priests and elders had no comfort to offer.

The time given to people by the dark and evil forces to decide their fate—to be enslaved or die—was running out. The last hour of freedom had struck.

With the hope slipping away, an ordinary but exceptionally brave girl named Flora appeared from the crowd. With her head held high, she stepped outside the thick defense wall and faced the enemy surrounding the city. The forces of darkness and evil, devouring the last blue patch of the sky and threatening with their powers, noticed the frail young girl and decided to hear her out.

Flora challenged the evil spirits. She volunteered to endure any trials for three nights in a row without begging for mercy and renouncing her devotion to the city.

If unable to break the girl’s spirit, the dark forces would have to leave forever, but if Flora gave up, the townspeople would become their servants to the last of days.

Believing that such an ordinary and fragile girl could not endure three nights of hardship, the evil forces accepted the proposition.

That same evening, with her clothes flapping mercilessly in the gusty wind, Flora stood on the other side of the city wall to face unimaginable cruelty. Having seized her away with immense fury and hatred, they tortured, humiliated, and maimed her all night long, but to their great surprise, Flora did not disown her feelings toward the city and its people.

At dawn, the forces released the young girl.

Finally reaching the city, Flora collapsed, but surrounded by the loving care of the people, she was able to regain her strength before the fall of darkness.

In the evening, still suffering from the pain, she was once again standing beyond the wall. The enemy callously grabbed the brave girl and submitted her to even more vicious and fierce torture—forcing her to endure the most horrible pain of her world and experience the crudity of the kingdom of darkness—but Flora did not give up and did not disavow her purest feelings.

Furious about another failure, on the second morning, the evil spirits turned the young girl into a repulsive creature and tossed her at the foot of the wall.

Having made her way into the city with her last ounce of strength, being unrecognized by anyone and completely exhausted, Flora found a secluded spot, where she quietly spent the entire day.

Formerly a pretty girl, she did not recognize herself: her beautiful face was wrinkled, bumpy, and ugly; her rich and smooth skin was old and saggy; her hands turned bony and veiny, the nails black and broken. Her hair had fallen out, and her whole body was flaccid and hunched. Flora was repulsed by her own rough voice.

Knowing that she would forever remain a beast and would never be proclaimed a hero, she nevertheless stayed true to her intentions and was prepared to save the city at any cost. When the fateful night had fallen, once again Flora sneaked out beyond the gate and faced the invader threatening with its vast blackness.

This was the first time the enemy hesitated. They did not expect that an ordinary and delicate girl could endure this much and didn't want to torture and hurt her anymore.

Instead, returning Flora's beauty, they asked her to become their queen. Promising to bestow upon her supernatural powers and immortality, to reveal the secrets of their world, and swearing eternal allegiance to their new dark governess, the forces of darkness and evil were greatly astonished to find out that the girl, ready to defend her city whatever the price, rejected their offer.

Blinded by fury, the forces took Flora's life, and despite their defeat, attacked the city, wishing to destroy it.

Fortunately, having noticed the wrongdoing, the good gods came to the rescue. They stopped the malady with their powers and had never again let the evil approach and threaten the people.

Having regained its freedom, the city was celebrating but at the same time mourning Flora's death.

The good deities felt sorry about the girl who had to suffer cruel torture and undeservedly die. Being unable to bring her back to life, they concentrated their powers, and for a brief moment, they gave her back her bodily form. Having drawn a speck of time from the divine granary of eternity, they allowed her to say farewell. All townspeople came to witness the miracle.

On that midsummer day, the maiden Flora appeared behind the city wall where she had faced the siege of the enemy. She looked so real, as if her death was just a misunderstanding. Everyone's eyes were on her. People praising her shouted out words of admiration, gratefulness, and love; others simply stood there in speechless amazement.

Through an opening in the thick evening clouds cut by the gods, a beam of the twilight sun had fallen on Flora's silhouette, embracing her in a circle of light bound by the invisible powers that no mortal man could enter.

Her father, crushed under the burden of loss, and her grieving mother, holding Flora's little sister, stood in front of the crowd surrounding the girl.

Having climbed out her mother's arms onto the ground, the little one clinched to her leg and stared with her big eyes at her older sister.

Suddenly she made a break for the patch of light and effortlessly entered into it. Leaping into Flora's embrace, the little one wrapped her arms around her. Touched by the sight, many in the crowd wiped away the tears rolling down their faces.

Soon the little one was on the ground again. Looking deeply into her sister's eyes, she stepped back and dove into the crowd. Moving to and fro through the astonished and wonder-struck people, the girl was looking for young women. Approaching each of them, she asked them to lean forward and whispered something in their ears.

Those the little girl had talked to stepped out from the crowd and gathered into a horseshoe-shaped hoop in front of their savior.

No one knew, but they were chosen for a reason.

Wrapped in the light of the evening sun, Flora looked at them carefully. Her glance fell on one of the young women. Looking her in the eyes, and without uttering a single word, she seemed to have invited her to come closer. In an instant, the chosen woman stood right before the ray of light emerging from heaven.

Flora lifted her right arm like she was trying to give something. The young woman also reached out, and when their hands touched, the face of the chosen girl turned solemn.

In a few moments, their hands had parted, and the light embracing Flora began fading away. People in the crowd felt that the inevitable moment of farewell had come.

Flora turned toward her parents and her little sister standing between them. Looking gently into their eyes, she bowed before them.

As if captured by a gush of strong wind, her clothes started flapping wildly, and her image faded. Without saying a word, Flora had dissipated into the air and perished forever.

Her brokenhearted father picked up the young daughter and firmly embraced his wife, but, struck by despair, she collapsed to the ground. Nonetheless, despite their aching

souls, Flora's parents were happy to witness the miracle and see their older daughter one last time.

Soon the clouds drew together, and with that, the last sign that something extraordinary had happened disappeared. Led by curiosity, people rushed to the place where their savior was standing just a moment ago, but that spot was as ordinary as ever.

38

Umpteen years had passed since the events described in the legend of the city. However magnificent, the ancient history was powerless to withstand the journey through thousands of years, and today the city was changed beyond recognition—the massive defense wall, the castle towers, and cobbled streets were long gone.

The city manuscripts proclaimed that in the place where Flora, deified for her deeds, was last seen, a monument was erected. It stood there for centuries, but, showing no mercy, time left not a sign of it. Today nobody knew where that place used to be. Having changed its appearance, it was resting under a thick layer of soil somewhere inside the modern city or on its outskirts.

Despite the many years that had elapsed, the townspeople did not forget their heroes and were proud of the history that was passed on by word of mouth from the days of old until the present. The Midsummer Festival, commemorating the deed of a modest girl and her display of bravery, was able to take people back to their roots and allow them to feel a part of the lingering history.

According to the legend, through the chosen woman, Flora left the legacy of goodwill and a precept to build a triple defense wall around the city, which, according to remaining historical sources, was actually built.

Many townspeople believed that the maiden Flora did, in fact, exist, but the legend recounted multiple times that day sounded like nothing more than a beautiful story with a message.

Whatever the secret of the silent legacy, it seemed that the will of the goddess Flora was indeed fulfilled, as her beloved city was standing and flourishing up to that day.

39

Friday, mid-July

On their free afternoon on the first day of the Midsummer Festival, Kenton and Germund met at a half-empty bar in the sports compound where the festival took place. Scenes of the celebrations and lots of commercials were playing on the large TV screens.

“I hope we will soon find out what Bruno is up to. Maybe even during the festival,” Germund said before taking a sip of beer.

“I think Lana Moore will be absolutely unapproachable to him during the next few days.”

“True enough. I bet he is watching her closely and thinking about her—at some point, he will have to make his move.”

“I’m sure he will, only I think Bruno will take his time getting ready.”

“The thing is, if he does get close to Lana, we will definitely see it, but if he fails, how will we know? I doubt he will deliver the news personally.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that—after all, we can ask him directly about it. There is lots of money at stake, and no one can wait forever.”

“That’s true. By the way, did you make your bet?”

“No. Not yet.”

“Make sure you’re not too late,” Germund said, raising his glass of beer.

In a moment, their attention was captured by the broadcast of the festival, and along with other spectators, the two remained silent.

Suddenly the crowd gathered in the stadium went wild. The main character of the festival—the maiden Flora—had appeared.

Dressed in a light blue gown girded with a belt of a lighter shade of blue and holding a shining crystal wand with a delicate diamond-decorated horseshoe-shaped ornament on its end, Lana Moore was a fantastic embodiment of the goddess Flora, who, despite her divine duties, did not forget about the ordinary townspeople and their needs. With her light dress fluttering in an artificial waft of wind, Lana had for a moment transformed into an ancient heroine standing on the imaginary shore of the ocean and nostalgically watching the horizon torn by the thunderstorm.

As soon as she began her opening speech, the cameras were showing a close-up of her silhouette, and the attention of at least half of the spectators was naturally drawn to the shapes of her body accentuated by the wind, thus bringing the displayed era from the triumphant past right into the present—the exquisite beauty and mystery of the adorably smiling Flora had apparently stirred up the imagination.

“Say what you like, but Lana Moore is truly magical,” Germund said, glued to the screen with open admiration.

“Watch your eyes, for this goddess will leave you blinded,” Kenton replied without looking away from the screen.

“I’ll drink to that,” Germund suggested, picking up his pint.

Clinking their glasses, they took large gulps of beer.

When Flora finished her performance and disappeared behind the scenes, the stadium exploded with applause. The Midsummer Festival had officially begun.

Kenton and Germund went outside to look around and headed in the direction of one of the many food stands. The festal noise was coming from every corner—event

announcements, bits of music, and the cheerful chatter of people. The air was filled with the pleasant aroma of the most delicious meals.

Having succumbed to the spirit of celebration and tasting the exotic dainties, Germund was able to relax and forget, for a moment, about Bruno's affairs.

Meanwhile, sitting there in a tribune among a multitude of spectators and people scurrying around, was a mysterious man with a fake press pass.

Everything about Lana Moore aroused his almost-unhealthy curiosity. Armed with a professional video camera, he was following her every step, gesture, and facial expression, which he would have otherwise been unable to see.

Pretending to be a journalist, the mysterious man was gathering information on Lana Moore exclusively for himself. Having been working intensively since the early hours, he was done for today and was about to leave.

The fête was a busy time.

40

Saturday, mid-July

The highlight of the Midsummer Festival was the performance organized on the second day of its celebrations—"The Silent Legacy," which symbolized the legacy of maiden Flora passed on to the future generations. The actors were young women who had earned such right by their good deeds for the well-being of the city and its people.

Lana Moore, previously the winner of the main event, was for the past several years the main character of the festival embodying the symbol of the city—the maiden Flora—and the one to select the current year's winner.

On the early Saturday afternoon, an innumerable multitude of people had gathered at the city's largest stadium. All the stands and other spectator areas were completely full. As the suspense reached its culmination, the pride of the festival—the maiden Flora—stepped out on the stadium field. Immediately, a live wave of applause went around. "The Silent Legacy" had begun.

Projected in close-up on the giant screen, Flora was moving slowly toward a small stage in the center of the stadium. She was an embodiment of flawless elegance and looked just as stunning as yesterday. As she walked up onto the podium, her light dress began fluttering in the wind.

Greeting the spectators, Flora slightly nodded. The crowd droned in response.

The organizers did an excellent job this year, many observers thought approvingly. Well done!

Dressed in plain, light, ground-long dresses with a matching waist ribbon, the other actors emerged from different corners of the stadium, walking slowly toward Flora.

As they approached, the women lined up in front of the goddess, forming an extended arc. Silent, they were looking at Flora, while their gowns dancing in the wind made the waiting all the more intense.

Subdued by the spirit of the performance, quieted spectators were watching the act. Their faces reflected the suspense of the events to come.

Giving the women a good look, Flora walked gracefully down the podium, and as though swimming over the lawn, she approached one end of their arrangement. Moving slowly inside the bow-shaped formation, she carefully examined each participant, and without uttering a word paused in front of each of them, looked each in the eyes, and slightly nodded.

Spending a moment with each of the women, Flora sailed along the dresses of various colors and, unable to decide who would inherit the legacy, reached the middle of the line.

Expecting the denouement, the spectators were observing the graceful procession with bated breath. As the maiden was about to come to the end of the line, everyone's eyes were on the woman standing last in the row. It seemed that they had only now noticed that she was holding a year-old child.

Flora paused. Without making a sound, the child held by one arm was watching her with great curiosity, and the participant holding him was looking at her with eyes filled with blissful anticipation and a slight smile on her face.

Nodding at the woman, Flora looked deep into her eyes and smiled at the child.

The feeling of culmination hovered over the stadium. The maiden slowly raised her right hand, and with her palm down, pointed to the woman with the baby, placing her other hand on her chest.

The crowd roared—Flora made her choice.

Reacting modestly and without saying a word, the winner also slowly stretched out her right hand. When their palms touched, the blast of the tribunes intensified.

Surrounded by a living mass of thousands of viewers, sparkling with powerful camera flashes and emanating a whole mixture of sounds, the two women stood there holding each other and warmly looking into each other's eyes. Without paying attention to the frenzied crowd, they seemed to have stopped the time and, for a few moments, felt like they were standing on a tiny, peaceful island.

Seemingly unwilling to let her chosen woman go, Flora gently pulled back her palm, still touching hers with her fingertips. Once again confirming her choice before returning to the stage, she nodded to the winner and, having received a similar response, slowly turned around and retreated. The woman with the child watched her go until the very last moment.

With the multitude of spectators clapping and shouting out words of admiration, having walked up to the stage, Flora closed the show, bowing down and gliding away.

“The Silent Legacy” embodied the hope that the entrusted will of maiden Flora would continue to be upheld, and various hardships and misfortunes would pass the city over.

By her incredible performance, Lana Moore had created a moving atmosphere, and the woman she had chosen—Sally Lockerbek, the city’s newcomer—managed to hold back her emotions and acted equally solid. At the end of the show, she found herself in the spotlight.

41

Second half of July

Forty-eight-year-old Germund Keel was married twice and both times divorced. Even though he made a promise not to do it the third time around, after a while, he was once again living with a new girlfriend, but their relationship did not last.

Germund was a wanderer. He had no children, practically no savings, and often changed jobs and his living place. Despite his respectable age, he was just a regular patrol officer, but that didn’t bother him one bit, and he had no ambition to be promoted. However, Germund had spent more time working at the police department than he did for any other employer.

Fond of parties and revel and interested in the lives of celebrities, Germund enjoyed communicating with people and had a rather strong opinion about the majority of them.

Bruno’s determination to become close to Lana Moore interested Germund more than any other man at the station. He couldn’t just sit and wait to find out something about this dare, especially if it meant having to wait indefinitely. Unable to forget his unsuccessful attempt at following Bruno, Germund was contemplating other alternatives and wasn’t about to let things simply go with the flow. Soon he arrived at the conclusion that if he wanted to know more about the development of this challenge, it was not Bruno he had to watch but Lana Moore—the woman of his choice.

Carried away by his new plan, Germund was very positive about its many advantages: Lana didn’t know the men working at the station, which meant that, if acting with caution, it would be rather easy to avoid any suspicion from her side. Moreover, watching her would be much less complicated than stalking an experienced detective like Bruno Brawling.

Rubbing his hands together in excitement, he couldn’t wait to proceed with his plan, but wishing to ensure continuous surveillance of Lana Moore, he needed to share his ideas at least with Kenton and, obviously, get his approval.

Germund was perfectly aware that his friend would not be as enthusiastic about it as he was.

Just as expected, Kenton was outright concerned about the proposition. He warned that these actions would amount to the unauthorized surveillance of a private person, and if revealed, everyone involved in the conspiracy would be in big trouble. On top of that, it would cause a scandal that could greatly damage the image of the police, and it was probable that the head of the department, Hubert Nilsson, would have to resign—all depending on the extent to which the media would handle the matter.

Kenton believed that the plot had huge risks and only intangible benefits, especially because Captain Hubert absolutely didn't deserve such a slap in the face.

Having stated his opinion, Kenton did his best to make Germund change his mind and tried to convince him that in this case, it was best to do nothing at all. Bruno would have to show his cards anyway; therefore, the smartest thing was just to wait.

Expecting a similar response, Germund listened patiently, but he did not intend to drop the idea. He believed that Kenton was overly cautious and that there was no need to imagine such terrible ramifications.

The way Germund saw it, everyone who cared about this case could become the hostages of the unknown created by Bruno, and he upheld the opinion that it was necessary to watch Lana Moore, even if only passively.

Knowing that his friend would not give up the idea, Kenton had nothing left but to make sure that Lana's surveillance would adhere to all necessary precautions and, depending on the circumstances, would be at least remotely related to their regular business. This could be used to justify their presence in her surroundings, should it become necessary.

Wishing to protect their colleagues from a possible scandal, they said nothing about it to others at the station.

42

Second half of July

Lana Moore's surveillance initiated by Germund brought some variety into his and Kenton's dull routine.

Even though it was highly unlikely that Bruno would show up at her work, the two decided to start there. Having met in front of the building at 49 Olive Street, they went inside.

Up on the third floor, where Lana Moore had an office, pretending to be there for a specific reason, they were reading the names of the companies written on the boards while actually trying to decipher something through the greenish glass wall of the Karis Pantti office.

Having taken a glimpse of Lana Moore sitting at her desk and of her assistant, and making sure there was no sign of Bruno, Kenton and Germund stepped away. Just as they had reached the stairs, they passed the city's new celebrity Sally Lockerbek, the winner of "The Silent Legacy," who was most likely on her way to see Lana Moore.

Settled in a small café on the first floor, the two had a few sandwiches and coffee. They were waiting for Lana to come down and were hoping to follow her and see whether she would go to meet Bruno.

Germund was champing at the bit to get on with it. Sure, Bruno could have been talking to Lana over the phone or online, but the point of the challenge was for them to become a couple, so this kind of communication would make no difference. Sooner or later, he had to show up with her in public, that is, of course, if he hadn't given up already.

In a few minutes, the two saw Sally Lockerbek and Lana Moore coming down the stairs and, having left their table, followed them outside. Getting into Germund's car, they continued pursuing them as they drove away in Lana's small Audi.

Realizing that she was on her way home, Germund went back to the police station parking garage—being seen hanging around Lana Moore's home would have been an unforgivable mistake. Having dropped Kenton off, he went his way and was glad not to have seen Bruno at Lana's side.

Just you wait, Bruno . . . We'll get you sooner or later! Germund decided as he drove home.

43

End of July, beginning of August

Due to their irregular working hours, Germund and Kenton had been watching Lana Moore either together or separately. If Bruno was off duty and was able to go meet her, one of them tried to be at least in the remote surroundings of Lana's activities and monitor the situation.

To make sure that Bruno didn't ever get a chance to see her unnoticed, they needed another man on their team. After some consideration, the two decided to approach the department's newbie, Martin Silverberg, who was in charge of holding the bets and keeping up with the news related to Bruno's dare. Because Martin took nobody's side, he could be their impartial referee, and since he often worked a different shift, he seemed to be an ideal candidate.

However, as soon as he heard about Lana Moore's surveillance, Martin got nervous. It was obvious that this was the first time this honest and dutiful young officer was dealing with a deviation from police statutes.

Kenton and Germund introduced him to the passive surveillance methods and precautionary measures they were using, but instead of giving an answer, Martin told Eric Hudson, a man of high standing among the ordinary officers at the station, about their surveillance.

When Eric heard about it, he wanted to speak with the authors of the scheme. During a heated discussion, Kenton and Germund explained how the plan had originated, told him about the principles of Lana Moore's surveillance, and pleaded the need for a third person to be involved—Martin.

Having heard them out and received the answers to some of his questions, to the amazement of all three, Eric supported Germund's idea to continue discreetly watching Lana Moore.

Knowing what a hype Bruno's challenge had created inside the department, and having received Eric's approval, Martin agreed to help out—especially because his presence would be required only when either Germund or Kenton was unable to do it.

Feeling excited, Germund was straining at the leash—with a third person joining in, not a single step Bruno made would go unnoticed.

Starting that day, Kenton, Germund, and Martin carefully watched Lana and kept a reasonable distance—all they wanted to know was whether she was seeing Bruno.

Everything was unfolding smoothly, and nobody else was needed in this three-man club. In order to cover their tracks, they would drop into a bookstore, stop for a snack, go to a hairdresser, or do anything else without letting Lana Moore out of their sight. If she was somewhere that was difficult to monitor, they would hang out in the surroundings of that place.

It was rather easy to follow her. Quickly recognizable by the passersby, Lana was used to the attention; therefore, a few strangers sniffing around in the distance did not raise any of her concerns. Always busy, she didn't even have time to be looking around and thinking about anything else but her own business. Incidentally, almost every day, she was meeting with this year's winner of "The Silent Legacy," Sally Lockerbek.

Despite the fact that the trio was loafing around Lana Moore, they were frequently unable to say exactly what she was doing at a given time. They cared about the surveillance only because of the possibility that Bruno Brawling might show up, but he was never around.

It was evident that Bruno, always showing off his professional achievements, superiority, and resourcefulness, was still unable to brag about having captured Lana's heart. As a result, having noticed nothing speaking of even the tiniest progress on his side, the trio had assumed that Bruno was still planning his moves, whatever they might be.

Even though it seemed that he did nothing to pursue a friendship with Lana Moore and had never been seen in her company, it didn't mean that he hadn't noticed three of his colleagues following her. Knowing that Bruno preferred no nuisances, those sticking their noses into his business had to remain extremely disciplined and leave no chances of

being exposed. After all, Oliver Paxton, the head of the mob responsible for kidnapping and abusing children, also didn't realize what Bruno was conspiring until it was too late.

Wishing to find out whether Bruno came to see Lana in the evenings, the men had several times been watching the access roads to her house. Armed with a simple video camera, they were trying to spot Bruno's SUV, without success. Most likely being tired after a long day of work, Lana Moore would turn off the lights quite early.

After more than two weeks of surveillance, it became apparent that she was living a rather monotonous life: working, hardly ever going out, and practically never meeting friends. Sally Lockerbek was basically the only job-unrelated person regularly seen in her company. Lana met her almost every day, and after spending a couple of hours together, she would usually just go home.

When, after a fortnight, Bruno was nowhere to be seen, Kenton began contemplating how long they would have to go on. He knew that Bruno was having trouble with a complicated homicide case where the investigation had run into a dead end, and he assumed that it could have been the reason why he still hadn't seemed to pursue Lana Moore.

However, just as Kenton's and Martin's patience was about to run out, the day of the breakthrough had come.

44

August 9

As usual, with Bruno outside the office, Kenton and Germund were watching Lana Moore. Having finished her work, she didn't go home but went to the largest park of the city, where she met with none other than Sally Lockerbek. There, they quietly walked along the paths.

Not having any particular feeling about today and giving in to hunger, Kenton turned back to the parking lot where he had seen a hot-dog stand, leaving Germund alone for some time.

Coming out of the lot, he held a couple of extra-large hot dogs. Taking a big bite and greedily chewing on it, Kenton slowly headed back. Suddenly he saw his buddy running toward him at a light trot. Germund was anxiously waving his hands, trying to tell him to stop. For a second, Kenton thought that his friend had finally seen Bruno.

Why did he stop watching them? Was he exposed? Kenton considered the possibility.

"What happened? Why did you leave them alone?" he asked upon nearing Germund.

Finally reaching his friend, Germund hastily looked around. There was not a single soul close by. He was very excited and still out of breath.

“I think,” Germund uttered, panting, “I know why Bruno does not show his face around Lana Moore.”

His eyes were glowing. He was concentrating on saying something important.

“Why?”

“When you went away,” Germund continued, gathering his breath, “Lana and Sally headed toward the park gardens and sat down on a bench nearly completely surrounded by vegetation, where they continued talking for another few minutes. Then, Lana started looking around, but she didn’t see me because I was standing far away.”

“And?”

“And then she embraced Sally and kissed her on the lips!”

Kenton did not expect this. Thoughts were rumbling in his head while Germund was enjoying the news and had almost regained his breath. He then quietly picked one of Kenton’s hot dogs.

“Looks like our efforts finally yielded tangible fruit,” Germund added just before taking a bite.

Kenton put two and two together. Bruno must have found this out about Lana much earlier. That’s why he didn’t come anywhere near her.

“Well, that explains a lot,” he uttered.

“Indeed!” Germund rejoiced. “That’s the end of Bruno’s challenge!”

“Lana’s sexual orientation will probably be a tough nut to crack even for the almighty Bruno. Oh, by the way, we should keep it between us for now.”

“I agree. We’ll only tell Eric and Martin.”

“Better yet, no one at all. We don’t want people unable to control their excitement getting this news going around and then someone tracing it back to us as the source . . . How would we explain it then?”

That got Germund thinking.

“So what do we do about Bruno’s challenge?” he asked.

“We’ll quit watching Lana, and we will tell Eric and Martin that it didn’t produce any results. They will only be happy. Then we’ll just have to wait until the challenge ends by itself, whenever that will be.”

Germund seemed to have some doubts about it, but he couldn’t find fault in the reasoning.

“All right,” he agreed.

“Promise you won’t bet any more money against Bruno,” Kenton said seriously.

Unconvinced by the supposed earnestness of his friend, Germund burst into laughter.

“By the way, why did you stop watching them?” Kenton asked.

“What do you mean? I’m not going to stare at them until they notice me!” Germund snarled, shrugging his shoulders.

“But it must have been your only chance to watch an intimate show of two beautiful women, you old loner,” Kenton said, grinning.

“I think you are simply jealous,” Germund said, giving him a playful shove.

The friends exploded with laughter. They finished up their hot dogs and went to the car. They no longer needed to watch Lana Moore.

45

August 9

Working exclusively alone, the mysterious man stalking Lana Moore knew quite a bit about everyone, but no one knew about him. Thus, nobody could stand in his way.

Having had strong suspicions about Lana’s sexual orientation for some time and witnessing her growing affection toward Sally, he was not at all surprised to see their first expression of intimacy.

Watching Lana kissing the slightly tense and constrained Sally, the mysterious man was calm. He realized that the witnessed episode was much more of a surprise to Germund Keel, who also saw their kiss and immediately took off to inform his friend Kenton Collins, who was standing somewhere farther away.

Today Martin Silverberg, who occasionally joined the two policemen, was not with them, but there was no doubt that he, too, would soon find out the news.

They’re like starved wild dogs—grabbing the first bone thrown at them and running off, gutting their petty catch, thought the stalker.

He found the three cops following Lana Moore a little entertaining and was not worried about them at all. Managing to stay unnoticed, the stalker always felt he was at least one step ahead, but if the strangers were to become more active, that could irritate him.

Preparing for this, he had collected multiple photos exposing the lame policemen who had been systematically performing unauthorized surveillance of a private individual. The stalker was ready to present the evidence to the head of the station the three worked for and, of course, to the journalists, but because they hadn’t bothered him yet, he let them play their game of spies.

He knew perfectly the intentions of the policemen watching Lana Moore, and they didn’t even come close to the grand vision he himself had for her. The stalker knew that the rather quiet and undisturbed life of this lovely woman would one day be changed—she would become unattainable to anyone and would belong only to him, and he had no intentions of sharing her. No one, however, knew about it, and when they did find out, it would be too late to do anything about it.

The mysterious man had a sound strategy, and having absolute confidence in own abilities, he wasn't shy about enjoying his future relationship with Lana Moore beforehand. No one could make him quit, lose courage, or doubt himself; therefore, already now, engaged in the future success of his plan, the man felt a pleasant quiver running through this body, which fondled his ego.

In this perspective, Lana and Sally's kiss served only a small purpose, as it was just a tiny little detail in the grand scheme.

Whereas witnessing intimacy between Lana and Sally was absolutely sufficient for Kenton Collins and Germund Keel, today's mission of the mysterious man who also saw their first kiss was not yet complete. Observing two women holding hands and merrily chatting away, he reviewed the gathered material and selected several photographs that portrayed Lana and Sally smiling gently while holding each other before the kiss and then kissing each other on the lips.

Isn't it just lovely...

Even though he wasn't sure how the others were planning to deal with the news, the stalker knew exactly what he was about to do.

His actions would cause much speculation, worries, and pain for Lana Moore, but it was necessary. Otherwise, the situation might become unpredictable.

Pulling out his phone and finding *MKH* in the address book, the mysterious man typed a message and attached two photos.

Following the plan was a pure pleasure.

Time to move to the next level, he decided with satisfaction.

46

August 10

To Kenton and Germund's great surprise, the news about Lana Moore became public the very next day.

On the afternoon of August 10, there were seven officers on the second floor at the police station. They were writing reports and filing other documents, which wasn't the favorite part of the job for many of them.

The shifts were about to change. The aroma of afternoon coffee filled the room. The topic of conversation between the men seemed to have drifted to the discussion of the local football team.

It was Eric Hudson who walked in next. Approaching the group of colleagues, he cut to the chase. "Guys! Breaking news!" he said under his breath.

Everyone went silent and looked at him.

Eric showed them his phone with the first page of the *M. K. H. Limited* tabloid on the screen. The headline read:

City's celebrity Lana Moore and the winner of "The Silent Legacy" Sally Lockerbek display their feelings in public

The article was followed by two close-up photographs. One of them showed two women sitting on a bench at the city park's gardens, then gently kissing in the following shot.

"How about that?"

The men stirred up, spilling out comments one after another.

"No way!"

"What? A lesbian? What a loss!"

"Like you ever had a chance with her."

"Get out!"

"It does suit her, though . . ."

After the first reactions quieted down, they all began evaluating the news in the light of Bruno's challenge.

"Holy shit! It's a real breakthrough!"

"I can begin spending the money I bet against Bruno."

Some guys high-fived each other in agreement with this idea.

"A country girl did what Bruno couldn't."

As the emotions subsided, they agreed to stop placing bets—the news most likely meant that Bruno's dare had come to an end and that he had lost.

The men couldn't wait to put a lid on this important matter, but before they could do so, they had to speak to Bruno. Everyone was extremely curious about how he would admit his defeat.

Looking at the photographs, Germund was secretly delighted about not being included in the shot.

Who on earth took these photos? There was no one else but me! he wondered.

This was a good reminder that the danger related to Lana Moore's surveillance was indeed very real.

Above the article about Lana Moore and Sally Lockerbek's kiss that created a real frenzy in the city was a signature of its author: Mario K. Habbermann. No one was really

surprised that it was his periodical that published the story and the photos of the scandalous kiss.

This infamous local journalist was going by the nickname the Scavenger. There were many people who hated Mario K. Habbermann—and quite rightly so.

Having started as a regular journalist, Mario distinguished himself by his appalling conduct and gross defiance of journalism ethics and prominent journalistic authorities. He had a set of moral values generally unacceptable to any reasonable person, which made him stand out among his colleagues. Soon no one wanted to work with him, but being alone was when Mario felt most liberated.

Without thinking twice, he quit his job and went along his own path—but not without sending everyone to hell before closing the door of the editorial office for the last time.

Soon after having established the *M. K. H. Limited*, Mario felt free and did not have to adjust to anyone. Working alone, he was finally able to adhere to his own principles.

Unwilling to be used by anyone, Mario meticulously selected every piece of material and thoroughly filed all information he received. If it wasn't going to be published, he kept it for the future—just in case.

Mario avoided routine writing. If he had no news worthy of announcing, the new issue of *M. K. H. Limited* would not come out.

Usually resorting to publishing online, Mario would only print a paper issue when he had special material and then distribute it at a give-away price—he considered being the first to tell the news to be the biggest profit.

When looking for stuff to put out, Mario wasn't squeamish about going through the garbage of the information society with his bare hands. As a result, too many found *M. K. H. Limited* to be a continuously tasteless column. The majority of the public disliked Mario's periodical and even loathed it—everyone had secrets, and those laughing and discussing the publicized private matters of others today could take their place tomorrow.

Obtaining information in, it seemed, simply inconceivable ways, Mario was able to expose the family secrets of a dozen or so well-known people in the city and to reveal the ghosts or old sins of their past lives, which he'd publicize in cold blood. *M. K. H. Limited* would also publish articles about extramarital children; a former close friendship with someone who was now a lowlife, criminal, or otherwise notorious individual; details about alcohol and drug abuse; and of course, the sexual orientation, kept secret up until then, of anyone who mattered in the city. Unsurprisingly, for many readers, this periodical was a much more enticing form of entertainment than the repetitive mainstream news.

Mario K. Habbermann didn't care about the opinion of others and didn't give a damn about the lives he was destroying. Items published in his tabloid had ruined many a career, destroyed family happiness, caused financial damage, and resulted in other headaches. Despite all this, even though to some he was the messenger of bad news, Mario

was writing about the things no one else knew of; therefore, as soon as the new issue came out, the commotion was guaranteed.

Even the people who despised the tone of his articles and the forthright method of revealing sensitive information often couldn't ignore the facts brought to light in *M. K. H. Limited*, and sometimes, after having publicized particularly juicy news, Mario K. Habbermann was enjoying his hour in the limelight.

Many who became victims of Mario the Scavenger attempted to strike back—he received anonymous threats and was sued many times, but despite this, Mario confidently accepted legal challenges, and up until now, no one had managed to cause him any serious damage. It seemed that the assaults of the attackers were contained by an invisible—but very solid—defense wall, able to withstand the pressure of even the most powerful rivals.

Every now and then, Mario would return the favor and attack back—pulling a skeleton out of the opponent's closet and waving it in front of his or her nose, effectively convincing the adversary to withdraw the claim.

There were times when, finding common interests with those he offended, Mario would come to a quick settlement, but the motives and circumstances of such agreements naturally remained unknown.

On some occasions, sensing the weakness of the opponent and using his journalistic skills and invisible allies to his advantage, Mario would even win the cases lodged against him.

The most that his opponents managed to achieve was a public apology and a fine of a couple thousand dollars.

48

Second week of August

Even though the news of Lana Moore and Sally Lockerbek's kiss had become the top story of the city's news, to most of Bruno's coworkers, it was primarily associated with his determination to get close to Lana and had become a thrilling twist in the events.

Up until now, Bruno always managed to achieve anything he was up to, but such an outcome no longer looked realistic.

The guys at the station were convinced that Bruno had already lost and now was sitting it out. Gloating over this fact, many of them wanted to look him in the eye. Among them, undoubtedly, was Germund Keel.

Even though Bruno was a real weasel, never gave up, and was able to mislead his opponents, now, it seemed, the writing was on the wall. The news that crowned Lana's surveillance offered answers to a lot of questions, and all there was left to do was wait for the denouement.

Even Kenton, as reserved as he was, and who secretly supported Bruno, had no hopes that he would scramble out of it this time.

Bruno, oh, Bruno . . . I can't believe you actually lost! he thought.

It was time to end the dare, but to properly do that, someone had to talk to the contestant. Eric Hudson seemed to be perfect for this task.

49

First half of August

Bruno had a lot of time at his disposal to attract Lana Moore's attention and was able to act without being disturbed, but when his coworkers realized that the situation was developing by far not in his favor, they decided to disregard Bruno's condition of leaving him alone and were determined to talk to him.

Lately, Bruno was noticeably agreeable and lenient, and it seemed that the news announced by Mario the Scavenger did not impress him at all. The men at the station believed that Bruno, sensing his defeat, was trying to devalue his challenge and pretended that its culmination was not important. Thus, no one was surprised that Bruno wasn't seeking confrontation—having obviously lost the bet, he probably had nothing to say.

The men refused to be taken for a fool. This was a situation in which nearly everyone felt like winners—some by winning money, others by enjoying Bruno's defeat.

Eric Hudson picked a good moment and approached Bruno in the view of the entire team.

To everybody's astonishment, Bruno didn't even try to deny accepting the dare and assured that it would soon come to an end. When answering Eric's questions, he remained calm, even friendly, and it didn't look like he was worried about anything.

Bruno even promised to inform them about any upcoming developments, mentioning that he would allow them to witness the end of the challenge and decide for themselves whether he succeeded or not.

His attitude was a great surprise. Not knowing what to expect next, the men decided to wait and see.

Although Bruno demonstrated an impressive self-confidence, many of his colleagues were not convinced that this dare could have any foreseeable progress in his favor. Most of them wondered that if Bruno hadn't managed to win Lana Moore's heart after all these months, what could he possibly achieve in the remaining time? The thought of him becoming her significant other seemed simply absurd. That would require a miracle, especially having in mind Lana's recently revealed sexual orientation.

Germund Keel, one particularly hoping to see Bruno fail, was slightly anxious and contemplated out loud whether Bruno's hints could really mean anything or whether it was just a bluff.

There were still no signs of things turning to Bruno's advantage—he was swamped with work: always on the phone, meeting with Hubert, searching through online databases, making quick runs out of the station, and seeing some student at the office.

Nothing indicated that Bruno had given the slightest thought about Lana Moore.

Knowing what he was like, some men speculated that Bruno's dormant appearance could be misleading, suggesting that it wasn't the end. Whatever the case, as the weeks went by, the invariable scene of Bruno working day and night did not leave much to hope for. Any other ending but guaranteed defeat was not to be expected.

To Lana Moore, however, who was picked to pieces by the media, a serious friendship with Bruno Brawling was the last thing on her mind.

50

Second half of August

After *M. K. H. Limited* published the article with the photograph of the kiss between Sally and her, Lana Moore was extremely stressed, was unable to concentrate on work, and did all she could to avoid the substantially increased attention of strangers.

She never looked at her sexual orientation as a particularly important issue and wasn't planning to hide it forever, but because it was a personal matter, Lana wanted to pick the right time and manner to open up to the public. She couldn't even imagine that someone would ever condemn her for it, especially because so many people before her had come out of the closet.

Unfortunately, in ways she couldn't comprehend, someone had managed to snap a shot of their kiss, and without the slightest regard for her privacy, the first to tell about it was this pathetic skunk Mario K. Habbermann, whom Lana despised.

This deplorable journalist portrayed her as a secretive person who betrayed the public trust. Now Lana needed to find the inner strength to survive the ordeal created by this prick.

Worse still, some people started suggesting that Sally won "The Silent Legacy" because of their friendship. Fueled by the media, this thought transformed into a questioning of whether Lana Moore was guilty of having a conflict of interest. The general public was trying to understand whether they could still trust her, and people were openly debating whether there was anything else Lana Moore was hiding from them.

It was a complete nightmare.

Soon after Mario K. Habbermann caused a scandal, wishing to shield herself from unwanted attention, Sally Lockerbek returned to her small provincial town, leaving Lana Moore to deal with endless speculations about her and stand up to people's interrogative looks.

To clear away the unfounded accusations and public misperceptions, Lana needed to act promptly and make an official press statement, but being unable to reach Sally for some time and tune into her current issues, she simply could not do it.

With unceasing media surmises, Lana practically lost public trust and became the topic of endless gossip while her career was hanging by a thread.

Her life was turned upside down.

51

End of August

Until the very end of August, Bruno practically lived at work, occasionally stepping out for a few hours with a stalwart sergeant, Curtis, who confirmed that Chief Hubert gave the two of them a new assignment. Thus, Bruno not being in the office meant that he wasn't taking care of the challenge business.

Since his last conversation with the team, Bruno had taken only one day off. That day, he went out of town. This information was also confirmed by Curtis, who was present when Bruno asked Chief Hubert to give him a leave of absence.

What could he have managed to accomplish in one day of being out of town? No one at the station was concerned about it. They were all waiting for the moment when Bruno would step up and acknowledge his defeat.

As August was coming to an end, some of the men could hardly restrain themselves from asking Bruno about how things were going, regarding him as an annoying braggart who very soon would have to say farewell to his triumphant inviolability, take himself down a notch or two, and of course, apologize.

Still, it seemed that he didn't care the slightest bit about the outcome. He was merely working, getting coffee, speaking with Hubert, or flipping through the archive files.

On August 30, Bruno was sitting with his legs on the desk and the office door wide open. Staring at a pile of papers in front of him and thinking of something, he was tapping his fingers on the desk and glancing absently from side to side. He must have noticed that his colleagues were lately looking at him with an unfavorable eye.

Seeming to have come to an important conclusion, Bruno got up, grabbed his coat, turned off the lights, locked the office door, and appeared in the common premises.

As promised several weeks ago, he addressed the men. Speaking freely and without looking down on anyone, Bruno informed that tomorrow at 6:00 p.m., he was meeting

Lana Moore on the main promenade in the city center. Mentioning the Midpoint Café, he personally invited Kenton, Germund, and Martin to witness his rendezvous and encouraged them to decide on the outcome of the dare based on what they'd see tomorrow evening.

Kindly bidding everyone goodbye and wishing a good time, Bruno left. The men looked at each other and kept standing there without uttering a word—his attitude left them speechless and, at the same time, sparked their curiosity. No one had expected such a direct announcement. Bruno, in general, was speaking in a manner untypical of him and seemed a bit strange.

Eric Hudson approached Martin Silverberg and gave him a couple of instructions: keep the distance, let Bruno do his thing, and most importantly, do not interfere in any way. Eric reminded him that it was necessary to wait it out until the very end, regardless of how long it would take, and not to give in to Kenton and Germund's persuasions to quit. Adding that it was Martin who was responsible for judging the outcome of the challenge, Eric asked him to keep in touch and brief him on the developments tomorrow evening.

Even though anticipating to see Bruno fail, both camps were impatiently awaiting the culmination. It would all be over tomorrow.

52

August 31

The weather on the last day of August happened to be just wonderful. As the evening grew, the central promenade was gradually getting busier—wishing to relax after a day of work, people were sitting in the outdoor cafés, meeting friends, shopping in the boutiques spread over the alley, or simply taking a stroll and enjoying the summer weather.

Amid the zooming cyclists and the roaming crowd, here and there one could spot young lovers rushing to meet their dates and the united couples slowly and dreamily walking around.

As the hands of the clock at the alley formed a straight vertical line, Kenton Collins, Germund Keel, and Martin Silverberg, having noticed Bruno Brawling settling in at the Midpoint Café, took a seat at the table on the opposite side of the street.

“Hard to believe it, but today is the last day of Bruno's dare,” Kenton summarized, flipping through the menu. “Do you even recall when it all started?”

“Way back, in early spring,” Martin reminded.

“That's right. By the way, we still didn't see Bruno do anything about it,” Germund added skeptically. “Can we really expect to see anything at all? I don't get why he is putting on this ridiculous show.”

“If he invited us, there must be something he wants to show. In any case, let’s see whether there will be an extra couple of lovers at this promenade today,” Kenton said.

“I wonder how Bruno is planning to admit that he screwed up. If he is still going to show us something, he better hurry up and make it worth our while, even though I doubt that it’s possible,” Germund said without hiding his pessimism. He then glanced at his watch and looked around.

“Nervous?” Martin sniggered, closing the menu.

“It’s hard to predict Bruno’s game,” Kenton interrupted. “In the past months, he’s never been seen with Lana, and we’ve been watching her for quite some time. Meanwhile, Bruno showed confidence until the very last day, like he has nothing to worry about.”

“Exactly! And that makes me wonder,” Martin added.

“Now everyone knowing about Lana Moore’s little secret doesn’t make it easier for Bruno,” Germund persisted.

“Yes. I hope today he will manage to dispel all doubts,” Kenton said.

“I am sure that’s exactly what he will do. Lana Moore is out of his league,” Germund blurted out.

When the waiter came to their table, Kenton ordered a salad and a glass of mineral water, Martin asked for a small pizza and a Coke, and Germund ordered a bowl of borscht.

“Well, any minute now. Be what may, tomorrow everyone at the station will know the outcome,” Kenton said patiently.

“Look, here she comes!” Martin said, pointing with his head.

Indeed, on the other side of the promenade, without paying attention to anything around her and looking somewhat strained, was Lana Moore, walking toward Bruno Brawling. She was wearing a white blouse, blue jeans, and white sandals and carrying a small grayish purse on her shoulder. Hiding her face behind large sunglasses, Lana could not entirely avoid the unwanted attention. Nothing said she was going on a date.

As she approached Bruno, he rose from his chair and offered her to take a seat. Hesitating there for a moment and maybe feeling somewhat baffled, Lana sat down.

In a short while they made their orders, and after the waiter had left, the two went on talking.

Meanwhile, the threesome was served the ordered food and dug in without taking their eyes off the meeting across the promenade.

Lana Moore was sitting in a detectably constrained manner and was trying not to look around. She obviously didn’t want to attract any unnecessary attention because the past few weeks of her life hadn’t exactly been peachy.

Despite Bruno’s invitation to observe the outcome of his challenge, his rendezvous with Lana Moore still seemed somewhat unexpected—the three men were wondering how he had, in general, managed to talk her into showing up in such a busy public place.

“Anyone could meet with her, even I, but that doesn’t mean a damn thing!” Germund grunted. He was prepared to become the witness of Bruno’s defeat right there, right then.

“You think Lana would agree to go on a date with you on the promenade?” Martin teased.

“I would definitely find a way to convince her to meet, even if just for a show!” Germund retorted quite seriously.

“Guys, let’s just see what will happen,” Kenton suggested.

At best, Lana and Bruno’s date looked more like a business meeting. There was nothing personal between them. From the other side of the promenade, one could see that Bruno was dominating the conversation while Lana was carefully listening. Her body language revealed that she was interested in what her companion had to say.

As the two went on talking, Lana Moore’s face lit up, and she seemed more and more relaxed. After Bruno said something, she even took off her sunglasses and froze for a moment. She looked astounded. What she’d heard must have been something extraordinary.

Lana then asked something, and the self-confident Bruno responded.

Soon after, the three men could hear a fragment of her sentimental fascination coming from the other side of the street. She even threw her arms around Bruno’s neck and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Bruno’s colleagues were hypnotized by what they’d just seen. Even Germund was bereft of speech.

From that moment on, Lana Moore seemed to have found herself. She and Bruno were enjoying the coffee and chatting enthusiastically.

Lana’s transformation was unbelievable. Even the curious looks of strangers didn’t seem to bother her. It was obvious that Bruno made an astonishing impact.

The men watching them couldn’t take their eyes off the new couple being born right in front of them. The situation was somewhat peculiar and was becoming less predictable with every minute.

Glancing at their watches, Lana and Bruno got up. She said something to him and gestured, suggesting an invitation to walk with her.

“What the hell is going on there?” Germund rattled nervously through his clenched teeth.

“Bruno’s show,” Kenton calmly responded, his eyes glued on the couple.

Holding Bruno by his forearm and talking to him, Lana led them back in the same direction she had appeared from before their date.

“I think Bruno is about to close the deal,” Martin added.

Germund looked very concerned. He didn’t want to hear anything suggesting Bruno’s victory and wasn’t ready to give any prominence to his meeting with Lana.

“Something like this was to be expected—that’s a typical Bruno signature,” Kenton said, still not letting Bruno and Lana out of his sight.

Germund looked askance at his friend.

“So what are we going to do now?” Martin asked.

“I doubt we can expect to see anything else,” Germund stated without hesitation. “What we’ve just seen was not a public proposal, and Lana didn’t give a positive answer. Bruno whispered something to make her give him a kiss in public, but I sincerely doubt anyone could call it a major development of the matter. I think we’ve already seen everything we could this evening. Obviously, Bruno lost, and his sorry show is over. Let’s call it a night.”

“No, we won’t!” Martin disagreed. “The show goes on, so either we all go after them, or tomorrow I will tell everyone at the station what I saw and how Bruno’s challenge ended.”

“Don’t worry—we wouldn’t dream of leaving it up to you,” Kenton said, giving Germund a friendly nudge, encouraging him to join them. “Besides, I am very curious whether there is anything else to see.”

Left with no choice, Germund gave in. The men got up. Walking slowly, they were watching Lana Moore and Bruno Brawling strolling down the promenade on the other side. Holding on to Bruno’s arm, Lana was cheerfully chattering away and was relaxed and natural.

Bruno walked her to her car. Before saying goodbye, both of them once again looked at their watches.

They are arranging a time to meet up later, Kenton thought.

Before getting into the vehicle, Lana Moore said something to Bruno, embraced him, and kissed him on the cheek. Driving past him, she waved at him through the car window.

Germund cursed.

Turning toward Martin, Kenton, and Germund, Bruno smiled and gave them a thumbs-up.

It was unbelievable.

Bruno then turned around and walked to his car, which was parked at the other end of the promenade.

“Let’s go after him,” Martin suggested, having collected himself.

“You bet!” Kenton answered for both Germund and himself.

Martin had left his old SUV at the same end of the promenade as Bruno, probably somewhere near his car. Watching Bruno walking on the other side of the alley, Martin called Eric and informed him about the events of the past hour.

Eric was excited. He asked for details and supported Martin’s idea to follow Bruno. At the end of their conversation, he reminded Martin to keep him informed of further developments.

Having put up an excellent performance so far, Bruno most probably had more surprises up his sleeve. Therefore, the meeting that had just ended seemed much more significant than the three men ever expected it to be.

Now they were not sure at all how Bruno's dare would end.

53

August 31

Seeing Lana Moore relaxed, flattering and kissing Bruno, and understanding that another meeting between the two had been arranged, Germund became really anxious.

He was disappointed by the events that took place at the promenade, which he had supposed to be just a cheap bluff on Bruno's side, but the fact that the three of them were now unexpectedly following Bruno, hoping to see the follow-up, just made him furious. Unable to predict how this evening would end, Germund couldn't shake off a sudden bad feeling.

Being aware of Germund's wishes in Bruno's respect, Kenton was secretly hoping that Bruno, although detested by many, would win Lana Moore's heart. Asking himself what else he had in store for them, Kenton was sensing a thrillerlike ending.

Driving behind Bruno's car at his own initiative, Martin was intrigued by what he witnessed at the promenade and was looking forward to seeing more action. His priority, however, was to be an impartial bystander of the events and carry out the mission Eric had appointed to him.

"Do you think Bruno has more surprises for us after what happened in the alley?" he asked, interrupting the silence.

"It's entirely possible, now that he will have a home-field advantage," Kenton suggested.

"Something tells me that the events we witnessed are just a warm-up," Martin offered.

"Bruno has no leverage," Germund said, joining the discussion. "We are following him to finally put this matter to rest, and if he wants victory to be credited to him, he will have to show more than what we've seen so far. I still believe that he will fail and that what we witnessed was just for show."

"Well, the truth is around the corner," Martin said, ending their short conversation as they approached their destination.

The usual serenity was resting upon the upper-class neighborhood situated only a half an hour's drive away from the city center, which was only occasionally disturbed by the sound of a passing car, the yapping of a dog, or the clamor of playing children.

The people living there enjoyed privacy and the large, practically designed, well-groomed parcels around their houses.

Due to the well-organized administration and high quality of provided services, this district was striking the eye, with perfectly clean streets and lavishly flourishing vegetation. The big trees that had long reached their mature age became homes for the chirping birds, purifying the air and granting coziness, while on the hot summer days their shadows provided shelter for anyone who needed to escape the heat.

Decorative plants abundantly growing in the yards of the community residents, high hedgerows, flower beds, and green lawns, sprinkled by thin, bow-shaped spurts of water cutting through the air, were the inherent attributes of this district.

There was a dominant sense of a carefully tended environment and a traditional neighborly feeling. Anywhere you looked, it breathed of tranquility, comfort, and tasteful luxury, while the houses around were often distinguished by exquisite style and individuality.

Living in this place seemed particularly attractive but could be enjoyed by only a few. Even the recent recession that cut a swath through the economy was unable to diminish the value of this community's real estate, just stopping the skyrocketing of prices. The residents of this place were the wealthy and famous people of the city who could afford this idyll and solitude.

One of the properties belonged to the honored detective Bruno Brawling. It accommodated a two-story modern house standing on the corner of a street crossing. The neatly trimmed lawn on Bruno's lot was framed by a line of thujas nearly the size of a grown man. The narrow strip of the driveway was paved with light-colored tiles, which engirdled the entire house with a thin line pleasantly contrasting with the color of the facade.

The house slightly reflected Bruno's straightforward character—its territory had everything one needs and not a single unnecessary item.

Bruno's black SUV, which he had just recently put up for sale, was parked in front of the garage, and the remaining space could easily fit two other cars.

Martin slowly rolled up and stopped his car near Bruno's house. The three men sitting inside settled in to watch the events of the evening—they had a good view of both the streets leading to Bruno's house, which they could see at an angle.

Skimming over the nearby houses and perfectly arranged district, Martin gave a whistle of amazement.

“I couldn’t have imagined how cozy this place is. I wouldn’t be ashamed to invite Lana Moore to a place like this either.”

“Yes. It’s been a while since I was here last,” Kenton replied.

“Last time I was here when I was still a student, six or seven years ago,” Martin said, trying to recollect.

“What were you doing here?” Germund asked from the back of the car.

“One of my friends threw a party at his parents’ house, what else?” Martin grinned. “But it was already pretty late, so I didn’t even notice how beautiful this place is.”

“An ordinary police officer like myself hardly ever goes to places like this . . . only if someone rich is robbed or murdered,” Germund stated with a hint of sadness.

“Or when someone invites you over,” Kenton added and pointed to Bruno’s house.

“Well, it looks like the stage is set—all we need is some patience to wait for the evening guest to arrive,” Martin summarized and glanced at his watch—7:10 p.m.

“I guess Lana Moore will come on the hour or half past something,” Kenton said.

“Very likely,” Martin agreed.

Silence overtook the vehicle. There were no signs of life inside Bruno’s house. There was no other choice but to wait.

55

August 31

The dusk was slowly settling in. Nothing had happened during the last thirty minutes; therefore, the three men waiting in Martin’s car began to feel bored. At half past seven, Lana Moore didn’t show up, but Martin and Kenton still believed that she would. Losing his patience, Germund nagged about wasting their time and suggested they should go back.

“Bruno has already let us see a thing or two, and we ended up at his own house, so the least we can do is wait,” Martin said. “Who knows—tonight we might even witness history in the making.”

“All I want to witness is Bruno have his ass handed to him!” Germund snarled.

“I wonder how it all will end,” Kenton said with a smirk. “After all, today is the last day of the challenge, which means we’ll stay here as long as we can to finally dot the i’s and cross the t’s. Only it’s still unclear what the sentence containing them would say.”

Germund continued to grumble, but Martin and Kenton had no intentions of deserting the implied place of action.

“You know,” Martin began, breaking the silence, “the last time I was here, a bizarre thing happened.”

That caught Kenton and Germund’s attention. Martin continued: “I was a student back then. A friend invited us to a party in one of these houses. There was about a dozen of us. Soon enough, everyone was drinking and raising a racket until we were all pretty wasted. Among us, there was one Molly Floss, a rich daddy’s girl. Anyway, drunk as a sailor, she went outside, and we didn’t see her for a while. When she came back, we noticed something strange—her long golden braid, her pride, was chopped off.”

“Are you serious?” Kenton asked.

“I swear I’m not joking. But that wasn’t the end of the story. Keep listening. When Molly realized what happened, she got terrified, even panicking, quickly sobered up, and began crying hysterically. Someone who could still think straight called the police, and Molly called her father. Soon the police arrived and questioned the young woman and other people at the party. But when her parents showed up, they started insulting everyone indiscriminately and threatened to take us to court.”

“I can imagine,” Kenton interrupted.

“We swore that we didn’t do it. I honestly can’t believe that any one of us would do such a thing.”

“So what happened in the end?” asked Germund.

“Molly was unable to tell anything that could be helpful because she couldn’t remember a thing. After promptly searching the surroundings of the house, the police took down the names of all party guests and, having uncovered no evidence, left. As far as I know, the case never made it to the courts. Everything is still a mystery,” Martin finished, trying to remember the details.

At that moment, his phone rang. As soon as he answered, Martin put the phone on speaker.

“Hey, Martin, anything new?” they heard Eric’s voice say on the other end.

“Hi. We’ve been sitting out Bruno’s house, but nothing has happened so far.”

“Oh, I really hoped you had some news for me.”

“Unfortunately, nothing yet. But we’ll keep waiting. Bruno is already home, but Lana Moore is nowhere to be seen.”

Clearing his throat, Eric added: “OK, stay put. Bruno is not going anywhere—he knows he’s gotta give us something. To be honest, I am a little jealous of you there right in the middle of everything. Other guys are waiting to hear the news, so don’t forget to call.”

“Don’t worry—I won’t, as long as there is something to tell.”

“Bye, then.”

“Bye.”

“Restless,” Martin said, hanging up.

“It turns out that tonight we need Bruno, and he needs us. It would be great to see something more,” Kenton contemplated aloud, tapping his fingers on the panel of the SUV door.

In a few minutes, the men saw an approaching vehicle and couldn’t take their eyes off it.

“Come on,” Martin whispered hopefully.

“It does look like Lana’s car,” Kenton speculated.

“It does,” Martin added.

Germund sat quietly staring at the car. He wished it wasn’t Lana’s but quickly recognized the navy blue Audi—the car he had seen many times before.

“Who said anything about failure! Lana is on her way to see Bruno at his place!” Martin practically shouted.

“The best part of the Bruno challenge is about to start!” Kenton said triumphantly.

Probably having noticed Lana’s arrival, Bruno turned on the lights near his house, which noticeably brightened up the exterior.

The clock showed 7:51 p.m.

“Looks like she arrived for their eight o’ clock date,” Kenton assumed.

Lana Moore pulled over at Bruno’s house, parked near his black SUV, switched off the engine, and got out of the car.

Dressed in a typical businesswoman’s clothing, she looked professional and as fabulous as ever. Her perfect body shape left no one indifferent.

Walking somewhat timidly toward Bruno’s house, Lana rang the doorbell. The host immediately appeared in the doorway. Wearing a black suit, white shirt, and a gray tie, Bruno looked more like a special agent or an influential businessman than a regular detective.

Lana greeted him. Looking around while saying something, she made a helpless gesture and probably smiled because Bruno broke into a wide grin.

If one didn’t know about Bruno’s repulsive character, one could easily take him for a real gentleman, thought Germund while observing the scene.

Lana and Bruno went inside.

Kenton still wished Bruno would win Lana Moore’s heart, and right now more than ever, he believed that he might actually succeed.

Having been exposed to the frenzy surrounding Bruno’s challenge for several months and now looking at Lana and Bruno, Martin saw two exceptional people. He envied Bruno’s position and skills—despite the negative expectations, he had managed to persuade Lana Moore in the flesh to come over to his place. And that, supposedly, wasn’t the end.

“What else do you think we will see here tonight?” Martin asked without hiding his excitement.

“It’s hard to see anything from the car when the real action is inside the house,” Kenton commented.

“Anyone could invite her over. It doesn’t mean anything. If Bruno really expects to win, he will have to show us much more than this,” Germund blurted out angrily.

“Can you hand me my binoculars, please?” Martin asked, pointing to the glove compartment. “Let’s see if I can make anything out.”

“Whew! I see you came prepared,” Kenton said and handed over the binoculars.

Having carefully examined Bruno’s house, Martin saw only the silhouettes occasionally flashing through on the ground floor. There was nothing left to do but continue watching and see if anything cleared up.

Martin called Eric to bring him up to speed; however, the only information he had was that Lana Moore did arrive at Bruno’s place. He shared his concern that they might have trouble deciding on the outcome of the dare sitting in the car.

As expected, there was quite a bit of curiosity about the progress on the other end of the line. Eric encouraged them and instructed them to stay put until Lana Moore left the house unless they were sure she was spending the night.

The conversation ended. Despite Eric’s words of encouragement, the three guys in Martin’s SUV did not feel the euphoria. They were mainly contemplating whether they would be able to see anything at all, hiding in the backyard of the events.

However, time without action was the ally of those who placed their bets against Bruno.

Most of the time spent in the car was dominated by silence. More than half an hour had passed, and the only thing the trio had seen was a small pizza delivery car pulling over at Bruno’s house to deliver a couple of pizzas. The three men in Martin’s car were getting tired, and Germund’s agitation was growing.

It was nearly nine o’clock in the evening. Feeling utterly bored, Germund grabbed the binoculars and looked around. He was about to give them back when he suddenly noticed a small detail—through the window near the corner of Bruno’s house, he could see that the window on the other side was left ajar.

Germund had an idea, but wishing to bring it to life, he needed to wait.

Having slightly regained his spirits and getting stiff, Germund stretched his legs over the back seat. Kenton also felt that it was time to let the blood run, and having pushed himself back, he flexed the muscles of his legs, feeling a pleasant tingling sensation. Martin was the only one who stayed motionless.

Luckily none of them smoked; otherwise, they'd have to put up with the cigarette smoke as well.

Peeking occasionally through the binoculars, Martin was unable to see anything helpful to judge the development of events, but both he and Kenton were determined to wait as long as it took.

Resenting having to sit still and do nothing, tired, and irritated by the unknown surrounding the outcome of the evening, Germund was cursing the situation but managed to keep on waiting.

"What if Bruno simply hired Lana for the evening to have us all fooled?" he suggested. "They are probably sitting there chatting away, eating those damned pizzas and waiting for us to leave so that Lana can go home."

For a minute there, Martin and Kenton looked convinced.

"It's a good theory, only at the moment, Lana is avoiding attention, and it wouldn't have been easy to talk her into the performance we saw there on the busy city promenade," Kenton said, breaking the silence.

"If we stay here, will Bruno actually convince her to spend the night?" It was another weak point of the theory suggested by Martin.

"Plus, if they are plotting and waiting for us to leave, Bruno loses the challenge," Kenton added.

"I agree, but during all those months, he hasn't been anywhere near her!" Germund retorted.

"That's true, but we all know what Bruno is capable of—that's why we're here, waiting and guessing," Kenton replied.

"This way or another, Bruno knows that we are here and will have to do his best to let us see something. Otherwise, it will count as a defeat," Martin said.

"You are absolutely right," Kenton agreed. "The challenge will not be held to draw, and we can't declare Bruno's victory because we didn't witness anything convincing."

"This means Bruno better put out or he loses," Germund said, lightening up.

Soon the boredom of having to sit in the car took its toll on his enthusiasm. Germund found it stupid as hell and a waste of time. Unfortunately, his friends didn't really pay attention to his ranting.

Around ten o'clock, two hours after Lana's arrival, Germund's patience had finally reached its limit, and he, for the umpteenth time, complained out loud about being exhausted by the lack of action.

"Are you really going to knock on the door and ask Bruno to tell what is going on?" Martin asked. "I'd also love to know more, but I can't come up with anything sensible."

Germund didn't reply and fell silent. He felt he had been unjustly cut short.

After hours of tedious sitting and empty presumptions, all three were starving and needed to use the bathroom.

The night fell. It was 9:58 p.m.

Having got out of the car for just a minute, Kenton and Germund finally had a chance to stretch out their legs. Stepping aside, Martin called his wife.

Thinking about how Bruno's challenge would end, Germund did not feel safe at all. After regaining the feeling in his legs, numbed by prolonged sitting, he opened up to Kenton: "I cannot shake off a bad feeling about it. Lana has been in there way too long."

"Don't worry, buddy. Think of it as entertainment," Kenton replied, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"I find it too hard to do that. The uncertainty is driving me crazy!"

"It's late, and Lana may be leaving sometime soon. We could be closer to the end than we think."

Germund did not respond.

Standing there in complete silence, the two could hear Martin making another call to Eric.

Shortly, Martin returned to the car and sat behind the wheel.

"I talked to Eric," he said, rolling down the window. "He was eager to hear the news."

Kenton was standing close but didn't want to get back in the car just yet.

"He was probably disappointed," guessed Kenton.

"He was expecting that we would have some news."

"Let's hope he won't have to wait much longer."

"If Bruno wants to show us something, he better do it now because our patience has come to its end."

"He is aware that we are here and knows what we want. Bruno is obviously doing his best. He did meet Lana in public and invited her over. The question is whether this is enough to call the bet," Kenton contemplated aloud.

"I wonder when we can stop sitting on our hands. We all have to work tomorrow. I called my wife to tell her that I won't be home for—" Martin didn't finish the sentence.

He saw Germund furtively walking toward Bruno's house.

"Hey, Germund! Where the hell are you going?" Martin called in a hushed voice.

"I just want to look around," Germund answered, turning back shortly.

"Don't be stupid! Come back here!" Martin said, slightly raising his voice, but Germund did not react and kept on walking.

Martin jumped out of the car, attempting to catch up with him, but Germund had already crossed the edge of Bruno's yard, marked by vegetation. Quickly walking over the lawn, he approached the house and soon disappeared behind the corner.

"Crap!" Martin cursed. He hesitated for a moment and then returned to the car.

Kenton, who was observing the situation with rather passive interest, also got back in.

"What on earth is he thinking?" Martin shouted angrily.

"No idea. He didn't say anything to me," Kenton said, shrugging his shoulders.

"He's gonna fuck everything up!" Martin blurted out through clenched teeth.

“Sorry. I have no clue what got into him.”

Kenton didn't want his friend to do anything foolish, but unwilling to get into trouble himself, he decided not to follow him. All they could do was wait to see what their comrade was cooking up. Martin called Eric and briefed him about Germund's move.

In about a quarter of an hour, a light came on in one of the rooms on the second floor of Bruno's house. Trying to somehow dispel the unknown, Martin grabbed the binoculars, enabling him to decipher heavy, dark curtains.

“I think it's his bedroom,” Martin said.

Suddenly, Bruno popped out from behind the curtains. He slowly glanced around the surroundings and looked somewhat preoccupied.

After standing there for a short while, he disappeared.

57

August 31

As soon as he got out of Martin's SUV, Germund immediately felt better. There was no way he was getting back into the car to wait for God knows what. He was ready to take the initiative.

Having exchanged a few words with Kenton but finding no comfort, Germund waited for a good moment and unhesitatingly took off toward the corner of Bruno's house, where he had spotted an open window when looking through the binoculars.

Knowing that he would never have received the approval of his buddies, Germund was determined to do something he considered necessary and didn't react to Martin's request to come back.

I am done sitting around and doing nothing—time to take the initiative into my own hands. I've had enough of this bastard messing around with us. Taking action had brought some life back into him.

Walking behind the corner of the house and crouching down under the open window, Germund listened carefully; there was no one in the dark room. However, the sounds of indistinct conversation between two people were coming from somewhere inside the house—it was Bruno Brawling talking with Lana Moore.

Looking around, Germund quickly reached the outer corner, behind which he stopped, looked over his shoulder once again, and relieved himself on the wall of the house.

For taking the risk, I get to take a sla-a-a-shhh. He exhaled a sigh of relief.

Soon after Germund returned to the open window, sat down on the narrow path of decorative tiles surrounding the house, and leaned against the wall. The chances of being

noticed by the neighbors were minimal because, sitting on the ground, he could not see the windows of other houses or the street.

By getting himself into this situation, Germund was hoping to find out what was going on inside and wasn't planning to leave until he got something. Occasionally standing up and putting his ear against the window, he intensely tried to catch any sound Bruno or Lana made, but he couldn't understand a thing they were saying. However, the intonation of their conversation suggested that they were talking about something serious.

Soon Germund heard the steps going up the stairs and saw the lights go on in one of the rooms on the second floor. For a moment, everything went quiet.

Germund waited patiently. This was his personal lookout spot to watch the ending of the challenge, and he felt he had paid for it.

58

August 31

In about twenty minutes, the light on the second floor went off, and Germund heard steps coming down the stairs. Soon he heard voices, with an emotional exclamation of Lana Moore clearly standing out: "Oh my God!" This was the first thing that Germund, hiding under the open window, could understand. Lana was obviously thrilled by something.

Then again followed the undecipherable conversation between Bruno and Lana.

Looks like there is no agreement between them about the challenge, Germund decided.

Suddenly, he heard Lana's ringing laughter. This was the second thing he was able to make out.

In just a few minutes, Germund could hear that the voices of Bruno and Lana were getting softer and felt the atmosphere heating up. He soon heard chaotic sounds of an unknown origin and a weird rustle accompanied by a rhythmic banging, which could not have been mistaken for anything else . . .

Bruno and Lana were making love!

That was the third thing Germund could clearly understand.

Hearing the moans of the lovers and sounds of rhythmically moving bodies, he could even feel the tiny vibrations of the intercourse coming toward him through the walls of the house . . .

Germund froze. He broke out in a cold sweat, and his thoughts were numbed. This development was unfathomable. He was taken aback, and such an outright turn of events made him feel sick.

Like life flashing before one's eyes just before death, different moments of Bruno's challenge dealt with in the past few months were running through his head. Germund's rational mind could not find any explanation for what had just happened. It was simply beyond his understanding.

After the initial shock, Germund somewhat collected himself.

How the hell did he do that? he spat out in his mind. *How? How? Hooooow?* He was asking himself and the entire world.

Unable to come up with any explanations, Germund's mind whispered: *This is the end of Bruno's challenge.*

Seeing no point in hanging out under Bruno's windows and listening to the compelling sounds of Bruno's victory, Germund found the strength to retire.

He felt completely crushed.

59

August 31

Hmm, what made him come back? Martin wondered, getting out of the car when he noticed Germund coming back. He didn't think that his persistent senior colleague would leave Bruno's house with nothing, and expecting to hear the news, he felt for his phone in his pocket, getting ready to call Eric.

Kenton also got out of the car.

Approaching them, Germund looked pale, confused, and not quite like himself.

"What did you see? What happened?" Martin jumped in, hoping to hear some good answers.

However, Germund only released some incomprehensible sounds.

"La-la-na . . . and . . . and . . . Bru-no-no . . ."

"What's that now?" Martin asked angrily, fixing him with a reproachful gaze.

Without saying a word, Germund waved away and, insensibly pointing toward Bruno's house, opened the back door of the car. Seeing what a dreadful state his friend was in, Kenton helped him to sit down.

"Hey, what happened there?" Martin persisted.

Paying no attention, Germund was merely staring in front of himself.

"Just look at him. I think we need to leave him alone for a while," Kenton pleaded, concerned about his friend's condition.

"Shit!" Martin cursed.

He had to find out what was happening inside Bruno's home, but even if Germund started talking, Martin knew he couldn't rely on his version alone.

Quietly hovering Kenton was of no use whatsoever. Something had to be done. Having calmed down a notch, Martin seemed to be caught in intense thought.

Suddenly he started walking toward Bruno's house, slid through the decorative plants, trotted across the lawn, and disappeared behind the corner.

Having noticed the window left ajar, Martin pressed his head against it and tried to listen. He then *heard* exactly what Germund was trying to tell them.

60

August 31

Sitting there next to Germund, who still didn't utter a single word, Kenton was thinking about the past months. He had been enthusiastic about the realities of Bruno's challenge, had his own role, and was excited about things, which not so long ago he had forgotten entirely about. These activities brought his old life back and made him feel just like then, before he lost his family.

Once again recollecting his painful past, Kenton now felt blessed to have had such a wonderful wife and daughter who made him happy, even if for just a while.

Strangely enough, he realized he was no longer looking at his life through the veil of the loss of his loved ones, and he felt the strength not to allow the past to determine his future choices. Kenton was ready for new plans and decided to take a step in that direction tomorrow. He knew that it was this particular evening when his rehabilitation came to an actual end.

Having gathered his wits, Kenton saw Martin walking back to the car. His friend Germund was still completely baffled.

Something important went down there, Kenton understood.

As soon as he reached the vehicle, Martin called Eric and briefly informed him about the latest developments. Listening to his conversation, Kenton found out what was happening in Bruno's house and assumed the outcome of the challenge.

Martin got into the car.

"So is it over?" Kenton asked.

"Yes!"

Kenton didn't feel like asking about anything else. Martin started his SUV and began driving. On the way home, the three men were immersed in their own thoughts about the ending of the challenge.

Bruno Brawling had made a great impression on Martin.

On the morning of September 1, the officers gathered at the station a little earlier—they needed to officially end Bruno’s challenge and split the winnings.

Half an hour before the start of the morning shift, nearly everyone was there. Only Germund and a couple of other guys were missing. Bruno and Chief Hubert were not there, either, but their presence was not really necessary.

Beginning his narration with the events at the promenade, it only took Martin about ten minutes to tell the entire story, including the sounds and moans of the lovemaking he heard with his own ears. Germund’s spontaneous action, which could have ruined everything, allowed them to become certain about Bruno’s victory.

The men were listening with great satisfaction.

Kenton confirmed Martin’s story but stressed that he personally didn’t hear the fateful sounds of lovemaking.

Suddenly, looking terribly exhausted and depressed, Germund walked into the premises. Everyone’s eyes turned on him. The look on his face was a definite declaration of the end of Bruno’s challenge. Standing there next to him, Eric Hudson gave him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Having gathered himself, Germund began speaking: “When I was sitting under the open window of Bruno’s house, I heard him talking to Lana, but I couldn’t understand what they were saying. Then the lights went on in one of the rooms on the second floor. It was quiet. At first, I thought that they were merely pretending, but when the lights on the second floor went off, I heard them talking again. Lana exclaimed: “Oh my God!” Then she laughed out loud, and the two went on conversing about something.”

Germund paused. Everyone was listening with great interest.

“You probably have already heard about what happened next. Bruno and Lana started making love,” he ended, glancing at Kenton and Martin.

Once again, Eric compassionately tapped him on the shoulder.

“Good work, Germund,” he said and gave Martin a sign to begin handing out the money.

Holding a small bag with the money bet on the challenge, Martin sat down behind a table.

“I am not done,” Germund said suddenly.

Everybody froze.

“Around half past four in the morning, I went back to Bruno’s house. Lana’s car was still there. If it was just an act, why would she spend the night, especially after we had left?” Germund said, looking interrogatively at his colleagues.

Kenton and Martin exchanged looks. Nobody had any doubts regarding the outcome of the challenge.

Eric turned to Germund, who looked exhausted and physically and emotionally drained.

“Take a sick leave today, Germund. You need a good rest,” he suggested.

The men standing around them nodded in assent.

Germund said goodbyes and left.

When Martin was done dealing with money, Eric approached him.

“Let me commend you on your excellent work, Marty. Well done!”

“Thank you! I am glad I didn’t disappoint you,” he replied, and the two shook hands.

Eric glanced at his watch and addressed the group: “Bruno’s challenge is over. If anyone of you finds out how he did it, remember to share.”

A light wave of laughter ran across the room.

“Now I wish you all a good and safe day at work!” he finished.

Everyone dispersed, going about their business.

Kenton went to his office. Feeling slightly excited, he closed the door, picked up his phone, and dialed a number.

III

In the eyes of the men at the station, Bruno was doing God knows what for months, and then he met in public with Lana Moore, who was going through a scandal, and seemed to have immediately captured her affection. On top of everything, he invited her to his house and spent a passionate night with her.

It was incomprehensible. Bruno Brawling simply flabbergasted his coworkers and raised a giant wave of conjectures and assumptions.

To a bystander, Bruno's success seemed indigestible. However, nobody knew that in pursuit of Lana Moore's affection, he had to endure inhuman trials and could hardly bear the hardships in order to achieve his goal. It required tremendous perseverance, self-control, patience, and most of all, luck. This challenge pushed Bruno's abilities to the limit. When accepting the bet, he couldn't even begin to imagine how it would change his life.

The fateful events took place at the beginning of the year when Bruno unexpectedly met a woman of prominence by the name of Lana Moore.

62

Beginning of the year

Bruno had met Lana Moore for the first time at the beginning of January. It happened by chance, during a private event by invitation only, which was organized by the city mayor's office.

Initially considering skipping the event, Bruno prepared to go willy-nilly.

Having met some familiar faces at the party, he greeted them but did not start a conversation. Settling somewhat farther away from all the hustle, he passively observed the developments of the party while slowly sipping his drink.

Two young women walking by noticed him. Bruno wasn't a bit surprised, as he was rather well known in the city and quite popular with the ladies.

One of them was the famous Lana Moore. She looked exactly the way she did in the papers, in magazines, and on the TV screen. Her unknown friend, some twenty-five-year-old woman with long, straight black hair and a half a span shorter than Lana, was very beautiful, only Bruno found her to be slightly pale.

She was the first to approach Bruno.

“Good evening. Juliana Spencer,” she said, offering her hand and attempting to introduce her companion, but gently shaking her delicate hand, Bruno courteously outpaced her.

“Who wouldn’t recognize the famous Lana Moore? Allow me to introduce myself—Bruno Brawling. It is nice to meet you,” he said, giving them a little nod.

“The famous detective.” Lana Moore obviously knew who Bruno was, responding with a perfect white smile.

“At your service,” Bruno said with a bow.

Having noticed the empty glasses and unable to find a waiter anywhere around, Juliana turned to Lana and asked: “Same?”

“I probably shouldn’t; I will have to speak soon,” she said, trying to turn it down politely.

Having understood it as a positive answer, Juliana hastily excused herself and rushed off to fetch some fresh drinks.

Lana looked at Bruno, smiled again, and shrugged her shoulders. It was just the two of them.

“I’ve heard a great deal about you, Bruno. Didn’t expect to see you here, but it’s really nice to meet you.”

“The honor is mine.”

“What you did for the good of the city and the entire country is amazing,” she commended.

“I was just doing my job.”

“And you did it the way no one else ever could.”

“Thank you! And obviously, you do your no-less-important job simply impeccably,” Bruno delightfully reciprocated.

Lana Moore responded with another charming smile.

“It is strange that we have never crossed paths before, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Probably because I don’t really like parties.”

“Yet by some reason, I did meet you at this one,” she said with a giggle.

“To be honest, I nearly stayed in.”

“It’s wonderful that you came!”

Bruno noticed Juliana returning with two full glasses.

“I am sorry to interrupt your conversation, but they are already looking for you,” she said to Lana.

“Bye, Bruno. It was a pleasure to meet you,” Lana said, looking him in the eyes.

“Bye,” Juliana said as well.

“Goodbye. Have a nice evening!” Bruno said, bidding his adieu while raising the glass and watching them leave. Lana Moore had made an impression on him.

Participating actively in the city affairs and often organizing various charitable initiatives, Lana had to give a speech that evening and talk to the potential sponsors. She

seemed to be much more engaged than Bruno, who was hanging around without any specific purpose.

That night, the two didn't happen to run into each other anymore.

63

February

The second time Bruno saw Lana Moore was about three weeks later. She accidentally ran into him at one of the shopping centers. They greeted each other, asked how things were, wished luck, and went about their business.

Even in this everyday situation, Lana Moore left the impression of a simple yet extraordinary woman. Bruno felt unusually easy and natural around her.

The third and longest encounter between them was also unplanned. On his way to lunch, Bruno stopped at the closest restaurant, where he noticed Lana sitting at the table with her assistant, Juliana Spencer, and another woman he'd never seen before.

After their meeting with potential sponsors, Lana and Juliana had dropped in to grab lunch. Unfortunately, businesses were continuously declining and were reluctant to take on additional obligations; thus, their meeting, too, appeared fruitless.

Despite this, Lana offered her assistant and their acquaintance, whom they sometimes had lunch with, to sit down and splurge a little.

Bruno, who walked into the same restaurant, knew nothing about it. Having noticed him, Lana invited him to join. Recognizing Bruno, her friends were impatiently waving him over to their table.

Bruno gladly accepted the invitation.

"Please meet our friend Sylvia," Lana said, pointing to the woman sitting at her right.

"Bruno Brawling," Bruno said with a gallant nod, gently squeezing Sylvia's hand.

"Sylvia Kemp," she said, introducing herself.

Bruno took a seat.

"We often have lunch together," Lana added.

Sitting to her left, Juliana was wearing a blue blouse, black skirt, blue-colored earrings, and light red lipstick. She was a gorgeous woman. This time, Bruno didn't notice any paleness in her face.

Sylvia Kemp looked a little older than Juliana. She had a tiny face and short black hair, and she was wearing fine golden earrings, a warm white sweater with a high collar, and dark jeans.

Lana was dressed in businesslike attire: a white shirt, black jacket, and a matching skirt, with a white-and-black pendant on her neck drawing the attention.

Bruno guessed that Lana and her colleague were spruced up for some occasion. Sitting down, he quickly flipped through the menu and gave his order to the waitress.

Sitting there at the table, Bruno felt the warm and curious stares of Sylvia and Juliana, meanwhile talking to him and looking him in the eye, whereas Lana Moore kept a certain distance, made evident by her physical tells. This detail was hardly noticeable, but it was apparent to Bruno, who, however, could not decipher its true meaning.

Soon the waitress brought the appetizers. Digging into their meals, the party went on talking.

“I feel much safer in the city thanks to such talented detectives like you, Bruno,” Lana suddenly complimented.

Knowing well of Bruno’s merits, Juliana and Sylvia agreed with her with one voice.

“Thank you. I am sure no one needs to be told who Lana Moore is and what she does for the city—together with her lovely assistant,” Bruno responded. Then he added: “The work you do is for the good of all. By the way, how are things going?”

“Most of the time we find a way to help those in need, but the economic uncertainties often do a number on our plans. What we do highly depends on the generosity of the sponsors, and currently, the businesses are having a hard time as it is. As ill luck would have it, after the recession set in, the need for assistance went up.”

“Fortunately, there are still many good people who are happy to offer a helping hand,” added Juliana. “At the moment, they are the ones who keep us going.”

Lana took a sip of water and asked Bruno: “The police must have also experienced the impact?”

“Definitely! Economic hardships backfired on the crime rate, which, of course, nobody likes. I hope that people in power will face many tough questions about this, and even though the elections are nowhere near, I hope that funding of the publicly essential areas will be at least partially resumed.”

“Let’s hope so,” Lana said. “However, at the moment, things are not getting better.”

“Is there any way I could contribute to your benevolent work?” Bruno unexpectedly asked.

Surprised by his offer, Lana and Juliana almost imperceptibly exchanged looks.

“Of course, a man like you, Bruno, would undoubtedly come in handy. But you already do such tremendous work for the good of the city,” responded Lana.

“Well, I am single and have my free time at my disposal. Plus, I would really like to contribute to a good cause.”

“We need to use every opportunity available,” Juliana said, turning to Lana.

“Just tell me how I can help, and I’ll think of something,” Bruno said seriously.

“All right,” Lana agreed. “I am sure we can find something. I will review the current projects and contact you.”

“I hope I won’t have to distribute leaflets at a shopping center because that’s not really my calling,” he added.

The women giggled.

Pulling a business card out of his coat pocket, Bruno offered it to Lana.

“Just a second,” she said. Taking the card, she grabbed her bag and found her card.

“Frankly speaking, I can’t wait to do something meaningful,” admitted Bruno.

“That’s wonderful to hear,” Juliana said with a smile.

“It’s amazing to see that such a well-known person does not stay indifferent to the sufferings and needs of others,” Sylvia added.

“Thank you! I hope I will rise to your expectations,” Bruno said, hesitant to assume the role of a benefactor.

Lana finished her soup and, eager to get back to work, glanced at her watch.

Juliana and Sylvia had also finished their meals. Waving to the waitress to bring the receipt, they were ready to leave.

“We have to go,” Lana said as she stood up. “I will contact you as soon as I have reviewed the projects. Thank you for your good intentions, and enjoy your lunch, Bruno,” she added while putting on her coat.

As Sylvia got up, Bruno noticed her disproportionately large bottom.

“Looking forward to hearing from you. It was a pleasure meeting you. Good luck!” Without giving away having noticed it, Bruno got up and said goodbye to all three ladies.

“Likewise. Goodbye,” Sylvia and Juliana said, one after another.

After they left, Bruno remained at the restaurant and continued his lunch. Reflecting on this meeting, he suspected that Lana and her colleague Juliana were not in particularly high spirits. Of course, they were able to conceal it, but Bruno was used to watching people and analyzing their behavior, and therefore he trusted his gut. He was also convinced that Lana’s body language was displaying certain signs of distancing herself, only he was unable to understand why.

Today, in spite of the difference in Lana’s mood perceived by Bruno, she made a no-less-significant impression.

Having finished his lunch, Bruno got up from the table, put on his coat, and walked to the exit. On his way out, he spotted Eric Hudson’s brother sitting at a table and having lunch with someone.

Is there any way I could contribute?

Thinking back about what Bruno Brawling said, Lana Moore, who often received similar offers, knew from personal experience their usual implications and was suspicious about the exact meaning of his words.

As soon as they got back to their office, she and Juliana brewed fresh coffee, sat down on the corner sofa for guests, and tried to figure out what Bruno's proposition meant.

Having experienced advances to get closer to her from men taking an interest in her business and offering their help, Lana immediately admitted being skeptical about it.

"What do you think about his offer?" she asked, taking a sip of coffee.

"It looks like his intentions are sincere."

"I really don't see any difference this time," Lana said with a sigh.

"There is definitely a chance, but to me, Bruno doesn't look like that type of a man."

"I still find it strange that he, who has nothing in common with charity, would offer his assistance. Do you really believe that he'll drop everything to concentrate on a good cause?" Lana shared her concerns.

"At the restaurant, when I took the liberty to say that we need to use every opportunity during these times, I said it because I didn't want you to decline his services because of your suspicions."

"I thought so."

"I think he acts businesslike around you and does not display any hints of familiarity."

"I agree, but it doesn't mean anything."

"Don't be so distrustful!"

"OK, OK . . . I will give him a chance, but if Bruno Brawling is up to no good, he'll have to blame himself." Promising no mercy, Lana smiled to Juliana.

Juliana responded with a smile.

"If we can't find a specific project he could assist with, maybe we could use his positive public image," Lana added.

"Definitely!"

Having finished their coffee, the two returned to work. Juliana was scrolling through the new emails while Lana was perusing the descriptions of the support projects, trying to decide which one was best to involve Bruno Brawling in.

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March 2

Bruno had to clear his head. He knew exactly what he needed to relax, so without thinking twice, he got into his SUV and drove to the downtown area. Having found a lovely pub, he went inside, sat down at the bar, and ordered a drink.

The place was crowded with many attractive women who caught Bruno's attention. Without a moment's hesitation, he was speaking to a lonely brunette sitting at the bar and

bought her a couple of drinks. After a pleasant, casual chat with a new friend, she flashed quite a few smiles at him and made soft eye contact.

The fact that he was Bruno Brawling made his mission much easier. Seeing that the woman was responding with affection, he was ready to continue their date outside the bar. It was evident that his new acquaintance was contemplating the same thing, asking: “Wanna get out of here?”

Bruno’s answer was positive.

The girl from the bar lived nearby, so there was no need to drive to his place all the way on the outskirts of the city. Having reached her home, they walked up to the second floor and went inside. Her place looked very moderate; however, that didn’t matter at all—Bruno wasn’t there to enjoy a home interior, but its resident.

After emptying a couple more glasses of drinks, Bruno’s new friend was relaxed enough to throw herself on his neck, subsequently ending up on the bed.

Freeing herself shortly from Bruno’s arms, the woman adjusted the scene: dimmed the lights and softly pushed him down on his back. Then, mounting herself on top of him, she revealed her beautiful body.

Bruno allowed the host to take the lead, and seeking pleasure, he was indulging himself in the picture: her loose hair, bare full breasts, delicate stomach, and firm thighs.

The woman he was having sex with threw her head back in pleasure, closed her eyes, and let out a long, satisfying moan. Bruno felt like he got everything he wanted.

For a while, the sex was pure bliss, but all of a sudden, he realized he had a problem. Looking away from his hostess’s face and then shifting his gaze back again, Bruno couldn’t see the one he, surprisingly, wished to see.

Having closed his eyes several times, he could easily imagine making love to Lana Moore, but when he looked back at his lover, that feeling would naturally vanish. To top that, having lost the momentum, Bruno suddenly felt like he was being watched, however stupid it sounded.

Feeling strange and unable to shake the thoughts about Lana Moore, Bruno knew he wouldn’t be able to come.

Deliberately distorting the flow of the intercourse, Bruno saw a questioning look on his partner’s face. He gently laid her on her stomach and, leaving no doubt that he was taking over the initiative, quickly rose up and approached her from behind.

Doing his best to give her as much pleasure as possible, Bruno was imagining that he was making love to Lana Moore, which quickly set him back on track. Soon, he experienced tremendous satisfaction.

Having felt the orgasm, Bruno realized it was the first time in his life when he was glad that sex was finally over.

March 3

Even though brief relationships and casual sex were an ordinary thing in Bruno's life, his last rendezvous gave him food for thought.

First of all, it made it obvious that Lana Moore had left a much stronger impression on him than he anticipated. Having experienced a turmoil of emotions during intercourse, it took him a while, but Bruno had admitted to himself that the woman he met at the bar helped him realize the true extent of his affection for Lana Moore.

Bruno could very well remember how, after the first encounters with Lana, he was fascinated by her. Thinking about it, he was sure that there was something special about her and assumed that she had a similar effect on most men.

Having made his conclusions, Bruno felt no need to rush. Despite his attraction for Lana, he intended to keep things strictly on a business level and hoped that her promise to contact him was not just a polite rejection. Thus, Bruno was waiting for her call.

He couldn't wait to see her again.

March 11

Soon after, the tabloid of Mario K. Habbermann came out selling the idea that Bruno and Lana were a new celebrity couple. The article mentioned their dinner and their first encounter back in January. Mario the Scavenger even managed to dig out a photo of them taken during the party.

Bruno knew that Lana was one of the people most wanted by the journalists; thus, seeing such a meticulous interest in his meetings with her, he wasn't a bit surprised and didn't feel like dealing with this turd Habbermann.

Even though Bruno didn't pay attention to this news, it looked like his coworkers got hooked on it. Already the next day, as soon as he arrived to work, Bruno understood that he would have to talk about it with his colleagues.

Sitting in his office, he could clearly see the men whispering and looking askance at him, occasionally exchanging expressive glances. Bruno wasn't planning to avoid the confrontation but was indulging in stalling and keeping himself unavailable.

Finally, he went to get some coffee and was instantly surrounded by a group headed by the insolent Eric Hudson. There was no doubt they were eager to discuss the news announced in *M. K. H. Limited*.

Understanding that he was being provoked, Bruno wasn't about to cop out. Without hiding his superiority over those dummies, he showed that he was not afraid of another challenge and was even willing to demonstrate his exceptional abilities one more time. It was this exact trait of his character that made him stand out in the crowd of ordinary slobs anyway.

When committing to becoming close to Lana Moore, Bruno knew he was lately often thinking about her anyhow; thus, making such vow did not feel spontaneous at all. Besides, he loved proving everybody wrong, and this time, too, he wasn't expecting any other outcome.

Having said what others wanted to hear, Bruno had enough of this conversation and went to fetch his coffee.

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Middle of March

Bruno never stopped thinking about the conversation with his colleagues and was ready and willing to demonstrate his superiority yet again, anticipating the joy of winning his grand prize—Lana Moore.

Even though he was dying to get closer to her, Bruno didn't want to rush his fences and was, therefore, waiting for her call without attempting any moves on his own. He merely intended to start the cooperation on the assistance matters.

A few days after the article suggesting their friendship came out, Lana called. She invited him to stop by her office and discuss their collaboration. Bruno gladly accepted and set the time of the meeting.

He was aware that the charity funds supervised by Lana Moore were facing hardships, and he wasn't really sure how much Lana thought that he, a detective, would be able to contribute. However, he was very happy about having this opportunity.

Despite his commitment to attracting Lana Moore's attention, Bruno was resolved to keep this meeting strictly professional and was by no means going to reveal his true intentions just yet. He knew perfectly well that trying to get closer to Lana in such a cheap way, pretentiously willing to help her fund, was a suicide—not only would he leave an unfavorable impression of an adventurer, but he would also lose all credence and the opportunity to pursue his goal. Bruno Brawling did not make mistakes of this sort.

Hoping to gradually slide into friendly and personal relations, he aimed at winning Lana's trust and believed that the two of them could definitely become close friends. Bruno was confident that his sincere cooperation with Lana Moore would help him later find a way to sweep her off her feet.

Ready to start from the ground up and prepared to keep his shoulder to the wheel, Bruno definitely felt up to the challenge.

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March 19

Before meeting with Lana, Bruno thought through every detail. He was serious about his promise to help and was determined to stick to business.

He wasn't sure whether they would touch upon Mario K. Habbermann's article; however, he had no intentions of mentioning it himself.

After arriving at Olive Street, Bruno entered building number 49. Having found Karis Panti on the information board, he walked up to the third floor and opened the green glass door of the office.

"Welcome, Bruno. Come in," greeted the ever-elegant Lana Moore.

"Good afternoon," Juliana saluted from behind her desk.

Bruno noticed a slight timidity in her look, whereas usually, he saw curiosity in women's eyes.

"Good afternoon," Bruno replied and looked around.

The size of the Karis Panti office was about thirty square meters. Two adult-size posters on the topic of social responsibility hung on the greenish glass wall separating the premises from the hallway. They attracted everyone's attention to important public issues and created somewhat more privacy.

The desks of Lana Moore and her assistant, Juliana Spencer, stood near the outside wall and faced the center of the office. Along the green-colored glass partition, he saw a black leather couch, two contemporary-shaped leather armchairs, and a small coffee table.

On his right, Bruno saw a door leading to some room, and behind the two large windows, he could see the buildings on the other side of the street.

"Cozy place you've got here," he complimented.

"Thank you," Lana replied and gestured to the leather armchair on his left, inviting him to sit. "Please, have a seat."

"With pleasure."

"Would you like some coffee?" she offered.

"No, thank you. Let's get down to business," Bruno suggested, sitting down.

"Of course," Lana agreed. Fetching a black folder from her desk and handing it to Bruno, she sat down on the other leather chair.

"Here you can find all projects and initiatives waiting for assistance," she said. "Have a look—maybe you will see one you would like to contribute to. If you don't, I can recommend something."

Bruno started flipping through the folder, turning some pages quickly over and stopping for a moment to glance through the others.

“To be honest, your offer was somewhat unexpected. Usually, I deal with businessmen on these issues,” Lana said, interrupting the silence. “In any case, we could use your positive image in society because you are so well known.”

Bruno could feel that she doubted his ability to accomplish anything feasible. Of course, she did have a right to think so, but Bruno knew precisely where he could be helpful.

“To make the most of your experience, public image, and talents,” Lana continued, “you must at least briefly familiarize yourself with our essential matters, and our partnership needs to be officially announced to the public. It would help to avoid unnecessary speculations.”

Bruno realized that she was talking about the article that came out a couple of days before suggesting a friendship between them. He stopped flipping through the pages of the file and looked up at her.

“I appreciate your professionalism and know that you are very good at what you do; however, I have one request—as little publicity as possible.”

Lana Moore was listening carefully.

“You see, I always work alone. Even as a detective, I don’t have a partner.” He grinned. “I am sure that in this case, too, public attention would only disturb me.”

Juliana was following the conversation between Bruno and Lana from behind her desk.

Bruno continued: “I want to accomplish as much as possible; therefore, I would ask you to trust me and let me work the way I am used to—quietly and methodologically. This way, I will be able to produce the best outcomes.”

After allowing him to finish, Lana spoke up: “To tell you the truth, I was hoping to use your image of a famous and well-respected man in the city, for example, by allowing the public to see you as a role model, but I don’t want to put pressure on you. If that’s what suits you best, so be it—I agree,” she said, giving in with a smile.

“Thank you. My wish to work quietly and unnoticed is related to the fact that I don’t like wasting my energy trying to look good in front of the cameras. I’d rather do something useful. To make a long story short, I am a results-oriented man. Please, don’t take me wrong; I do want to help, but to be efficient, I need to have no distractions. Well, if I succeed, I guess I could also fool around with the camera flashes a bit,” Bruno finished, smiling.

Lana Moore looked interested. Bruno could tell that his words hit the goal and possibly slightly increased her trust in him.

She glanced at the assistant who was carefully listening to their conversation. Observing this silent exchange of looks, Bruno yet again noticed Lana’s body language, exposing a certain dissociation.

Turning back to him, Lana gave him a warm smile and said, “I must admit, I was suspecting that you’d prefer to work alone.”

“I am glad we could agree on this point,” Bruno responded with relief and smiled.

Lana politely excused herself and went to look something up on her computer. Meanwhile, Bruno continued rifling through the documents stating the assistance needs, passing an eye over each of them and silently evaluating their content. Among them, he found applications for financial and material assistance and volunteer work, which Karis Pantí was flooded with by homeless shelters, charity centers, several elderly homes, institutions for minors, and other organizations and private individuals asking for assistance in the form of human resources, money, or consultations on various issues.

Karis Pantí was the largest organizer of charities in the city, and in many cases, only thanks to its activities, people who needed help the most weren’t left knocking on closed doors. Bruno could only imagine how much was resting on Lana Moore and Juliana Spencer’s shoulders. It was just the two of them handling this mighty heap of projects.

Turning over a new page in the file, his attention was drawn by the heading: *Professional Child Protection and Care—To Each by Their Needs*. Having read the information, Bruno noticed that funding of this institution had been secured only until the end of the year.

Not much time left, he thought.

“I couldn’t help but notice that there is an organization caring for children, called Sparkle,” he said, examining the list of services provided by this institution. There was also an impressive amount listed at the bottom of the page that this center was asking for.

Lana Moore knew exactly what Bruno was talking about. She stopped what she was doing and joined him again on the leather armchairs.

“This is probably the most challenging project. It is a special education center, particularly affected by the municipality’s decision to cut down funding by nearly a half. Without due support, this vital center would probably cease to exist—it would be fully restructured and have to cancel many of the professional services it offers. This would definitely and inevitably affect the living conditions of the children fostered by this center. Who knows how many kids it would be able to take in the future?” Lana said, exhaustively describing the situation.

“The situation looks rather grave,” Bruno concluded.

“Yes, it does. Unfortunately, I was unable to offer this situation any shift forward.”

“And they are running out of time?”

“Yes.”

“I’d like to take this on. This is such an important center,” Bruno said in a rather ordinary manner, closing the binder and placing it back on the table. “It wouldn’t be wrong of me to say that this case, if solved, would greatly help the lives of the young residents of our city already abandoned by fate.”

Lana silently looked him in the eyes.

“I don’t doubt it for a moment; however, this project is very complicated,” she warned.

“It’s worth trying!” Bruno added, as if he was sensing that he’d be able to help.

“Please, don’t think that I do not appreciate your efforts or don’t trust you, but this situation is particularly important. If I have the slightest opportunity, I will try to do at least something to help this project.”

“By all means! How could I stop you from doing your job?”

“Wonderful! This is a very noble deed. The destiny of many kids is in your hands, so I wish you every success, Bruno!”

“Thank you.” Bruno rose and extended his hand.

Lana Moore also stood up and gently shook his hand.

“If you need anything, do not hesitate to contact us. Please report any progress. The children’s center is eagerly awaiting the news,” she added.

“I promise—I will!”

Wishing them success, he politely said goodbyes and left.

Lana Moore and Juliana Spencer made fresh coffee and jumped into discussing the meeting that left much of an impression on both of them.

“I can’t imagine he’ll really be able to succeed, but even a tiny extra amount would do good for the center,” Lana said, starting the conversation.

“I hope his boundless confidence is worth something.”

“You know, for some reason, I believe that he is a truly capable man.”

“Having in mind his bold speech, it would be difficult not to.”

“If he hadn’t achieved so much in his own field, I’d think that everything he does is only to make an impression, but it looks like Bruno Brawling is actually taking the charity matters seriously.”

“Yes, actually. We also need to use every opportunity, even if it is really nothing more than just crumbs.”

“I agree. I really liked it that up until the very last minute of the meeting, he was acting professionally and didn’t display any familiarities or try to engage in empty talk. You know how much I hate wasting time on twiddling.”

“I told you he was worth giving a chance!” Juliana said with a laugh.

“Well, if he really gets anything done, that would be almost unbelievable.”

“I am glad Bruno wasn’t afraid to take on such a challenging case.”

“True. I was also impressed by this.”

Winding up their conversation, the two went about their business. Lana felt that this meeting with Bruno helped to disperse the doubts about the sincerity of his intentions.

During the businesslike conversation with Lana Moore, Bruno noticed her somewhat formal tone, which was obvious despite her friendly voice and amiable smiles. He wasn't expecting anything else, but yet again he detected some distance in Lana's conduct. Bruno spent a considerable amount of time thinking about the displayed body tells but was still unable to grasp their meaning.

What message was she trying to convey? Bruno was sure that he didn't imagine all this. He was guessing that Lana Moore was possibly trying to purposely look cold and indifferent because it wasn't her first time dealing with annoying admirers. Bruno was hoping, however, that the encoded message was not meant for him personally and continued looking for answers. It was one of those moments when the professional obsession to find something out took hold of his mind.

As the days slowly passed by, Bruno kept on trying to solve the mental puzzle and was patiently waiting for the resolution. Disciplined enough to listen to his inner voice, he managed to refute perceptively wrong presumptions and never doubted himself.

When trying to figure things out, Bruno often let his thoughts run their own course. He was determined to spend as much time as was necessary and wanted to arrive at an answer naturally, without too much pressure.

Time went by, and Bruno started to intuitively feel that he was close to the solution. Having eliminated various thoughts and guesses, he concentrated his attention on the last assumption, where he didn't see any uncertainties and shortcomings.

Bruno anticipated that his pursuit to find the explanation was about to reach the climax. He grew conscious and very soon he *knew* . . .

Bruno didn't smoke, only sometimes, on some special occasion, he'd light up a cigarette.

On his evening off, he went to his favorite quiet spot in nature just outside the city, where he meant to spend some time alone, focus, and reconsider everything.

After lengthy deliberations, there were practically no doubts left about the meaning of Lana Moore's body language: she was a lesbian. Therefore, having in mind his determination to become intimate with her, he needed to reevaluate his chances.

Bruno loved challenges. They emphasized his superiority over a miserable gray mass and granted the desired status; however, the unexpected conclusion about Lana's sexual

orientation had messed up the simplicity of the case and thrown him off track. Knowing her secret, Bruno realized the hopelessness of his situation, but dead or alive, he wasn't going to give his coworkers the pleasure of seeing him lose, and he was determined to further pursue his goal.

Ready to rethink his present situation, he got out of the car and lit up a cigarette. Bruno knew that a real challenge was now ahead of him.

Frequently faced with unexpected situations and critical moments, he usually managed to efficiently handle the problems and was determined to do exactly the same this time around.

As soon as he arrived at the conclusion about Lana's sexual preferences, Bruno knew that he was dealing with something he wouldn't be able to change. Therefore, the first thing on his mind was to think of a way to fool his colleagues or somehow get himself off the hook, but whatever he'd choose to do, he understood that he'd have to put all his wits to work.

Deep in thought, Bruno was only occasionally drawing on his cigarette.

The original plot to begin getting closer to Lana from a business relationship was correct—his image remained unsoiled, allowing him to make the first right step at the right moment.

That's what it's all about—to be one step ahead.

Lying down on a nearby bench, Bruno admired the night sky. He took the last draw of another nearly burned-out cigarette and kept on thinking. He couldn't really tell how long it took to come up with a seemingly proper plan and even its details, but he was beginning to feel stiff from this passive outdoor activity.

His concentration, though, was interrupted by a phone call—someone dialed a wrong number.

Bruno's plan was blatant and required very bold moves, the consequences of which could lead to certain sacrifices, but it was quite feasible. Thinking his plot over and over again, he was unable to find any flaws.

Bruno blazed up another cigarette. Before doing anything, he needed to take care of some things and find out some information. Having pulled out his phone, he opened the internet browser and found his first answer.

I guess even I can call it a challenge now, he thought, revising the plan put together within the past couple of hours.

Bruno knew that he would have to make many important decisions and that he would find himself in continuously changing situations, yet he wasn't worried. It was called a challenge for a reason.

Taking a last draw, he tossed away the unfinished cigarette.

It was only occasionally that he smoked anyway.

April 16

Sally Lockerbek, who only recently arrived from a small provincial town, had no friends and no job. She was living on her scarce savings in a tiny one-bedroom apartment and was trying to find her place in the city. Suddenly, her attention was captured by the Midsummer Festival celebrated in the middle of July.

Wishing to improve her situation and enhance her opportunities, Sally was hoping to take part in the main event of the festival.

Running around without a moment's respite in the past few weeks, she was resting on her modest bed, staring at the ceiling of the small rented apartment.

Holding a calendar with the circled date of April 25—the registration deadline for “The Silent Legacy”—Sally knew she had no time to relax. If she wanted to qualify for the main event, she needed to commit to community service and get ready for the avalanche of work about to befall her.

Despite the pressure, Sally didn't allow the doubts to overtake her and was thinking about how she came to this city and what she wanted to achieve. Seeing no way back, she simply had to push her way through toward the goals that she'd set—taking part in the Midsummer Festival to begin with. Glancing one more time at the calendar with a date circled on it, she picked up the phone and dialed the participants' registration number.

May 22

It was almost 11:00 p.m. Sipping his protein drink, Bruno was resting after an intense workout, which had worn out his body but helped to relax the mind after a stressful day.

He was thinking about Lana Moore. Bruno hadn't seen her since their last meeting when he chose the charity project, and even though he promised to inform her about the progress, he hadn't called her yet, as there was nothing to report on the matter. Despite this fact, he knew that eventually, he would find a way to help, and he had a plan in place.

Having emptied his glass, Bruno checked his email and briefly searched the internet. Then he watched some TV, used the bathroom, brushed his teeth, and went to bed.

In about an hour, he was awoken by the sound of his phone. By the ringtone, Bruno knew someone was calling from work. Picking it up, he saw the number of the station.

He was informed about a murder and had to immediately leave to the crime scene.

Early morning of May 23

The residential district, where a husband coming home had found the body of his murdered wife, was on the opposite side of the city, but driving on practically empty streets and taking the bypass, Bruno quickly reached his destination.

Arriving on the scene, he saw four police cars, an ambulance, and the van of the forensic experts. The police patrolling the site were guarding the taped-off territory and keeping an eye on the inquisitive neighbors gathered at the scene.

Bruno got out of his car and walked up to the first officer he saw, showing his detective's badge. After asking him which crew responded to the scene, he found the right officer and had a brief talk with him. Learning that there were no witnesses, Bruno entered the secured area. A gray-haired man in his fifties came out of the house to meet him.

"Kelvin Rotcher, chief forensic expert," he said, introducing himself and extending a hand.

"Detective Bruno Brawling," Bruno said, shaking Kelvin's hand. "What do we have here?"

"The victim is Kelly Patterson, murdered in her own house. We assume that she died of asphyxiation. Someone used an air-impermeable material to cover her face, most probably a plastic bag. Our team has just finished a preliminary examination of the crime scene. We are now searching the house and the victim's body for evidence and taking pictures," he explained and gestured, inviting him to come into the house. "Follow me."

Walking behind Kelvin, Bruno entered the Pattersons' hallway. Pausing there for a moment, the forensics expert pointed to the left.

"This way is the kitchen, with no evidence of criminal activity, and here is the study," he said, turning right. "Let's go."

They walked through a tidy room and stopped for a moment in the opposite doorway.

"There we have the bedroom," Kelvin added, pointing his gaze toward the room. "This is where the signs of crime begin. Come on in."

One of the forensic experts was taking pictures of single details in the messed-up bedroom while two others were thoroughly examining the scene and collecting potential evidence.

"It will be possible to say whether we got anything good here only after we run the lab tests," Kelvin commented. "There is no murder weapon, and we found no items that could have been left behind by the unsub—everything seems to be more or less in its place. Whether anything was stolen from the house we'll be able to confirm only with the help of Patrick Patterson, the victim's husband. We are currently searching other rooms as well, and then we'll sweep the outside territory around the house. It might take a while."

Knowing the nature of work of the forensic examiners, Bruno slightly nodded in response.

“There is no blood trail, only minor scrapes and bruising on the victim’s body. So far, it looks like Kelly Patterson was the only target of this crime,” Kelvin continued.

Bruno was jotting down the notes.

“Come on. The victim’s body is in the other room.”

Watching every step, Bruno followed Kelvin. The bedroom was full of the vestiges of the crime: the bedding on the bedside of one of the spouses was pushed to the foot end and, hanging over the edge of the bed, was touching the floor. The pillow from that side of the bed was lying on the floor next to it. The thin carpet runner in the middle of the room placed along the foot of the bed was crumpled, and the plant stand that seemed to have been standing next to the door leading to another room was knocked over. The pot was broken, leaving the plant on the floor between scattered soil and clay shards.

Walking across the bedroom, they went through the door on the left side wall into a small room. This is where the body of the murdered Kelly Patterson, covered with a light white sheet, was lying on the thin carpeting of the room. A doctor was standing next to it.

The small room had no furniture, only a large closet. It led to the closed porch through the door on the right or the living room straight ahead.

Kelvin turned to the doctor.

“Time of death—between 9:00 and 11:00 a.m.,” she said, uncovering the right arm, legs, and head of the victim. “There are three different signs of struggle: two broken nails on the right hand, a small lock of pulled-out hair, and several abrasions on the legs. None of these injuries could have been fatal. It looks like the victim was strangled. We will run some extra tests to confirm whether she was raped.”

Bruno noted the remarks.

“Kelly Patterson was found only in her nightgown. The unsub could have taken her panties to hide the evidence: sperm, blood, or saliva. We found traces of soil on her thighs and soles—looks like it’s coming from the broken pot in the bedroom. One of the nails broke off the finger. We were unable to find it. The other broken tip is still intact. No foreign particles found under the nails: no skin, blood, or other evidence,” Kelvin informed.

“She obviously put up a fight . . . Maybe she just didn’t manage to scratch him?” Bruno wondered aloud.

“Maybe. At the moment of murder, the offender must have been holding a bag over her head, leaving her arms free. There are no signs that she was constrained in any way. We will run a tox screen to confirm possible intoxication, which would have made her unable to fight back. If no such evidence is uncovered, it is possible that the murderer had an accomplice who held her arms.”

“Has the husband touched anything in the house?” asked Bruno.

“He was warned not to when he called 911. He said to the patrol officer that he found his wife’s body on the side and turned it on the back—he might have been trying to resuscitate her or simply wanted to see what happened. He is being examined by the paramedics, so you will have to wait to question him.”

There were two golden rings on the victim’s right hand. One of them was rather modest and simple, whereas the other one was much bigger. The murderer must have definitely seen them, however, didn’t take them.

“As I’ve already mentioned,” Kelvin added noticing Bruno’s look, “everything points to the fact that robbery wasn’t the intent of the crime.”

Bruno thoughtfully nodded in accord.

“We’ve discovered no signs of crime in the other rooms. Looks like everything started in the bedroom and ended right here,” Kelvin said.

Bruno put down a couple more questions for the victim’s husband and suggested that they go back to the bedroom, which he wanted to inspect one more time.

75

Early morning of May 23

The Pattersons’ bed was untouched since the fateful events. Looking at the empty, messed-up bedside, Bruno was thinking about the woman who was lying there yesterday morning, who, due to yet-to-be-discovered reasons had to suffer through the pain, uncertainty, and horror of an attack and whose life was then brutally taken away.

What could she have done to deserve such fate?

“It looks like she was forcefully pulled out of the bed and fell off it to the ground. She was then dragged by the hair across the bedroom into the adjoining room, disarranging the carpet runner. Trying to hold on to something, she knocked over the wooden rack standing near the door to the next room, breaking the pot,” Kelvin said, suggesting the possible sequence of events in light of the evidence found at the crime scene.

Bruno followed him carefully.

“The soil trail from the broken pot leads toward the walk-through room, in the direction the victim was pulled in,” Kelvin added.

“Yes.”

“In the doorway, she managed to grab the door frame and maybe even shortly free herself from the unsub’s clutches. Trying to hold her back, the murderer yanked her hair, pulling out a small clump,” Kelvin said, pointing to the evidence on the floor. “Clawing into the doorpost, Kelly Patterson broke two nails on the right hand—this will be confirmed or excluded by the lab tests.”

Following Kelvin, Bruno again entered the room where the body was found.

“As you see, this room has access to the porch, but the door is locked, and there is no key in the lock. We couldn’t find it anywhere, but we took fingerprints off the handle. Why Kelly was dragged here before being murdered is still unclear,” Kelvin summarized.

Hoping to find out whether the porch door was usually locked and where they kept the key, Bruno noted another question for Patrick Patterson.

Bruno glanced through the glass door. There was a couch resting along the right wall, an old rug on the floor, and several wooden chairs next to the left wall. Nothing unusual was to be seen; therefore, he didn’t rush with the assumption that the killer could have been doing something in there, then locked it and took the key.

“I see a key in the outside door of the porch. Have you already checked whether the door is also locked?” Bruno asked without moving away from the glass.

“Yes, it’s locked.”

Looking through the porch windows, Bruno noticed white patio furniture sitting on the green lawn outside the house. Like silent witnesses unable to recount the events of yesterday morning, they stood motionless and quiet.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to see the other rooms as well,” he said, turning to Kelvin.

“Sure.”

They went to the Pattersons’ living room. The forensic expert was in the room dusting for fingerprints, but everything seemed to be in its place. Stepping into the kitchen a little farther down, Bruno and Kelvin saw a similar orderly view.

Then, entering the front hallway, they circled around the rather modest home of the Patterson family.

Aside from the turned-upside-down bedroom and the walk-through room where the victim was found, the rest of the house seemed to be untouched by yesterday morning’s atrocity.

“We didn’t find any signs of forced entry. It’s quite possible that Kelly Patterson let the killer in herself,” Kelvin said, mentioning an important detail.

“A lover?” Bruno guessed.

“Could be. The signs of crime begin in the bedroom. Certainly, it is also possible that someone, say, a lover, had a spare key and, upon entering the house, found her in bed and, for some reason, murdered her. Whether the two were in bed together will be confirmed by the collected specimens and conclusions of the examination of the victim’s body. Only then will we be able to tell more about the actual course of events. I will contact you as soon as I have something.”

“OK,” Bruno said and wrote down another question for Patrick Patterson: whether there was anyone, aside from the owners, who had a key to the house.

Early morning of May 23

Bruno was eager to question Patrick Patterson, the husband of the murdered Kelly Patterson, who, in cases like this, was usually the first suspect. However, having found his dead wife in his own home, Patrick felt completely crushed and was being taken care of by the paramedics; therefore, he could not talk to police just yet.

Bruno summed up the information he already had—he'd definitely have to pull an all-nighter.

Stepping out of the Pattersons' house, he again found the police patrol officer who was first on the scene and asked him: "When you first saw Patrick Patterson, what state was he in?"

"He was screaming and weeping. I asked him to describe what happened."

"What did he tell you?"

"He said that he spent the entire day in the capital city at some conference. His wife wasn't answering the phone. When he came home, he found her lying dead on the floor. He said he didn't touch anything, only that he was kneeling next to her body and had turned it from the side to the back. Patterson's speech was quite incoherent; he was emotional and looked absolutely depressed. He kept asking why someone would murder his wife and who could have done it. Soon he felt unwell and fainted right in front of me. I grabbed him just in time. Then the paramedics took over."

Right then, Bruno noticed that Kelly Patterson's body was being taken out of the house.

"Anything else?"

"No, I didn't talk to him anymore and haven't seen anyone else."

"Thank you."

Bruno wrote down the agent's last name, badge number, and his statement.

Turning back to the Pattersons' house, he unconsciously slowed down. Looking at the crowd gathered behind the police tape, for some reason, he considered whether Kelly Patterson's murderer could be one of those who returns to the crime scene of his own doing.

He was approached by Kelvin Rotcher.

"Are there any witnesses?" he asked.

"None so far, and unfortunately, I doubt whether there'll be any—too much time has already passed."

"Could be so. We can surely say that the trail is getting cold. The murderer could have left the country a long time ago."

"Yes. We've got a great deal of work ahead of us. I still have to talk to the victim's husband. Then I'll go back to the station."

“After you talk to Patterson, make sure you find me before you leave.”

“I will.”

77

Early morning of May 23

Walking up to the doctor, Bruno inquired whether it would be possible to ask Patrick Patterson a couple of questions. Having received permission, he soon saw a man who had lost his wife and was affected by strong sedatives, helping him to maintain his composure.

Patrick was an intelligent-looking man with grayish hair. He was wearing glasses and dressed in a black suit. He looked exhausted and brokenhearted, but he wanted to speak to the detective in charge of the case.

Bruno was hoping to ask him at least a few important questions.

“Please accept my condolences,” he said, opening the conversation. “I am detective Bruno Brawling. I would like to ask you to describe in detail the course of today’s events. Your answers might help us to catch the murderer.”

“I was away all day on a business trip. I went to the capital city for work. I took a train together with a coworker. His name is Sam Vail. I left home early—just after five in the morning. During the day, when I had a moment, I called home many times, but Kelly hadn’t picked up the phone once. I didn’t worry too much about it. And I never suspected that anything bad could happen—she doesn’t have a cell phone and could have been simply out of the house.”

Bruno listened carefully, quickly writing down something in his notes.

“I took a train home and then a taxi from the train station. And when I came home . . . I realized why she wasn’t . . .” Patrick couldn’t continue and was becoming emotional.

Wishing to make the conversation as meaningful as possible, Bruno quickly proceeded with a new question: “Did you lock the house before leaving?”

“Yes.”

“Was it locked when you came back?”

Patrick paused.

“Yes.”

“Does anyone else besides you have a house key?”

“Nobody, that’s for sure.”

“Have you ever received any threats? Maybe some hateful messages, silent calls, or anything suspicious? Do you know anyone who could have murdered your wife?”

“No,” Patrick said without hesitation. “Nothing like that. We lived a quiet and simple life. I have no idea on whose toes Kelly could have stepped that she had to end up like this . . .” Patrick was on the verge of breaking into tears again.

“We will find the one who did it,” Bruno quickly assured. “But now I really need your help. I have a couple more questions. What you tell us is very important. Help me find something I can use.”

Listening carefully to Bruno’s words, Patrick Patterson managed to gather himself together.

“I’m listening.”

“I know that you’ve been inside the house only shortly and that you were, first of all, trying to find your wife. However, did you notice whether there was anything missing or misplaced or see anything unusual that doesn’t belong to you?”

Patrick took a few seconds to think.

“No. Only that the bedroom was turned upside down.”

“Do you normally keep the door to the porch from the adjacent room, where you found Kelly, locked?”

Patrick had to concentrate again.

“In the summer, that is, now, we hardly ever lock it, but in winter, we usually keep it locked.”

“Was it locked last night?”

“I can’t remember . . . I don’t know. It shouldn’t have been.”

“Where do you keep the key?”

“It’s always in the door.”

“What about the door from the porch leading outside? Was it locked from the inside?”

“I am not sure, but we always keep the key in the door on the inside.”

“Do you have a safe?”

“No,” Patrick answered assuredly.

“Do you keep any valuables in your house, such as paintings, jewelry, collections, or anything else?”

“No, nothing valuable, except some of Kelly’s jewelry.”

“How many rings did Kelly normally wear?”

“Usually two rings—her wedding ring and the ring I gave her on our fifteenth wedding anniversary.”

“Where did Kelly work?”

“She didn’t have a job since the beginning of this year.”

“I must ask you a personal question.”

“Go ahead.”

“Was Kelly wearing her panties when she went to bed last night?”

“I don’t understand—what does this have to do with the investigation?”

“She was found without panties on, only her nightgown. We have to find out whether they are missing and were possibly taken by the person who committed the murder or whether she didn’t wear them to bed that night. We have to check everything.”

“I get it. I really can’t remember a time she’d ever sleep without them.”

“Thank you for your answers. I only have a few more questions about the exact place of things in the bedroom, and I would like you to look inside the house and see whether everything looks as usual. When you feel ready, let me know,” Bruno said, giving him his business card.

“We could go in now,” Patrick suggested, accepting the card.

Surprised by the request, Bruno looked at Patrick to assess his condition. He seemed to be quite stable and willing to help.

Bruno called over one of the paramedics standing nearby and, having briefed him about the idea, asked for his opinion. After receiving advice to immediately stop examination of the house if Patrick were to become overwhelmed with negative emotions, Bruno had a word with Kelvin Rotcher and invited the house owner to come inside.

Accompanied by Bruno and Kelvin, Patrick walked through the rooms of the house that displayed no evidence of the crime. Stopping in each of them and thoroughly examining the setting, he carefully evaluated the general view. To him, everything seemed to be where it was supposed to be.

When asked by Bruno, Patrick checked Kelly’s house key, which was still in its place.

In the torn-apart bedroom, Patrick showed the exact place where the plant rack used to stand, indicated the normal position of the carpet, and confirmed that his wife was indeed sleeping on the disarranged side of the bed.

They didn’t go inside the walk-through room, where Kelly Patterson’s body was found. Even though Patrick tried to stay strong, Bruno noticed his aggravated condition and had therefore suggested to round up the examination.

Coming out of the house, Patrick noticed Kelly’s relative who had just arrived and waved at him. Before saying goodbye, he looked Bruno in the eyes and spoke with a voice of a man overcome by desperation: “I believe that you, Bruno Brawling, will find out who did it. Promise me that you will find my wife’s murderer.”

In his eyes, Bruno could discern the deep pain of the loss and the desire to have the answers—this man would be able to find comfort only once he knew the truth and saw the murderer thrown behind bars.

“I promise to do everything in my power to find the one who committed his unspeakable crime,” Bruno responded, giving him a friendly pat on the shoulder. “Thank you so much for your help. If there is anything you need or remember, or if you simply want to ask something, do not hesitate to call me. You have my card?”

“I do.”

They said goodbyes. Under the doctor’s supervision, Patrick went to meet his wife’s relative.

Bruno felt sorry for Patrick. Today this man had experienced unfathomable pain, and it would take a toll on his health and strength to return to a life not ripped apart by the agony of this loss. Bruno knew the hardships he’d be facing before he got there.

Even though today he met Patrick Patterson for the first time, Bruno believed that he was innocent. Of course, he was planning to check Patrick's alibi as soon as possible; however, something was already telling Bruno that this man wasn't involved in his wife's murder.

Now it was essential to grasp the motives of this gruesome crime and identify the suspects.

Bruno went to find Kelvin Rotcher. Possessing information that the porch door should have been unlocked and that the key was probably missing, Bruno shared it with him and waited until they opened it.

Having discovered nothing unusual, he left the experts inside to their business and walked out of the house.

"Leaving?" Kelvin asked, following him outside.

"Yes, going back to the station."

"Good luck, Bruno Brawling. I hope our labs will have something you can use."

"Looking forward to any news."

"I'll call as soon as I find anything."

Bruno and Kelvin had exchanged their business cards and, shaking hands, said goodbye to each other.

Hesitating for a moment next to his car, Bruno glanced over the Pattersons' house one more time. Regardless of the experts searching for evidence around the residence, from a distance, everything looked rather orderly and causal. Except a woman murdered in cold blood inside the house.

78

Early morning of May 23

Lately, it had been pretty quiet in the city, with occasional reports of crimes. There were several homicides as well; however, the case of Kelly Patterson, who was living in a good neighborhood, did stand out. First of all, she was an ordinary middle-class woman, murdered in her home without intended robbery.

Driving to the station, Bruno was contemplating that the most realistic assumption was that she was murdered by her lover or, which was much less plausible, by some other acquaintance.

Admiring the rising sun of May 23, Bruno relaxed and allowed the thoughts related to the investigation to flow. He weighed the facts, noting that the only things missing from the house were most definitely the key from the inside door of the porch and the victim's panties. The motives of the murder were yet to be established, but Bruno agreed

with Kelvin Rotcher's suggestion that this case was personal—the unsub knew his victim and murdered her for a specific reason.

It was also possible that there was a particularly valuable item stolen from the Pattersons' house, which Patrick Patterson chose to withhold or possibly wasn't even be aware of, but this theory seemed too weak. From the looks of it, the spouses had an average life. It was doubtful that they would own any unique articles worth being murdered for.

Another theory was that Patrick Patterson hired a hitman. Even though this idea sounded weird, it wasn't something unheard of.

Bruno was determined to check all the information possible on the spouses as soon as he got to his computer, but his gut was already telling him that the Pattersons were regular people and that Patrick had nothing to do with his wife's murder.

Starting to feel the fatigue, Bruno turned on the radio and soon heard the six o'clock news. The reporter mentioned Kelly Patterson's homicide. She also added that the lead investigator on the case was the city's famous detective Bruno Brawling, but due to the lack of information, she was unable to comment on the details of the crime or the ongoing investigation.

They're quick, thought Bruno.

Just then, his phone rang.

Must be the journalists, he assumed.

Unwilling to talk about the case, Bruno peeked at the screen. It was Lana Moore.

"Hello."

"Hello, Bruno. Lana Moore speaking. Excuse me for this early call."

"Hello, Lana. Don't worry—you didn't wake me. How can I help you?"

"I've heard the terrible news about the murdered woman and that you are leading the case," Lana said and made a small pause. "To tell the truth, this is the reason I called. I wanted to ask you to forget about all the charity matters. I don't want you to feel obliged. You are doing so much already. Juliana and I will take care of the funding ourselves. You better focus all your attention on your job. I will be grateful to you anyway," Lana blurted out, hardly taking a breath.

Bruno heard a thread of worry in her voice, maybe even fear. It was only natural that after hearing such news, she felt unsafe.

"What happened is truly unspeakable," Bruno replied. "But I hope that we'll be able to successfully solve it. Now, about the funding, I first of all need to apologize for disappearing without a trace . . . The truth is simple—I haven't made any progress on this matter."

"I don't want you to feel guilty about anything, even if it stays this way."

"I think that I will indeed be unable to do anything about the funding for some time, but I don't want to quit just yet. Once the pressure is down, I hope to be useful."

“I must admit, you always radiate serenity and confidence.” Lana paused. “Shall we agree like this: we’ll discuss the funding later, when you have solved this case and have appropriate time for it; as for now, don’t think about it—OK?”

“Agreed.”

“Wonderful. Good luck, Bruno. Bye.”

“Thank you, Lana. Bye.”

Bruno pressed the button to end the call and kept on driving.

79

Morning of May 23

As soon as Bruno got back to the station, he bought a sandwich from a vending machine, poured himself a cup of coffee in the kitchenette, and went to his office. Washing down his early breakfast with small sips of coffee, he was sitting in his chair and savoring the moment of peace and quiet.

Shortly, he was going to analyze the evidence gathered, look for connections, possible suspects, and a motive for the crime, but before he did, he wanted to stop, even if just for a minute, and take a break. While having his breakfast, of course.

There were only a couple of officers on the premises, but the shifts were about to change, and the roaring of the momentum of a new day would fill the rooms.

Bruno let his mind wander for some time, taking a rest before the long and challenging day ahead. Having finished his sandwich and coffee, he went back to the kitchenette to fill another cup and then returned to the computer desk.

The police database contained only scarce information about the Patterson spouses. Forty-four-year-old Kelly Patterson and forty-two-year-old Patrick Patterson had been married for almost seventeen years. No discords were reported during that time. The couple had no children.

Patrick Patterson, who had served in the military, acquired a specialized engineering degree and was working at the highway design and construction company.

The spouses had been in an accident once, and their car had been broken into on one occasion. The police database had nothing Bruno could work with. Patrick and Kelly Patterson lived a quiet and undistinguished life.

Having access to the migration, taxation, central bank, and some other databases of public institutions, Bruno decided to keep digging. He did not care that he was abusing his authority as an agent of the Homeland Security Department. Bruno had his own principles he went by and trusted them more than any other regulations. After all, he was doing it for a good reason.

After entering several complex inquiries in the computer system, Bruno found out that as of January 1, Kelly Patterson had quit her job at a private accounting firm. She'd been working there for a little more than fourteen years. After leaving the job, Kelly received severance pay and hadn't been employed since.

Wishing to clarify whether her resignation was as smooth as it looked, Bruno jotted down a question intended for her husband.

When Patrick Patterson was twelve, both of his parents died in a car accident. He was raised by relatives—his uncle Austin and his wife Isabella, both now deceased. Patrick was all alone.

Bruno reflected on this thought. This was a fact speaking in Patrick's favor. It lessened the suspicion about his involvement in his wife's murder or the plotting of this crime.

Further reading up on Patrick, Bruno discovered that in his field, he was a well-known and respected specialist who participated in various international engineering projects and received several bonuses. Prior to the onset of the global financial crisis, he was earning a very good salary, which was now cut down a tad but was still nothing to be ashamed of.

Now Patrick was working on one of the city's strategic engineering projects—the construction of a new subway tunnel, which had started a few years back. Because of this project, he had loads of work; on top of his direct responsibilities, he was consulting other engineering companies, which came with considerable financial incentives.

Patrick and Kelly Patterson had substantial savings, spread across several accounts, none of which exceeded 100 percent of the amount compensated by the deposit insurance scheme.

Strategists, Bruno thought with a smile.

There were no withdrawals from any of their accounts either right before or after Kelly's death. The spouses had already paid off their mortgage and had no other loans. They had taken out insurance only on their house and their car; therefore, after losing Kelly, Patrick wasn't entitled to any insurance payments. The couple often spent their holidays abroad, only this year, they didn't have a chance to go anywhere.

It was evident to Bruno that the Pattersons didn't have any financial difficulties and that money didn't play a decisive role in this crime. He was ready to bet that Patrick had no motive to murder his wife.

The workplace was becoming lively with people, and the scurry was intensifying. Bruno had just finished checking the data and had no intention of staying.

Having looked up the contact details of the colleague Patrick commuted to the conference with and noted them down, he locked the computer and went to talk to him.

On his way to see Sam Veil, Bruno received a call from Kelvin Rotcher, who reported that all fingerprints lifted at the Pattersons' house belonged to the owners and that they found nothing of value on the locked porch either.

Kelvin mentioned that the forensic analysis of other samples collected at the crime scene was still in progress and promised to call later.

After a short conversation with Sam Veil, Bruno found out that on the day of Kelly's murder, her husband had behaved normally and didn't raise the slightest suspicion. Having noted Sam's remarks, Bruno gave him his contact details and left.

Contacting the capital city's police department, Bruno asked them to drop by the location of the conference and let the organizer confirm that on May 22, Patrick Patterson indeed attended the meetings. Having received the affirmative answer in about half an hour, he decided not to waste any more time checking on the victim's husband unless new evidence were to emerge.

Returning to the Pattersons' house, Bruno saw it cordoned off by police tape. The police were still patrolling the crime scene while several forensic experts were combing the perimeter of the house and checking the trash containers.

Bruno spent more than an hour knocking on the doors of all the Pattersons' neighbors and interviewing them.

Everybody spoke highly of Patrick and Kelly: the spouses were sincere and kind people, often walking around holding hands. They were friendly, living in agreement with each other. The couple didn't have many visitors. The ones who came were usually Kelly's out-of-town relatives.

None of the people Bruno talked to noticed anything suspicious or unusual, and therefore, they couldn't provide any assumptions as to why Kelly Patterson was murdered. She was unanimously characterized as a simple, openhearted, and decent woman who maintained friendly relationships and shared her news with everyone, particularly lately because she didn't have a job and had a lot of free time.

Every single person who knew the Pattersons was deeply shaken by this atrocity and strongly denied even a thought of Kelly having a lover. Of course, there could still be a lover, but such a uniform opinion caught the detective's attention. Bruno was also going to ask Patrick about it, hoping that he would share his suspicions if he had any.

Having interviewed all the neighbors, Bruno didn't get any answers. However, he put a question mark by the theory of the lover—this assumption did connect the beginning of the action in the bedroom, the personal motives of the killer, and the fact that no signs of a break-in had been discovered.

After talking to the residents, Bruno's own opinion about the couple's good relationship, and that Kelly and Patrick lived a happy life, was further confirmed.

He wrote down the name and address of each person he talked to in his notes and, leaving them his contact information, asked everyone to call him if they remembered anything.

There were still no leads, but tomorrow Bruno was expecting to receive the final lab results on the collected samples, and he was hoping that they would help to get a break in the case and point the investigation in the right direction.

Dropping by the station, he briefed his colleagues on the case and then finally could get some rest.

81

May 24

Kelvin Rotcher, the chief forensic expert of the criminal investigation department, showed up at the station at the agreed time. Greeting him, Bruno invited him into his office and offered coffee.

The two sat down at the desk. Having already received some information, Bruno was eager to hear the final conclusions of the investigators.

"The findings are not particularly promising," Kelvin said, opening his binder. "We were hoping to find more evidence."

"Isn't it always the case?"

"It is. However, this time, considering the nature of the crime, we wanted to find some compelling evidence. Unfortunately, I won't be able to make you happy, as the results are rather meager."

"Well, I guess that will have to do."

"Let's hope it will. First, I have some facts. The Pattersons have an installed alarm system, but on the day of the murder, it wasn't on because the victim was at home. She didn't spend much time behind her personal computer, usually only to read the daily news and check her email. The phone records showed only her calls related to job searching, occasional conversations with her sister living in the capital city, and frequent communication between the spouses. We didn't find any online correspondence or phone calls leading to the potential murderer. On the fatal morning, Kelly Patterson hadn't eaten breakfast—she hadn't even started making it. She also didn't have sexual intercourse before she died," Kelvin said and then paused.

Bruno was listening without any remarks. Kelvin continued: "Now, about the course of the crime. If you don't mind, I will start from the beginning, even though you might already know something," he added, giving Bruno a questioning look.

“Certainly.”

“All right. As you know, there were no signs of a break-in, the door was locked, and the victim’s key was in the house, which most likely means that the killer had his own key. By the way, after inspection, we noticed that the door lock of the Pattersons’ house is specialized and highly secure.”

“Unbelievable . . . everything’s been meticulously prepared for?”

“It seems so.”

Kelvin turned over a page.

“The signs of criminal activity begin in the bedroom, in the victim’s bed. Looks like Kelly Patterson was pulled out of bed and then dragged by the hair to the adjacent walk-through room. She tried to resist, hence the disarranged carpet runner, knocked-over wooden stand, broken plant pot, and two of Kelly’s nails that broke off during the struggle.”

Bruno was listening carefully while Kelvin continued: “The autopsy confirmed that the victim died of asphyxiation. She was strangled by putting something made of an airtight material over her head, most probably a plastic bag. At her death, Kelly Patterson was conscious.”

“Why wouldn’t she fight back?”

“We assumed that at the time of the murder her hands were constrained, but we didn’t discover any visible ligature marks.”

“So the killer had an accomplice?”

“Kelly Patterson’s blood analysis showed no traces of alcohol, medicines, or narcotic substances. At the moment of death, she was fully conscious. However, there is not a single sign that she tried to resist. We discovered no blows to the head with an intention to incapacitate her. Before coming over here, I discussed this matter with my colleagues. We believe that there were at least two offenders.”

“You don’t say . . .” uttered Bruno.

“Honestly, it’s only a presumption, but quite a realistic one.”

“This means that while one was smothering her, the other was holding her hands?”

“Looks like it.”

Turning the next page in the binder, Kelvin went on: “Among the hair samples carefully collected from the bed, there were none that didn’t belong to either Kelly or Patrick. There were no signs of crime anywhere else, except the bedroom and in the room next door, where the victim’s body was discovered. The soil fragments found on Kelly’s body came from the broken pot. The fingerprints lifted from the knocked-over plant stand and the door handles all belong to the owners as well. Two nails from Kelly Patterson’s right hand were broken off. However, we can’t say exactly how it happened. It’s possible that while being dragged by the hair, she managed to grab the doorpost in the doorway to the walk-through room, but we cannot confirm it. One torn-off tip of the nail hasn’t been found, even though we specifically looked for it—took us half a day. It

could have been removed on purpose, but there is also a possibility that the unsub or his accomplice didn't notice the nail embedded in their clothing or shoes and took it with them. The other broken nail was sent for additional analysis. No foreign particles, which could give us a lead, were found under any of the nails. To sum it all up, I must say that we didn't find any trail that belongs to a stranger," Kelvin ended and closed the binder.

"Clean work? I didn't expect that," Bruno admitted.

"Yes. We've been to the Pattersons' house again looking for new samples. Unfortunately, we came up empty. This only supports the assumption that it was a meticulously planned murder."

Bruno was thinking intently.

"My best guess is that the crime was committed by two individuals who knew exactly what they were doing. It is not easy to determine the motive, and I must say, this doesn't happen very often in my practice," Kelvin stated.

"So the lover doesn't fit into the profile of this crime," Bruno said, weighing the available facts and assumptions.

"Seems like it doesn't. If there was a lover, I'd expect that on the day of the murder, it wouldn't be his first visit to the Pattersons' home. That said, he would have left at least one fingerprint or some other evidence behind. Besides, an ordinary lover wouldn't be capable of pulling off such a clean job."

"The Pattersons' neighbors—all of them—were convinced that the theory with the lover was impossible."

"Really? It looks like this time the community's intuition is accurate."

Bruno highly valued the work of the forensic experts, so he decided to keep talking to Kelvin.

"What do you think all this means? Who murdered Kelly Patterson? A hitman? A psycho? Wouldn't they act alone?"

"Both options are possible. In this particular case, however, I'd go with a maniac."

"Why, exactly?" Bruno wondered.

"It is supported by the missing objects: the porch key, the panties, and possibly the broken nail tip. That is much more maniacal than purely professional."

"I must admit that I tried to avoid such assumptions myself, but I am inclined to agree with you. Everything we have so far says that the spouses were regular people who never got into any trouble. I've not uncovered a single thing allowing me to assume otherwise. Who would hire a hitman to kill an ordinary woman? If there was a reason to, I don't think we would have missed it."

"I agree. I doubt two professionals would be needed either."

"What about two maniacs?"

"For some reason, it's easier to picture a psycho working with an assistant than a hitman."

“OK. One way or another, a maniac can demonstrate highly organized planning and manage not to leave any traces behind, except the ones he wants us to find. Besides, a professional wouldn’t bother himself with making an extra key and dragging a woman by the hair across the rooms, unless it was specifically an act of revenge.”

“Yes, but if this is the work of a psycho, determining the motive or locating the offenders may be much more difficult,” Kelvin warned.

Thinking of something, Bruno silently nodded.

“Listen,” he said suddenly, obviously having come up with something, “could it be that the items missing from the Pattersons’ house and the fact that she was intentionally lugged to the walk-through room be a puzzle left behind by the killer?”

“It’s possible,” Kelvin agreed, contemplating Bruno’s words.

“Or perhaps the murderer is just trying to mislead us.”

“That may as well be so.”

“I will definitely consult the psychological and criminal profilers. Well, it looks like I’ve got a lot of work to do. I won’t keep you any longer.”

“If there is anything you need, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Thank you for your excellent work,” Bruno said, standing up and extending a hand.

“The pleasure is all mine.”

“Have a nice day. Let’s keep in touch.”

“Certainly. Goodbye.”

Kelvin shook Bruno’s hand and left.

Having collected the copies of the test results into the case file, Bruno leaned back in his chair, sunk in thought.

Kelly Patterson hadn’t been raped, and no message was left behind or, in fact, anything specific that could be linked to the maniac who committed the homicide. There were no previously reported similar crimes; therefore, if it was indeed the work of a psycho, it was the first such case in the city. Unfortunately, this meant that the killer might strike again.

The lack of evidence, in this case, was the essential piece of information. The murder was premeditated and professional, displaying evidence of manic intent. Usually, both the professional hitman and the lunatic act alone; however, the murder of Kelly Patterson apparently wasn’t a typical case.

What if it was merely revenge, jealousy, or payback? he considered, trying to once again use a simple explanation. Of course, this homicide could have been a combination of professional and lunatic work; however, the thoughts about the psycho were drawing him in like gravity.

Thinking about the possibility of the murder being committed by professionals, Bruno considered the largest criminal organization in the city—the Gentlemen.

Their leader and his closest accomplices were in jail, and the current chieftain had been recently arrested for verbally assaulting police officers in the line of duty. Under the

leadership of the new boss, the Gentlemen became more aggressive, and even though they were no longer as powerful, they were definitely capable of a killing, but it wouldn't be Kelly Patterson.

Contemplating a possible maniac, Bruno recollected his own studies when he was researching the activities of a man who had murdered five women, keeping the city in terror, which happened a good three decades ago. It was a criminal who caused distress and confusion in society and who voluntarily surrendered himself to the police. He looked terrified, even crazy, constantly calling for help and acting irrationally. Unfortunately, during the night in the detention cell, the man's heart stopped before they managed to discover the reasons for his killings or obtain other information. He was found dead, his face contorted in pain and horror.

Trying to get at least a little bit closer to the conception and motives of Kelly Patterson's murder, Bruno decided to consult the experts in human behavior and psychology. He expected no quick resolution in this case, but in any event, the answer as to why someone meticulously planned this crime must be somewhere, and Bruno was determined to find it.

Who are you—you, who, with the help of an accomplice, put a bag over a woman's head and watched her convulse in death throes? Bruno asked himself as he got ready to see Chief Hubert, who was expecting a report on the case.

82

May 25

Bruno came to Kelly Patterson's funeral to pay his respects. He was stealthily watching the people who came to say their goodbyes, looking for any signs of unusual behavior in their actions, facial expressions, or postures.

The cemetery was also guarded by the police. Bruno, however, was quite sure that the people who murdered Kelly were not the type of offenders who came to the victim's funeral.

Conventional methods won't help me find them.

Patrick Patterson looked completely crushed. Standing next to his wife's coffin, he wasn't able to hold the tears and was evidently broken down. Bruno was hoping to ask him a few questions but so far hadn't found the right moment.

At the end of the funeral, Bruno once again expressed his condolences to Patrick and went back to the station, where he met with the behavioral analysts and continued racking his brain over Kelly Patterson's possible killers.

About three hours later, Bruno received an unexpected call. It was Patrick Patterson asking whether it was OK to come by so that Bruno could ask all his questions and

probably answer his. Somewhat surprised, Bruno invited him to come over and was hoping that this conversation would yield some possible benefits.

Appearing in the hallway of the station, Patrick was greeted by Bruno himself, who shook hands and invited him into his office on the second floor.

“Could I have a glass of water, please?” asked Patrick in a slightly trembling voice.

Bruno fetched the water and offered Patrick a seat. Noticing that his guest wasn’t feeling very comfortable, he wanted to ease the tension before asking him any questions.

“Kelly’s murder has deeply shaken up your community and the entire city. I’ve talked to your neighbors—everyone, without exception, spoke kindly about you. Please, allow me to express my condolences once again and make a personal promise that whoever did this will pay the price. Thank you for volunteering to come and answer my questions. Any information you provide may be crucial.”

Bruno’s words actually helped.

“Thank you for your compassion and encouragement,” Patrick responded, having brightened up and gathered himself a little bit. “I wanted to spend the last remaining moments with Kelly. Now that I bid farewell to her and thanked everyone for the support, I can answer your questions and hopefully help to find the murderer. I’ve got plenty of time. Besides, I know that in the entire city, if not in the whole country, there is no better detective than you,” Patrick said in an assured manner.

“Thank you for trusting me. I know you are having a really hard time, and I am very grateful for your cooperation. Before I start, I want to tell you that you are not involved in the investigation as a suspect; all the questions related to the events of May twenty-second are just a pure formality.”

“I understand.”

“First of all, I’d like to know how often you participate in the conferences or leave home on business trips.”

“Since the onset of the financial crisis, the trips have become less frequent, and this was my first conference this year. Before the crisis, it was maybe five or six times a year.”

“Do I understand correctly that these trips do not take place on a regular basis?”

“Yes. There could be two or three a month or nothing at all for a few quarters.”

“I see. Please describe in detail the events of the evening of May twenty-second.”

Patrick was trying to collect himself, but before he started talking, he looked Bruno in the eyes. It was clear that he was still weak and vulnerable.

Nonetheless, Patrick uttered a decisive “OK” and then began: “The conference ended at four o’clock. When it was finished, I called Kelly yet another time that day, but she didn’t pick up, like all previous times. With a group of other conference participants, I had dinner in one of the local restaurants. I couldn’t stay long because I had a train to catch. Around seven, Sam and I said goodbye to everyone and went to the train station. On the way home, I called Kelly a few more times but couldn’t reach her then either. We arrived at about 11:35 p.m. I caught a cab and went straight home. I was there just after

midnight. I knew Kelly wouldn't go to bed without me and would wait until I was back, especially since that day we didn't have any contact with each other. I couldn't wait to ask her about her day and why she didn't answer any of my calls."

Patrick was on the verge of breaking down. Bruno encouraged him not to give in to the emotions and continue his story. It took nearly a minute before Patrick braced himself and could concentrate again. Having taken a sip of water and hesitated for a moment, he went on with his narration: "I was surprised to see that the lights in the house were off—Kelly always waited for me to get back. When I walked into the house, I expected to see her sleeping. I thought maybe she wasn't feeling well and simply went to bed early."

"When you came home and went inside, did you notice anything strange or unusual? It could be even the tiniest detail."

"No, everything was the way I left it in the morning like it usually was. I really didn't get the feeling you are talking about. I felt like I walked into an empty house. Turning on the lights in the study and quietly pushing the bedroom door open, I saw no one in our bed. The side where Kelly normally slept was disarranged. When I walked in and switched on the lights, I saw that the bedroom was unusually messy. Moving toward the walk-through room, in the doorway on the floor, I noticed a small clump of hair," Patrick stammered.

Bruno saw the suffering of the man having to relive the most painful memories of his life, but he needed to hear the rest of the story and ask further questions.

Offering him to drink some water and finishing making notes, Bruno let him calm down and reassured him of how important those answers were for the investigation.

Pulling himself together, Patrick continued: "I was ready to drop, and when turning on the lights in the small room, I saw Kelly lying on the floor." Patrick got quiet for a moment. "First, I thought that she had a heart attack or something. I threw myself toward her, turned her on her back, and shook her, trying to feel her pulse. Then I realized that my wife was dead—she was already cold . . ."

Patrick wiped away a silent tear running down his cheek and carried on: "Then I turned around like in a slow-motion scene and suddenly realized that I wasn't looking at the aftermath of an accident but that of a crime. The lock of hair lying in the doorway, the broken pot, scattered soil . . . After all, if Kelly did have a heart attack, why would she push herself into that walk-through room with her last ounce of strength? Most probably she would have tried to make it to the phone, wouldn't she?"

Bruno nodded in response.

"I immediately called 911."

"Aside from placing your wife's body on the back, did you move anything else in the house?" Bruno asked.

"No, I didn't. I was also instructed by the police not to touch anything and wait for them. When the patrol officer arrived—how should I put it—I had a blackout, and I

remember only some fragments. I remember, though, that later that evening, you were asking me questions.”

When Patrick finished his story, Bruno took a few more seconds to write down his notes and then asked: “I was told that you’ve been back inside the house?”

“Yes, accompanied by the police, I collected some documents, clothes, and essential personal items.”

“Maybe then you noticed that something was missing or misplaced?”

“No, everything was as usual.”

Bruno noted it down and asked the next question: “The forensic experts thoroughly searched the entire house but didn’t find the key to the porch door from the walk-through room. It’s still missing. Could you have lost it before May twenty-second?”

“We definitely didn’t lose it,” Patrick assured and took a moment to think. “The key was always in the lock, and it was kept there without exception—I can’t remember any occasion when we wanted to access the porch but found it locked, with no key. I can’t explain why you didn’t find it.”

“As you know, we hoped to find evidence on the porch, so it was opened and searched, but no traces of crime have been discovered.”

“Yes.”

“I would like to ask now about Kelly’s job. Is it true that as of January first of this year, she was unemployed?” Bruno asked.

“Yes.”

“Before that, she worked in one of the firms in the city and was conducting financial audits. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Did she quit voluntarily?”

“Yes.”

“Could you please explain why, at a time of economic recession, when so many people lost their jobs, she decided to leave? If I understand correctly, she didn’t resign because she found another job, correct?”

“It’s quite simple. For the past several years, Kelly was thinking of doing something else—she was tired of the routine work. At the onset of the crisis, her employer announced a company restructuring and offered a one-off payment amounting to almost six months’ worth of wages to those who quit. It was an easy decision.”

“And she never regretted it?”

“On the contrary. She felt quite positive about the situation; besides, we did well financially—my salary was enough to support both of us and even to set some aside, so even though the job hunting took longer than expected, she wasn’t discouraged.”

“This means that everything went smoothly—she didn’t experience any coercion?”

“She really did quit of her own accord.”

“As I understand, she never found a new job?”

“No.”

Bruno scribbled something in his notes.

“What time did Kelly normally get up in the morning?”

“If she had no errands to run, she’d lie in bed until ten o’clock, sometimes later. If she had appointments, she’d get up earlier.”

“What would Kelly normally wear to bed?”

Patrick needed a second to think about it.

“She’d usually sleep without a bra, wearing a nightgown and underwear.”

Bruno jotted down the last remarks. He noticed that Patrick had good analytical skills and was satisfied with the answers provided. No wonder this person was a high-level engineer.

“Do you have an alarm system in the house?”

“Yes, but we activate it only when we leave home for a longer period of time.”

“Does this mean that on May twenty-second, it was disabled?”

“Definitely.”

Bruno wrote it down.

“Well, thank you so much for your assistance. I know you need answers, too, so I am ready to tell you about the investigation.”

“Certainly!” Patrick’s eyes sparkled with hope.

“As you may know, Kelly wasn’t wearing panties when she was found, but she hadn’t been raped. The forensic experts have confirmed the previous assumption that she was strangled . . . I am really sorry. Initially, we thought that she had a lover, and that’s who killed her,” Bruno uttered slowly while observing Patrick’s reaction. “However, now we are working out a theory that the murder has been committed by at least two individuals, neither of whom was a lover.”

Patrick was listening like he was hypnotized.

“Unfortunately, we have no leads on the suspects, but I can assure you that the investigation is being conducted in all possible directions. We are not going to remain mere bystanders in this situation, but I must be honest with you—this crime has presented a puzzle with many missing pieces; thus, it is not a regular case, and it might take some time before we’ll be able to solve it.”

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Patrick whispered, recollecting himself, as he could hardly believe what he’d just heard.

He was mostly shocked by the fact that there were two killers.

“First of all, she didn’t have a lover,” he blurted out with slight irritation. “And second of all, why were there two killers?”

“We still have no answers to these questions. This is where the case gets complicated. However, the facts we do have suggest maniacal intent.”

Patrick stared at Bruno with astonishment.

“I really didn’t expect anything like that . . .” He was perplexed.

“At the moment, we can’t explain why there were two perpetrators or why they killed Kelly. Nothing has been stolen from your home, and we didn’t find any solid evidence. Therefore, right now, it is crucial to find out as many details as possible, however insignificant they may seem. They could probably give us a clue.”

“This means that you know practically nothing?” Patrick asked, staring fixedly at Bruno.

“In a nutshell, the current theory is as follows: There were at least two offenders, who acted professionally. Motive—unknown, style—maniac. Such crimes are difficult to solve but definitely not impossible. I guarantee you that we will spare neither time nor efforts to get it done, but the investigation may take a while. I know there is not much certainty at the moment, but I am just being frank with you. I think you deserve to know the truth,” Bruno said, containing his emotions.

“Thank you for the provided information and your honesty, Detective Brawling. Even though the assumptions you presented sound strange, I truly value everything you and your people did. I don’t doubt for a second that you will catch those bastards.”

“We sure will. And I would like to ask you not to share the things you heard from me with anyone, especially the press. If this information gets out, it may harm the investigation.”

“You don’t even have to ask.”

“Well, I’d like to thank you again for answering my questions. There is nothing else I wanted to know. If you remember anything, even if it seems trivial, you need to contact me,” Bruno urged. “Like I said, the answer could be hidden in the most insignificant details.”

“I will.”

“I’ll let you know if anything comes up,” Bruno promised.

“Thank you. I won’t keep you any longer,” Patrick said, standing up.

Bruno accompanied him to the exit and said goodbye. Fetching a cup of coffee and returning to this office, he got to thinking about the recent conversation. Patrick gave the impression of a heavy-laden man who wasn’t afraid to look him in the eye. When answering questions, he was consistent in his statements and spoke coherently both today and back at the house, meaning that he was telling the truth.

Despite the difficult case, Bruno was determined to get to the bottom of it. Contemplating his next steps, he somehow felt that this crime had something extraordinary about it.

After leaving the police station, Patrick Patterson was feeling glad that the conversation went well. On his way to meet Bruno Brawling, he was not at all confident that he would be able to withstand the confrontation.

Strolling along the street, Patrick was thinking intensely about what he had heard from the detective and was prepared to wait as long as needed for that moment when he could look his wife's killers in the eye and have his questions answered. He had no intention of forgiving them, though.

Reflecting on their conversation, Patrick was thinking about the compassion displayed by Bruno. He knew perfectly well that if Bruno were to merely spill out his questions and, without thinking twice, type the answers into the computer, it would have been unbearable—Patrick would have felt like a statistical insignificance, which would definitely have made it worse.

Luckily, Bruno Brawling, who had an outstanding reputation, was persuasive, friendly, and sympathetic. This gave Patrick hope and allowed him to trust the detective.

Now, more than ever, he wanted to believe that the monsters who murdered Kelly would be caught. If necessary, he was prepared to spend the rest of his life attempting to find them.

Sally Lockerbek began winning people's trust with her registration card to the festival and the fact that her services were of high quality and free of charge.

Looking after children with little confidence at first, she quickly regained her skills and felt more self-assured. Having successfully endured the first days of trials, she had more faith in her own abilities and wasn't afraid to show initiative and take on responsibility.

Sally was babysitting the little ones of the single moms and young families, taking care of the house, and doing their grocery shopping and other helpful work without asking for a penny.

Weeks went by, and even though she was overstraining herself, Sally was engaged in social work as much as she had the strength for, and she was determined to keep up the pace. Soon she felt capable of achieving her ultimate goal—qualifying for the main event of the Midsummer Festival.

At the beginning of June, Sally spotted her name in the sixth place of the preliminary list of participants published on the festival's website. This meant that if nothing changed, she and twenty-three other contestants would reach what they'd been striving for.

It was time to think about presenting herself to the public. Sally felt a little nervous at the thought of the cameras and all the attention; however, her self-confidence, which had grown immensely in the past few weeks, helped her to stay strong.

85

Beginning of June

Having returned empty-handed from numerous meetings with potential sponsors during the past few months, Lana Moore's mood was far from delightful, but when she saw the first candidate applications for "The Silent Legacy" showing up, her spirits were uplifted.

Tired from continuous professional mishaps, Lana could, even for a moment, forget the devastating consequences of the ongoing financial crisis and once again admire the people working hard for the common good.

Having familiarized herself with the activities of the participants, Lana noted the questions she, as the hostess of the main event, wanted to ask the candidates during the interviews.

The application of Sally Lockerbek, who only recently moved to the city from a small town, stood out from the bunch. Searching for a better life, Sally was still unemployed, yet she was laboring for the well-being of others without pay, helping young families and single mothers.

Keeping in mind that the winner wouldn't be awarded any monetary prize, this woman demonstrated dedication, and Lana Moore couldn't wait to meet her.

86

Second half of June

It was six days before the final list of participants in "The Silent Legacy" was to be announced. Lying on the bed in her modest room, Sally Lockerbek was staring at the calendar and for the first time felt that she had achieved her goal and made it to the main event of the Midsummer Festival. After long months of arduous work, she could finally catch a breath.

It was today that she received a call from a TV journalist to make an interview appointment. Sally knew that following the selection, she would be introduced to the

public, which she had agreed to when filling out the application, so now all she needed to do was get ready for her interview and make a good impression.

As a newcomer in the city, Sally wasn't afraid of the public's prejudice. She went through the journalist's questions and was slightly nervous about her appearance.

On her way to the interview, Sally kept peeking in a pocket mirror, but in the end, she suppressed the anxiety and restored her confidence. At the TV studio, she didn't even use the professional makeup.

During the interview, Sally experienced people's sudden interest toward her, the stranger, who dedicated a good deal of her time to the needs of others. She had, therefore, received many questions, which she tried to answer sincerely, in a witty and cheerful manner.

Sally stayed true to herself, and the interview went unexpectedly well.

87

Beginning of July

The entire June, Bruno was swamped with work and had no time whatsoever to look for someone to sponsor Sparkle, the special education center. Thus, he wasn't able to inch closer to Lana Moore.

Several weeks after Kelly Patterson's murder, the investigation had cooled down, and Bruno was back working on a relatively flexible schedule. Having more time to spare, he was finally able to think about his challenge.

After another stressful day, Bruno spent some time in martial arts training and returned home around half past nine in the evening. He whipped up a cold protein drink and got comfortable on the couch. Turning on the TV, he slowly sipped his shake and didn't really pay attention to what was on, and eventually fell into thinking about Lana Moore.

Despite the fact that he met her on only a few occasions, Bruno felt a strong attraction and often caught himself thinking about her. Sure, he was definitely going to seek her friendship, but for now, he just liked to indulge in a little contemplation about their possible relationship.

Suddenly his attention was drawn to the evening news. The presenter mentioned Lana Moore and the introduction of "The Silent Legacy" cast.

In a few minutes, he saw footage of an interview with Sally Lockerbek, one of the participants of the main event of the festival, who came from a small town and was still jobless yet was laboring tirelessly for the good of the people in the city.

The interview with Sally Lockerbek made an impression on Bruno. She loved sunbathing, fitness, and jogging and had a very positive attitude. She was a tall woman

with gentle facial features and seemed to have somewhat provincial manners, but she was apparently self-confident, and her mind-set and cheerful way of speaking more than made up for the insignificant flaws that were probably caused by stress.

Knowing Lana's little secret, Bruno couldn't help but think that Sally Lockerbek might catch her eye as well.

This could be a real turn of events, he surmised, giving it serious thought.

88

Beginning of July

The mysterious man watching Lana Moore's every move was also preparing for the Midsummer Festival. Showing his press pass to the stadium security guard, he went to one of the best seats in the media section he had reserved in advance and, without raising any suspicion, settled for work.

After recording Lana's performance, he intended to thoroughly analyze the situation and set up his own action plan, which would allow him to enjoy Lana Moore's company as much as he wished.

In a premonition of his success, the stalker was already imagining the wonderful time he would be spending with Lana and was thrilled that soon, he'd be the only one she'd belong to.

He was prepared to tackle any problem that came his way—this beautiful and meaningful purpose that concerned Lana Moore granted him an impregnable strength and confidence far beyond the abilities of an ordinary man.

The stalker knew that his actions would surprise and shock many. Anticipating the stunning effect his deeds, he was already feeling a pleasant quiver of satisfaction running through his body.

Having checked out the filming location, the man was ready for the Midsummer Festival, which would be Lana Moore's last.

The unknown . . . What a beautiful and blissful thing. He exhaled a sigh of relief.

89

Saturday, mid-July

The day of the main show of the Midsummer Festival had finally come. It seemed that Sally didn't even notice the hours, weeks, and months fly by until she found herself right

where she was hoping to be, right there, right then, in the middle of the event, all spruced up, wearing her gown.

She was holding a one-year-old infant, whose mother needed her help again this morning.

Wishing Sally well, she felt relieved for the assistance.

“He will bring you luck—you’ll see!” she called after them and waved goodbye.

Sally knew this toddler very well, as this wasn’t the first time she babysat him—he was an exceptionally well-behaved boy. Besides, the regulations didn’t forbid a participant to bring a child. This, however, made many raise eyebrows in amazement—no other festival participant had ever pulled off anything of the kind.

Shortly, Sally Lockerbek stepped onto the stadium lawn, and according to the appointed movement trajectory practiced during the rehearsal, reached a spot where, together with other participants, she lined up in a horseshoe-shaped formation and stood in front of the maiden Flora.

Sally had a good view of Lana Moore, who slowly bowed down to the spectators and received the ovations of the fascinated crowd in return.

The risk she was willing to take had so far justified itself—the child in her arms was completely still, and without making a single sound, he was curiously observing what was happening around him. Probably because she was holding an infant, the cameras had zoomed in on her several times, singling her out from other participants.

To the accompaniment of applause, the maiden Flora stepped toward the women in front of her, starting her evaluation from the side opposite to where Sally was standing. At a suitable moment, Sally found a way to quickly adjust the belt girding her waist, making sure everything looked neat and that her long-sleeved light blue dress didn’t differ from the clothes of the other ladies.

Sally had already done everything she was supposed to; therefore, now all she had to do was wait in hopes of being noticed. After all the work she had accomplished, there was nothing else she’d rather do anyway.

The atmosphere of the solemnly serene performance of “The Silent Legacy” was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for each of the participants and a real privilege. Sally was happy to be part of this fantastic festival.

Taking tiny little steps, the goddess Flora was walking along the row of women, looking for the one to be granted her silent legacy. The numerous spectators were watching the development of events with bated breath.

Silently evaluating every single woman and slightly nodding to each of them, the maiden was moving toward the end of the hoop where Sally was standing. Approaching her, Flora stopped, and like a real goddess, she looked Sally deep in the eyes.

The long-awaited moment had come. Placing her left hand upon her chest, to end the somewhat prolonged mutual gaze, the maiden Flora slowly extended her right hand to Sally. Holding her palm down, she embodied the passing on of the silent legacy.

The crowd went wild. As the tradition dictated, accepting this heritage, Sally Lockerbek extended her right hand and gently pressed it against Flora's palm, supporting the infant with the other.

As their hands touched, Sally and Flora seemed to have stopped the time. Forgetting about the presence of the innumerable multitude of people, two beautiful women, locked in the circle of thousands of camera flashes exploding all over the audience, were standing on a tiny island of reciprocal feelings created only a moment ago and looking each other in the eyes.

90

Saturday, mid-July

Even though he was always working alone, Lana Moore's stalker never felt lonely. Focusing his attention on Lana as she embodied the maiden Flora, the man concentrated on filming the final show of the Midsummer Festival—this was one of the last stages of the necessary preparations; therefore, attention to detail was of utmost importance.

The performance was running as planned; however, during its final episodes, the mysterious man couldn't help but hold his breath—he was looking at a close-up of Lana Moore's image as she was slowly reaching out to the chosen winner. Gently holding each other and looking into one another's eyes, it was as though the women had frozen for a moment, and the anxiety of the man observing the act was growing with every second of this prolonged scene.

Skillfully operating the professional video camera, he was able to capture every moment of the women's tender touch and their yearning separation.

Perhaps nobody paid any attention to a longer-than-usual moment where Lana Moore and the winner she chose were holding hands, let alone gave it any prominence. However, the mysterious man saw it in an entirely different light.

It was too soon to tell whether there was anything personal behind these actions or if it was merely a flawless performance of their roles; thus, the stalker knew he'd have to watch the video footage until he had analyzed every single detail.

One way or another, something was telling him that Sally Lockerbek, the winner of the event, was bad news for his plans.

Sally Lockerbek, the winner of “The Silent Legacy,” was showered in what seemed to be the inexhaustible attention of the media and people around her. Strangers recognizing her on the streets would try to exchange a few words with her, she was continuously receiving calls from journalists who somehow dug up her number, and the press and internet were full of all sorts of speculations.

People would talk, gossip, spread rumors, and admire her, and Sally couldn’t help any of it, only try to stomach it. She never would have thought that this honorable victory would become such a burden. Therefore, tired of the eyes fixed on her, Sally began avoiding publicity and frequently refused to give interviews.

However, winning “The Silent Legacy” also had a bright side—she received several job offers, but she wasn’t in a rush to plunge into new activities and was simply enjoying the freedom.

To Sally’s relief, Lana Moore was there to help her deal with the hardships of her suddenly emerged popularity and gave her many good pieces of advice. In her company, Sally felt relaxed and didn’t worry about anything. Lana was always friendly and attentive to her needs, never pressured her, and gave her so many things that lightened up her life.

Nearly every day, Sally would stop by Lana’s office at the end of business hours. With time, their meetings were becoming less official and more similar to get-togethers between two like-minded individuals who felt a growing attraction. If unable to meet, they’d call or text each other several times a day. Before long, Sally Lockerbek and Lana Moore became close friends.

When Sally was alone, she often thought about Lana and couldn’t wait to see her again. She frequently recollected the last moments of “The Silent Legacy”—the two of them standing there, looking into each other’s eyes as their hands touched and the world around them disappeared.

Being with Lana gave Sally an impetuous incentive to rediscover herself, which resulted in the most beautiful emotions one could feel toward another person.

Even though she never revealed her feelings and didn’t dare to take the first step, Sally also sensed Lana’s attention—their relationship, which was born at the culmination of the festival, enhanced by the time spent together, was becoming truly special.

One Sunday at the beginning of August, the waiting had become impossible to bear, even for a woman like Lana Moore. Understanding that she would have to be the one to take the first step, after a short walk, sitting down on a bench in the park gardens, Lana caught the right moment and took the initiative—she carefully and gently kissed Sally on the lips.

This kiss was a revelation of love Lana had been longing for. Suddenly the casual communication in their relationship turned into something much more serious.

However, while opening a new page in the relationship, neither of them had any idea that soon their lives would be turned upside down.

92

End of July, beginning of August

Having suspicions that the prolonged eye contact between Lana Moore and her crowned winner, Sally Lockerbek, meant more than just the excitement of the celebration, the mysterious man watched his video recordings several times until he was sure about what he saw.

Perhaps no one else had noticed it, but the man stalking Lana Moore and making plans for the two of them wasn't someone easily fooled.

Thinking about it made him nervous.

The regular meetings between Sally and Lana that started after the festival were direct evidence that he was right about their actions during the show—there was something more than just an ordinary acquaintance connecting these two.

The stalker knew he was about to witness the first expression of their affection and was prepared to capture it. He also already had a plan for what he was going to do with the footage.

As if the growing intimacy between the women weren't enough, two policemen working in shifts started sniffing around Lana Moore and were soon joined by a third one. Although the stalker was aware of the reasons behind their presence, he wasn't giving this interference any significance.

This, however, made Lana Moore's surroundings unnecessarily overcrowded; therefore, the man had to find a way to get rid of them and put everything back on track, as his ultimate scenario didn't include anyone but Lana Moore and himself.

The mysterious man wasn't a bit worried about the three policemen. Having recorded them illegally tailing Lana Moore, he could disclose these materials at any time, making them disappear for good. Sally Lockerbek, on the other hand, was apparently not going anywhere. The intolerable uncertainty of the situation, caused by her presence, was ruining his plans; thus, something had to be done about it.

The stalker was determined to do everything in his power to ensure that all was running smoothly and wasn't about to let some washout from the countryside get in his way.

Contemplating the possible solutions, the man had a strong feeling of the tragic fate awaiting Sally Lockerbek.

Shortly after the Midsummer Festival, the local police station where detective Bruno Brawling worked received an anonymous tip about a serious deal made by the largest criminal organization in the city, the Gentlemen.

While their leader and his closest accomplices were doing time in prison, the gang was headed by a chieftain, Ottis Wilby, going by the nickname “Bruiser,” who, according to the police intel, was attempting to revive it.

The deal, on which the anonymous source provided regular updates, offered an opportunity to catch the Gentlemen red-handed and cause another severe blow to their organization and was therefore very tempting for law enforcement. The task force was set up in just a couple of days, which included the prominent lieutenant Bruno Brawling, who, together with the leaders of the police assault units, started planning the operation and was appointed the right-hand man of the heavily built sergeant Curtis Botner.

The anonymous source feeding valuable information to the police demanded that they not try to disclose his identity, threatening to compromise the operation in the case of such attempts.

His request was granted.

Amid her sudden rise in popularity, Sally couldn't shake the feeling that she was being watched, but when she shared her concerns with Lana, she wasn't at all surprised. She explained that strangers who previously didn't pay any attention to her now naturally turned their heads, watched her walking down the street, or spoke to her. Sally hoped that she'd get used to it somehow, but every time the two of them were in a public place, she felt someone else's presence.

Eventually, it didn't matter—their first kiss caused an avalanche of emotions inside of her and revived her senses. Sally was happy that she found her love and fell head over heels for this woman.

Being an introvert in some senses, she decided to take it one step at a time—the unexpected popularity was a challenge in itself, but now also in love, Sally found herself in an unusual situation and at times felt confused.

Unfortunately, before they could fully enjoy their love and start making plans for the future, Sally and Lana were to experience a painful disappointment—already the next day, a photo of their kiss appeared in the press.

Out of the corner of her eye, Sally caught sight of an article published in a local tabloid, and she seemed to freeze when she saw a close-up shot of herself and Lana—it was too late to change anything, of course.

From that moment on, everything went downhill.

The repercussions of the photo becoming public were much more significant than the occasional gossip or mockery that Sally had previously experienced. Now all she wanted was to curl up and die. Unlike Lana Moore, who was yet to become an object of merciless public backlash, Sally didn't have any responsibilities in the city and was free to leave.

In a couple of days, that was exactly what she decided to do.

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Sunday, mid-August

On a cold and windy Sunday afternoon, Sally Lockerbek was standing at a public bus stop on the outskirts of the city. Putting her suitcase packed up with her belongings on the ground, she was waiting for Lana, who was supposed to meet her there.

Waiting for her beloved to arrive, Sally was thinking about the past few months of her life. She had succeeded in achieving the impossible, and it looked like everything was going to only get better, but suddenly everything turned belly up, and the only thing left to do was to skip town.

However difficult it might be, today she had to utter the heartbreaking goodbye. The parting was going to be agonizing.

Sally couldn't say when she'd be back to the city and didn't even know whether it would be possible at all.

Learning about her plans, Lana was trying to calm her down, suggesting to stay strong and go through the difficult times together, but more than anything, Sally didn't want to burden her loved one; therefore, she chose to leave.

The navy blue car had pulled up.

"Hello, my love," Lana greeted, just barely out of the car, looking sad and concerned.

"Hello, Lana," Sally replied, gently embracing her.

"Sally, I am so sorry . . ." It seemed that Lana was about to burst into tears.

"Lana, don't beat yourself up. It's not your fault."

"But I can't stop blaming myself . . . It's all my—"

Sally didn't let her finish the sentence and softly kissed her.

The wind was tousling Lana's straightened hair, and her eyes shimmered with tears.

"I hope you won't be away for long?" she asked quietly.

"I don't know . . . I'm out of luck in this city."

"Please, don't say that." Lana embraced her tighter.

"I don't mean you, my darling, I really don't," Sally whispered, trying to console her.

Clinging to her, Lana was silently sobbing. They were standing there for some time without uttering a word, tortured by the hovering feeling of inevitable separation.

Sally wasn't crying, but she couldn't swallow the enormous lump of sorrow blocking her throat. The silence was calming her, but she needed time to dispel the gloomy mood.

"Where can I drop you off?" asked Lana, composing herself.

"I'll walk. I need to clear my head. Walking will do me good."

"Are you taking a train or a bus?"

"A bus."

"But it's quite a distance to the station!" Lana protested, raising her head up.

"It's OK . . . I need it. Besides, it won't take that long."

Glancing at Sally's bulky suitcase, Lana tried to pick it up.

"Oh my! How are you planning to drag this with you on foot?"

"It's OK. It's got wheels—very easy to roll."

Lana pulled out a handle and turned the bag on its side. Trying to pull it, she realized it was indeed pretty easy to do.

"Still, I'd love to bring you there."

"I couldn't stand another parting. Don't you worry about me, love. A stroll will take my mind off the separation."

Lana walked up to Sally and hugged her again.

"Please, Sally, I beg you, stay, don't go anywhere. It will be so lonely without you."

Sally's heart was aching, but she had already made a decision to leave and was only hoping that the pain of separation would eventually subside.

"My departure will only make things better—you'll see. When I am gone, you'll be able to concentrate on your work and quickly sort out this mess."

"But I still don't want you to go," Lana said sadly, wiping away her tears.

"I hope that everything will fall back into place soon and that we'll be together again."

"From now on, it will be the only thing that will keep me going," Lana admitted, looking hopefully into Sally's eyes.

Sally didn't respond. Instead, she gently kissed her on the lips one last time.

It was a tormenting farewell, but they found the strength to deal with it.

Leaving her beloved behind at the bus stop, Lana was driving home, crying her eyes out. With her last bit of faith, she was hoping that the turmoil created by that damn tabloid would soon end and that she and Sally would be together again. It was the only thought that kept her from losing it.

Little did she know that Sally would never set foot in the city again.

Sunday, mid-August

As soon as the photo of Lana and Sally's kiss saw the light of day, the three policemen—Kenton Collins, Germund Keel, and Martin Silverberg—conducting unauthorized surveillance of Lana Moore disappeared from the sight of the mysterious man.

The stalker grinned with satisfaction—the scandal he had caused was working in his favor.

That first sweet kiss had a bitter aftertaste, he thought gleefully.

The man was now thinking about Sally Lockerbek—the last variable that didn't fit into his equations. As she was constantly hanging around Lana Moore, he felt a direct threat to his scheme; therefore, without a moment's hesitation, he decided to get rid of her.

Ta-ta, Sally Lockerbek . . . So long! You won't be missed, he decided, gloating over his malicious design.

Upon realizing that Sally was leaving, the mysterious man didn't give up on his despicable plans. This problem required a permanent solution that would make sure he'd never have to be bothered by it again.

Plotting to murder Sally, the stalker set the day of her departure as the day it'd all be over. Having no idea when the opportunity to do away with her would present itself, he was prepared to wait patiently and even drag himself out into the country.

Tailing Lana Moore's car at a safe distance, he drove to the outskirts of the city, where, at a remote bus stop, without even realizing it, Lana saw her darling Sally for the last time.

Settling out of their sight, the mysterious man was enjoying the tearful images of the lovers' farewell and managed to capture many touching moments.

What a beautiful goodbye . . . Straight in the face of a tragedy soon to befall. Not to worry—everything is duly recorded. The man could hardly contain his ebullience.

As soon as Lana left, Sally took off on foot, pulling her suitcase.

"Aww . . . Walking to the station? No one there to give a ride?" murmured the stalker, theatrically pouting his bottom lip.

Letting Lana Moore out of his sight for the first time because of Sally, led by murderous intent, the mysterious man was slowly following the lonely woman, occasionally stopping his car and watching her monotonous gait from a distance. In his trunk, he was carrying the tools he'd use to dig a hole and enough plastic to wrap a dead body. He had already picked the spot where he would dump the remains.

The man was assuming that because she was carrying a sizeable traveling bag, Sally would take the shortest way. Following her route, he was soon convinced that he made

the right conclusion, and knowing exactly which way she'd go, he drove ahead, overtaking her, and turned toward a small industrial district.

Parking his car, he entered the empty vicinity and quickly found the pedestrian path Sally would take to get through to the station. Plotting his sinister design, the man turned in the presumed direction of his victim's destination. Walking down a couple of hundred meters, he found the perfect spot—before exiting the neighborhood, the narrow path passed between the walls of two windowless warehouses with several large trash containers standing next to them, which was an ideal place to hide.

Taking the shortest route, Sally would have to pass this way. The mysterious man picked his spot without hesitation. Hiding behind the second container, he was lying in wait for Sally Lockerbek.

Looks like I won't even have to leave the city. I can hide the body right here until I move it later. Just perfect, he thought, pondering his actions.

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Sunday, mid-August

Having said a sorrowful goodbye, Sally took off toward the bus station. It wasn't close, but a long walk was just what she needed. She had enough time before the last bus departed and knew she wouldn't be late.

Dragging her suitcase behind her, sunk in thought, Sally was walking slowly and mechanically along the paths of the city's suburbs. She needed time to suppress the feelings aroused by the parting.

In nearly half an hour, she reached a grim river quay and set off along it. She saw several cars passing by and a few people, who went their way without paying any attention to her.

At some point, the road stretching along the river branched off, going through a small industrial area completely deserted on Sundays. As she walked among the closed offices, warehouses, and garages, Sally noticed the first signs of dusk engulfing the overcast afternoon sky.

The suitcase wheels were making a much louder sound being rolled over the bitumen road of the small city district than they had in the open area. It seemed that the empty surrounding buildings were staring at her, the intruder disturbing their peace, with their glass eyes. Suddenly, Sally felt pretty uncomfortable.

As if purposefully, her path unexpectedly narrowed and led through a dark alley with huge trash containers scattered here and there. Sally really didn't want to walk through that place, but to get out of there quickly, she had to make it through this section.

Sally paused. Even though she couldn't see a single soul, she couldn't shake a brooding and unpleasant feeling.

Hesitating for a moment and assessing the length of a detour, she pulled herself together and took a guarded step forward along the darkened pathway. Feeling tense and wishing to make as little noise as possible, Sally was rolling her suitcase slowly and carefully.

Advancing cautiously, she felt the shivers running down her spine and remained extremely vigilant, as though she knew that the gloomy alley had something to hide.

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Sunday, mid-August

Feeling rising excitement, the mysterious man was waiting to hear the first steps and the noise of the suitcase wheels rolling over the ground.

Savoring the thought that Sally would soon be gone, he was already engrossed in the idea of Lana Moore being left all alone and soon becoming his. This was a woman he could even fall in love with.

After fifteen minutes of hiding behind the trash container in the narrow alley, the man heard the sounds of Sally Lockerbek approaching. Having opened his thin leather jacket, he pulled out an engraved dagger from the inside pocket, the pleasant weight of which he had felt the entire morning.

The letter *G* fancily engraved on its blade gave the impression of authenticity and impeccability.

A perfect and unique thing. . .

The stalker once again looked at his poniard with admiration. Even though the moment when its blade would be covered with blood, when he would have to take a person's life, was nearing, he was feeling no worry, tension, or fear. On the contrary, he was in high spirits, and his heart was quivering with the thought of an approaching encounter.

As the steps of Sally Lockerbek came closer and died down, the man pricked up his ears.

Probably hesitating. . .

Soon the sounds started slowly getting closer to him again.

The final countdown had begun.

At the right moment, tightly clenching the dagger, he vigorously jumped out from the shadows and stood in the path of the terrified woman.

A neat, punctual, and responsible young man by the name of Andreas Bog was a student at the Faculty of Law and had just recently completed his junior year. Trying to make some extra cash during the summer, he was looking for a job that was at least remotely related to his future profession.

Andreas was lucky to get a job at the police archive, where he was digitizing old police reports, claims, crime-scene layouts, pictures taken, and other materials, which had been dusting on the archive shelves for decades, and entering them into the computer system.

One after another, he was removing the boxes filled with cases of minor importance, scanning each document, and uploading its digital version into the catalogs on the police servers, as instructed.

Even though this work wasn't exactly exciting or paying well, Andreas immersed himself in it with great interest and kept bringing new boxes from the depths of the archive racks into the light of the day. He would quickly read through the content of each document he was about to scan and thought of the archive as a true treasure.

One ordinary summer day, routinely going through piles of old records, Andreas noticed an unexpected connection between two cases discontinued a long while ago. Having never encountered similar situations before, he considered this to be a strange coincidence and went on with his tasks.

In a couple of days, Andreas's attention was drawn by another link. Having dug up the cases he noticed before and collated all three, he took time to think about this unusual discovery. Unsure exactly what to do next, he simply continued his work but kept thinking about his findings.

In a week's time, having found another weird link between three other cases, Andreas made copies of all the records and put them aside. This was definitely no coincidence.

Having developed a theory connecting the strange facts together, Andreas wanted to share his discovery with someone, and he therefore decided to contact the famous city detective Bruno Brawling and hear his opinion.

Andreas found Bruno's personal number and left him several messages, but excusing himself by being too busy, the detective was unable to find time for him and kept postponing their meeting.

In the middle of August, however, Andreas had finally been invited by Bruno Brawling to his office and was promised an entire hour for his visit.

The police investigators assumed that the anonymous source tipping off the details of the Gentlemen's operation was involved in the criminal world but had personal reasons to destroy the agreement with the cartel and harm the largest criminal organization in the city.

It could have been someone who wanted to leave the Gentlemen or someone holding a grudge against its current leader. That wasn't essential. What, however, did matter was that the anonymous source was making regular calls and providing information to law enforcement.

Based on that information, the police had set up surveillance on a meeting between Bruiser and the cartel members and had secretly filmed it.

Having verified the reliability of the provided information, the police began planning a huge operation aimed at capturing the criminals on both sides and seizing their weapons, drugs, and money. According to the anonymous source, the transaction was going to take place at the very end of August.

As the preparations were progressing, Bruno Brawling showed up at the office of the chief, Hubert Nilsson. He wanted to discuss one important matter, and there was no time to be wasted, thus leaving Hubert no other choice but to hear him out right away and take his requests into consideration.

As expected, having heard what he had to say, the chief was greatly surprised. He then asked one thing in return.

Bruno did not object.

A young man carrying a small folder walked into the second-floor premises of the police station and asked right away where he could find Detective Bruno Brawling. Curtis, sitting the closest to the entrance, pointed to Bruno's office, and nearly everyone in the room followed the stranger with their eyes—it wasn't very often that Bruno received guests like him.

"Andreas Bog," the young man had introduced himself, stopping in the doorway of the office. "I'm the one who's been bothering you all this time."

"Bruno Brawling. Please, take a seat," Bruno invited. "So what is this all about?"

“Thank you for giving me this opportunity. I am studying law—just finished my junior year. After my studies and internships, I plan to become a prosecutor. At the beginning of the summer break, I wanted to earn some cash for my tuition and got a job at the Department of Justice, at the police archives. I digitalize long-forgotten cases and police reports. To be honest, that place is a real treasure.”

Bruno looked at him like he was becoming annoying and blabbering too much about irrelevant things, but seeing that the guest had something he wanted to show him, he didn't interrupt him.

After a short pause, Andreas retrieved several documents from the folder he brought with him.

“At the archive, I had an opportunity to read through a number of cases of petty crimes and different types of disorderly conduct. All of them were reported more than three decades ago, before the start of the computer age,” Andreas said, placing copies of three documents from the old cases on Bruno's table one after another. “Here, take a look.”

Bruno scanned the documents. These were indeed some copies of old files: one of them was a report on the cruel treatment of an animal; the others were reports on the damage of property and vandalism.

Such reports were not an everyday thing at the station, but he saw nothing unusual.

“These are rather minor misdemeanors, and all of them are distinguished by irrationality. Who would ever have any reason to commit these violations?” Andreas contemplated.

The arguments presented by the young man didn't seem convincing to Bruno at all. Even though the collected examples indeed presented strange and vicious actions, such crimes were sometimes reported, and it hardly meant anything more than an act of infamy.

This guy is just too much into his job, Bruno decided.

“I am pretty sure that there were many more incidents of this nature,” Andreas said. “Not everyone reports cases like this.”

“I'm sure you're right,” Bruno agreed. “But what makes you think that this means anything more than comparatively minor offenses? Who knows what people who lost a bet, got drunk, or just fooling around can come up with?”

“That's the thing,” Andreas replied, opening his folder and showing five copies of other documents.

Having perused them, Bruno immediately noticed that these were copies of almost identical cases recorded in later years.

He started carefully comparing the materials.

In 1962, a director of a business loans branch working at one of the city banks contacted the police to report the cruel treatment of his pet—someone had smudged waterproof paint all over the poor animal. This could have been a simple animal abuse

case; however, a person taking the same position in another branch of the bank had complained to the police about an identical crime in 1971. Furthermore, there was also a third person who became a victim of such an atrocity in 1983.

Three different people were connected by the position they held at the same bank and by the fact that all of them had a pet—two had dogs, and one had a cat—that suffered this strange abuse. They lived in different parts of the city; therefore, the reports were filed in different police stations, and the link between them went unnoticed.

Bruno picked up a copy of another case reporting three identical incidents of property damage—all four tires of a collectible sports car were slashed. The victims were three different owners of the same car living in the different parts of the city, in the years 1963, 1974, and 1982.

The third crime had been committed only twice—in 1969 and 1980. It was a clear case of vandalism—the houses of private enterprise owners were smeared with paint. In both cases, the victims were different owners of the same company—two individuals residing in different areas of the city.

Bruno was obviously concerned. This young man had uncovered the connected facts that, up until now, no one was able to see.

“How on earth did you catch this? What brought this to your attention?”

“My task is digitizing the old cases. I take boxes from the archive and scan all the materials: pictures; case pages; and all related documents, comments, and remarks. I must admit, I was interested in them all along. Therefore, if the situation allowed, I examined their content. That’s how I accidentally came across these identical cases.”

In order to notice these connections in a huge pile of documents, Andreas must have clearly been a vigilant and patient person.

“All right. What are your thoughts on this matter?” Bruno asked.

“First of all, the oldest cases are brought to the archive of the Department of Justice from the different police departments of the city—this is what made my findings possible. Secondly, I think that nobody noticed the connection between the offenses because they’d been repeated after a considerable amount of time had passed and were reported to different police units. Thirdly, I am convinced that these facts mean something. I believe these are acts of revenge.”

“Wow! I wonder how much they are paying you for this job?”

“Not much, but if I had known what I would uncover, I would have done it for free,” Andreas said with a laugh.

Bruno leaned back in his chair. His guest’s assumptions made sense, but the last recurring episode was registered a while ago, back in 1983. Thus, whatever was standing behind these deeds was long over.

“Well, these are peculiar links, but at this moment, it’s just history,” Bruno said after giving it some consideration.

“I agree. That’s what I thought, but I know that some old cases reported other strange acts, which, I’m sure, have also been recorded during the digital era. I think many of these crimes are somehow related, and the recurring episodes that I’ve come across simply helped to find the clue.”

Bruno’s face spoke of his disagreement with these presumptions.

“Yeah, but the police have been dealing with things like this in all ages, back then and now too,” Bruno added without giving Andreas’s theory any prominence.

“You are right. However, I happened to notice some individual crimes that seemed illogical to me by their nature.”

“Like what?”

“You might recall a recent case when someone broke into the house of a member of the city council?”

“I do.”

“Nothing was taken, but the trophy that the house owner won in a golf championship was tampered with—filled with dog excrement. Someone broke into a home, which is a highly risky operation, only to play a joke!”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I don’t think it was a joke at all. It looks more like a meticulously planned revenge. Anyone of sound mind knows that if someone breaks into a famous person’s home, they will be intensively searched for. There were no suspects in this case, and it remains unsolved; therefore, if this joke were a deed of a drunk or some adventure seeker who lost a bet, I’d think the police would have long found him.”

“So who do you think is responsible?” Bruno asked.

“I’ve been thinking about it. So far, I have no explanation, except that it could be the work of multiple people, maybe a private club, the members of which systematically pull pranks and mean jokes out of vengeance. Whatever it is, they are not motivated by any material gain—it could just be their game.”

“Why do you think there is more than one person involved?”

“It’s only common sense. These things have been happening for more than half a century, so I doubt that these acts were committed by the same person. Besides, I am inclined to think that the previous repeated offenses didn’t stop but only gained a new form, perhaps due to changes in crew behind of all this, and are related to the individual similar crimes, which are still happening. It is only logical that there’d be more people involved,” Andreas responded, shrugging his shoulders.

This young man does make sense, but this is not enough. Everything must be thoroughly analyzed, which will be difficult to accomplish, if possible at all, Bruno thought.

He was pleasantly surprised by Andreas’s insight and commitment to his ideas. Undoubtedly, his companion deserved commendation, and, however seldom, he was prepared to give him credit.

“So have you thought of becoming a detective?” Bruno asked.

Andreas chuckled.

“Believe me, coming from you, this is a great compliment, but I want to be a prosecutor.”

“All right. I will be honest with you—the facts you’ve collected and your theories have got me curious; however, I am not sure about the connection between the old recurring crimes and the recently reported single offenses.”

“I understand. I do have a small favor to ask.”

“Sure.”

“The cases reported since the start of the computer age need to be reviewed, but I don’t have access to them. I would be ever so grateful if you could do it. Then you’d be able to decide for yourself whether you see any links with the recent cases.”

Bruno took a moment to think.

“OK, I’ll look into that. If I find anything interesting, I will contact you,” he promised.

Andreas was happy to excite the curiosity of Bruno Brawling himself.

“Excellent! My work didn’t go in vain.”

“We’ll see about that when I’ve reviewed the digital files,” Bruno said with a wink.

“Well, thank you for your time. I’ll be looking forward to your call.”

“It’s a deal,” Bruno said, extending a hand to Andreas. “I must compliment your initiative. Well done!”

“Thank you, I’m glad to hear it.”

Having said their goodbyes, Andreas left.

“This one will be a true professional,” Bruno concluded.

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Third week of August

Now that Sally was gone, Lana hoped she would keep daily contact with her, which would alleviate the dismal separation at least a little. Unfortunately, after sending numerous texts and trying to call her beloved on countless occasions, she was unable to reach her. Sally hadn’t replied to any of Lana’s messages on social media, and her phone was always disconnected.

Lana tied herself up in knots worrying. She had an apprehension that something bad had happened, and these thoughts were terribly tormenting and depressing. Lana couldn’t stop blaming herself that it was her fault Sally had to suffer so much pain and leave the city, where a bright future earned with blood, sweat, and tears was awaiting. She was ready to endlessly repay her guilt just to hear Sally’s voice again.

The stupidest thing was that Lana still didn't know Sally's home address, and now, hoping to keep in touch with her love, she couldn't simply take a day off and go see her.

Knowing that Sally was suffering too, Lana prayed to God that nothing terrible would happen to her or that she wouldn't do anything to harm herself. Realizing that she was the one to blame for all the misfortunes that had befallen Sally, Lana was prepared to pay for everything, whatever it took to make sure that her beloved was fine.

Lana had never felt more vulnerable and helpless. She always handled her matters with ease, but now, torn apart by the burden of the unknown, she was indifferent to her work and everyday activities while the days painfully passing by distorted her life and kept dragging her down.

She'd never been so much in love.

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Third week of August

Having some time to spare, Bruno used his privileges and had, first of all, as a matter of habit, checked out information on Andreas Bog.

Next, after entering various database inquiries, he spent a good half an hour analyzing the cases of the past decades, hoping to find something that would catch his attention.

One crime did stand out. Six years ago, the golden braid of a drunken student by the name of Molly Floss, who had briefly left a house party to step outside, was chopped off. The officers responding to the incident were trying to calm things down and find out who could have pulled such a nasty prank, but the young men and women present at the party swore they didn't do it.

Unfortunately, Molly herself was unable to throw any light on the circumstances of the incident, either, because she was completely wasted when it happened. Having taken down the names of all the youngsters, the officers took the victim's statement and searched the surroundings. After finding no evidence, they left. No further accusations had been raised.

Ain't this just beautiful. . . Who would be randomly carrying a large knife or scissors? Bruno thought.

The next morning, having been brought to the police station by her parents, Molly had withdrawn her statement without any explanation. The girl's father, an influential businessman, likely trying to avoid publicity, stated that the family had no claims against anyone. The case was closed before Molly's friends even had a chance to properly sober up.

Bruno also noticed that this offense was committed in the same area where he was currently living.

Searching for other similar occurrences, after a while, Bruno came across another odd episode. During an official presentation of a company's new product, the wives of two prominent business figures suddenly started acting strange—they climbed onto the stage and deliberately tore up the packaging of the product, revealing it too soon. Then, holding each other, the two started singing.

Probably had too much to drink or were high, Bruno considered, dismissing this report as one that did not belong to the category he was looking for.

Bruno also found the case he had discussed with Andreas—the championship trophy defamed by the dog feces. This offense had the same cynical nature, with no evidence left behind, except, obviously, the dog's dung, as well as a broken window.

Despite the fact that the member of the city council was not afraid of publicity and wanted to know his offender, the police were unable to help, and the investigation soon reached a dead end.

The insurance indemnified for the damages incurred, and the affected was most probably forced to forget this had ever happened, Bruno deliberated.

Trying not to jump to any conclusions, he thought that this was likely to have been a planned and well-prepared-for misdeed. Chances are, some random rogues who decided to amuse themselves would hardly be able to leave no trace behind. Thus, however strange it sounded, this was the job of a professional prankster or a group of them.

Bruno decided that the cases of Molly Floss and the golf trophy could fit with the crimes he was discussing with Andreas Bog a few days ago.

Having compared the recurring misdemeanors reported in the past with the information he just found, Bruno saw no pattern—they were committed in different parts of the city and directed against people of different social class, age, and race.

After skimming over the archive files of his own department just in case and discovering nothing of note, Bruno fell into thinking. At the moment, aside from numerous personal matters, he was investigating the murder of Kelly Patterson and was getting ready for the operation against the Gentlemen; therefore, he highly doubted his ability to make any significant contribution to solving the strange crimes. Besides, Hubert Nilsson would never approve of wasting human resources on such ordinary cases.

Feeling that he wouldn't be much of help, Bruno called Andreas Bog and offered to meet.

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Third week of August

Bruno valued the work done by Andreas. When meeting him again, he told Andreas about the Molly Floss case and mentioned that he was going to talk to the member of the council, and then he immediately apologized for not being able to help with anything else.

The face of the student radiating such hope at the beginning of the meeting suddenly saddened—he needed answers.

Revealing important personal circumstances, Bruno assured his companion that he was in fact greatly interested in his theories; however, at the moment, he would be unable to do anything to help, except to keep an eye on the news and wait for similar incidents.

Wishing to find who was standing behind all those deeds, the two decided to keep in touch and share any news, and if they happened to get a break on this matter, Bruno promised to find someone to assist.

After saying goodbye to Andreas, he went to see the member of the city council. Having been invited inside, Bruno asked to see the trophy. He was about to ask some questions concerning the incident when the man suddenly froze—he had just realized that the trophy won at the golf championship had been replaced with a cheap fake, which had been standing on the shelf along with the rest of the prizes for God knows how long.

The council member was petrified.

“What in the hell is going on?” he stuttered, looking at Bruno, perplexed.

“I would like to know what exactly happened at that golf championship, who the participants were, and anything else you can remember,” Bruno said, trying to hide a smile and anticipating a long conversation.

He was hoping to finally get something useful.

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Third week of August

Lana Moore was sitting at her desk, going through charity documents. Juliana wasn't there yet. Unexpectedly, Sally walked into the office.

Rendered speechless, Lana couldn't take her eyes off her. Without uttering a single word, Sally approached her, then slowly and gently kissed her on the lips.

Kissing her back, Lana looked into her eyes, full of love and amazement.

“Sally . . .” she muttered.

Without uttering a word, Sally softly kissed her forehead, then her cheek.

Unable to comprehend what was actually happening, Lana was enjoying the affection of her beloved to the bottom of her soul. While Sally kept on kissing her face, Lana was tenderly repeating: “Sally . . . Sally . . .” Not long after that, struck by the euphoria of amorous emotions, she began giggling with happiness, trying to embrace her.

This soul-healing episode was mercilessly interrupted by the alarm clock. Turning it off, Lana was left in a dismal mood and kept on lying in bed, inevitably thinking about Sally: desiring to draw her closer, to embrace and kiss her, to tell how much she loved her,

to listen to her tender response, and to finally find peace in her heart after the agonizing separation.

Dear God, I beg you, keep her safe.

Hoping that this beautiful dream meant something good, Lana got up and started the new day. After dressing and grabbing a quick breakfast, she went to work. Walking into the office, she greeted Juliana and sat behind her desk.

Lana couldn't find the energy to do the work and abandoned the dreams about her future career. Unprepared for this unexpected and painful separation, she had unconditionally succumbed to thoughts about Sally.

Lately, Juliana Spencer, her best friend, who understood and supported her, was her only comfort.

Attempting to distract Lana, she had several times mentioned making an official press release, which was badly needed to stop the relentless gossip about Lana and Sally's friendship. Juliana kept telling her that everything was fine with Sally and was urging Lana to act or take a break from everything and get out of the city for a bit.

Plagued with the worry of the unknown, Lana refused to do it. Until she heard from Sally—even a single word just to know that she was alive—she wouldn't find peace, no matter where she went.

Lana perfectly realized that she had to take public opinion into consideration and make an official statement; however, she was yet unable to plunge into the professional realities. She was mostly concerned about the fact that before leaving, Sally had never expressed the desire to sever contact. Therefore, Lana intended to go to the police soon.

Sitting at her desk and not knowing where to begin, she glanced at Juliana, once again looking to confide in her.

Lana's phone buzzed—a new text message arrived. Unwilling to talk to anyone, she didn't pay any attention—the ringtone wasn't Sally's.

Knowing that only the news of her beloved could grant Lana any comfort, Juliana was about to console her friend yet again, but the phone buzzed a second time.

Lana checked to see who kept bothering her. Both messages came from the same unknown sender. She opened the first message and read it: *Hello, Lana, it's me, Sally. Forgive my long silence, but I needed some time alone . . . It was a dreadful time.*

"Oh my God!" exclaimed Lana. "It's Sally!"

Juliana was by her side in a split of a moment.

Lana went on reading the second message: *Fortunately, I no longer feel low, but it was really hard.*

Lana exhaled with immense relief. Standing there next to her, Juliana placed her hand on her shoulder.

Soon, the third message came in: *How are you holding on, my darling? Hope you are not mad at me.*

Lana felt like the world around her had regained its colors. The messages, even though incomparable to direct contact, were a million times better than the terrifying silence.

Wishing to share her feelings, Lana wanted to call Sally right away and hear her voice. But just then she received the fourth message: *I know you have many questions. I miss you so much. I will call you later today. I can't talk right now . . . OK?*

As the uncertainty was over, at last, Lana felt uplifted. She hastily typed the reply: *I am not angry at all. Love you madly! Can't wait for your call. Kisses.*

"Finally," Juliana said with great relief.

"How wonderful," Lana said, exhaling and wiping away a tear of joy. "I've nearly gone crazy with worry."

"You'll see—everything will be fine."

"Now I do believe you," Lana, who had clearly lightened up, said with a chuckle. "I need just a little bit more to be happy."

Taken by emotions, they embraced each other.

106

Third week of August

Bruno was well aware of the scandal around Lana Moore and suspected she might need someone strong and reliable she could lean on and who would help her through the crisis.

That person could be him—Bruno Brawling.

Because he had been careful not to display any personal interest toward her, Bruno knew that he looked trustworthy in Lana's eyes and was prepared to lend her a hand. To do that, he'd need to meet with a top-ranking official and try to get him on his side.

More than a month had passed before Bruno was given an appointment.

Being swamped with work and experiencing unexpected difficulties lately, he gladly welcomed the opportunity to get out to the capital city.

Having considered various possible scenarios of their conversation, when arriving at the meeting, Bruno felt confident and believed that he'd be able to take on his opponent. He expected mighty resistance and was prepared to throw in the trump card he had been keeping secret for the past seven years.

Fiddling with his phone, Bruno was sitting in the waiting room, using the time before the meeting.

"Bruno Brawling! Nice to meet you!" the prime minister greeted cheerfully as he came out of his office.

Rising immediately, Bruno shook his hand.

The prime minister seemed to have aged a little since their last encounter. He was already in his late sixties, but being in a good mood, he radiated more energy than when Bruno saw him on TV.

The premier was wearing an expensive black suit, white shirt, and a dark blue tie. He looked rather imposing, like someone holding a high-ranking position.

“Thank you for agreeing to see me.”

“My pleasure, Bruno. Please, come in.”

Bruno stepped into his office. There was an office suite standing against the back wall and a long desk with a massive leather chair behind it. A painting depicting a glorious battle that made the country’s history was hanging on the wall.

Beautiful plants in large pots were lined up under the windows of the left wall. A black leather couch and comfortable chairs were placed in the right corner, with a long wooden coffee table next to them. On the wall was a framed reproduction of the country’s first constitution, and a big, expensive carpet granted coziness to the spacious room.

“Have a seat,” the premier offered amiably, pointing to the sitting area.

“Thank you.”

Settling comfortably on the three-seat couch, Bruno noticed a massive bookcase standing next to the entrance, holding what could easily be a thousand neatly arranged books. The office made quite an impression on him.

“Tea, thank you,” the premier muttered over the internal phone line, approaching his desk.

“I hope it won’t come as a surprise if I tell you I am here to ask for a favor,” Bruno spoke up.

“Getting straight to the business, aren’t we?” The premier laughed. “I like that, Bruno Brawling. Many of those with their empty talks I have to face on a daily basis could learn a thing or two from you,” the head of state complimented, sinking down into one of the armchairs.

Bruno smiled.

“Don’t worry—I wasn’t expecting that you came here to help me,” he added. “Let’s hear what’s so important that we couldn’t discuss it over the phone. By the way, I must warn you right away: ask for anything you want, anything but money.” The prime minister guffawed again.

Not a bad defense tactic, Bruno assessed.

Entering the room, the secretary placed two cups with hot water on the coffee table and a box of assorted tea bags, sugar cubes, and two teaspoons.

“Why not money?” Bruno asked as the secretary left, dipping a tea bag into the water.

“Right now, everything is shackled by the global financial crisis, with no end in sight. The country is going through a difficult period,” the premier said seriously. “Everyone, including me, has their hands tied because there is barely enough funds to cover the most essential things.”

“You sound just like the news presenter, even though I came to see the prime minister himself,” Bruno responded openly, taking a sip of the tea.

The head of state silently glanced askance at his companion.

“Alas, even I can be helpless at times,” he replied.

“I hope you will still be able to help me,” Bruno said bluntly.

“And what is actually the matter?”

“Financing.”

“Financing? What for?” The prime minister sounded genuinely surprised, then sipped his tea.

“It’s for the special education center called Sparkle.”

“Bruno, I have to ask, since when are you involved in charity matters?”

“I promised to help Lana Moore—you must have heard about her?”

“Lana Moore,” the premier said, slowly stretching out the name, obviously understanding what it was all about. “And this is why you came to see me?”

“Yes.”

“Bruno, I am sure the charming Miss Moore deserves respect and all the best for the charity work she does, but I am not a doctor of love affairs and do not solve problems of this sort. When I offered to help, I meant a personal favor for you. You know, something related to your job.”

Bruno was quiet.

“I am able to make a phone call, pull some strings, or put a good word in from the top. Do you understand?”

“Sure. However, the assistance you offered is required not as much for me as for Lana Moore—that’s why I came here to ask you to help her, not me.”

“You came here?” The premier expressively repeated Bruno’s words. “Do you know how many ‘comers’ like this are approaching me every day? If I were to give them as much attention as I do to you, I wouldn’t be able to do my job at all,” he snapped in a raised voice, glancing at the door of his office.

Bruno did notice that, but he wasn’t planning to leave until he got what he came for.

“I didn’t expect such a negative attitude, dear Prime Minister. You left an impression of a very agreeable man the last time we spoke,” Bruno replied in a calm voice, slightly irritating the premier, and kept on sipping his tea.

“Bruno, you must understand that right now, I don’t have time for charity funds,” the premier uttered patronizingly. “The crisis poses serious concerns for the country’s well-being—entire business and industry sectors are frozen, and many struggle just to survive. You there, living off the budget, don’t even get where the money comes from. There is none!” he said, his cheerful mood gone.

“Nonetheless,” Bruno insisted, “I would really appreciate it if you could help. Maybe the amount I ask won’t even seem significant.”

“And what is the amount?”

Bruno pulled a small piece of paper with the sum written on it from his pocket and handed it to the prime minister.

“The financing must be approved within a few weeks, and the funds must start coming in from the beginning of the next year,” he added.

Looking at the number, the premier only snorted. The, having crumpled it right in front of Bruno, he demonstratively flicked it away.

“Are you out of your mind?” he snarled. “Do you expect me to go rob a bank for you? I don’t have this kind of money!”

“You are one of the most influential persons in the country. You must know who does.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t run errands, Bruno. I have real work to do. Besides, this could have been discussed over the phone. It would have saved you a trip,” the prime minister finished, content with his own speech, and glanced at the office door once again.

He felt like he had done away with his visitor.

“We are done here,” he added, taking a gulp of tea.

Putting his cup on the table, he was about to stand up.

Bruno didn’t move—he hadn’t even begun to talk seriously yet.

“Are you sure there is no way you will help me voluntarily?” Bruno asked for the last time.

“Voluntarily or not, there is no money!” the premier retorted.

His body language was clearly telling his guest to leave.

Time to step up my game, Bruno decided.

“All right. I didn’t want to talk about things that are unpleasant to the ear. I only have a few more words to say—it won’t take long. Then you can decide for yourself whether you are willing to help me.”

This caught the prime minister’s attention.

“This matter is very important to me, and I have no intention of going back empty-handed,” Bruno said calmly. Not allowing the premier to react, he continued: “I’m here to get the money, not to ask for it, so save your speech about the crisis for someone else.”

Unable to believe what he’d just heard, the prime minister sincerely laughed at that.

“What? Who do you think you are, Bruno Brawling?”

He looked at Bruno like he was some dumb fool, but his face didn’t move a muscle.

Feeling a little embarrassed about his laughter, the premier decided to let Bruno’s insolent tone go, and collecting himself, he continued diplomatically: “All right, all right, jokes aside . . . I see that you are indeed serious about this whole aiding Lana Moore thing. No offense, but that doesn’t change anything—I can’t help you.”

After allowing a few seconds to pass, Bruno spoke placidly: “Unfortunately, I have to move on to the unpleasant part of our conversation.”

Waiting for an explanation, the premier kept looking straight at him.

“You see, I came here to save your reputation. I wanted to talk to you in private, without leaving any trace behind; therefore, I will get right to the point—I know about your connection with the notorious pedophile Oliver Paxton and his financial support.”

The premier’s countenance changed. Suddenly Bruno saw a man tempered in all possible verbal battles throughout his long political career, a man who had defeated a multitude of tough opponents and withstood the opposition arsenal of the entire country.

The fact that an ordinary man like Bruno Brawling was now dictating the terms was an unprecedented event in the premier’s life.

“Do you realize who you’re talking to? You—a mere police officer! I could crush you like a worm!” he threatened.

With his eyebrows raised high on his broad forehead, slightly droopy sideburns, and eyes shooting daggers at Bruno, the prime minister looked like an old enraged bulldog ready to tear his opponent to pieces—he was, after all, one of the top politicians and had been elected for a third four-year term just last year.

Even though his companion looked ferocious, Bruno wasn’t afraid—he knew that this attack was only his self-defense. His opponent clearly didn’t expect an easy way out.

“I don’t doubt your abilities, Your Excellency, that’s why, before I even called your secretary, I was prepared to sacrifice my career. What I am more concerned about at the moment is whether you are ready for it yourself.”

The premier was about to burst with a new wave of anger and fury, but Bruno outpaced him: “Let me remind you that at the start of your political career, Oliver Paxton and his associates provided you with financial assistance. Do you recollect that?”

“That doesn’t mean anything! I didn’t do anything wrong—I knew nothing about him at that time and have nothing in common with what he’s done!”

“Maybe so, but I have coincidentally remembered the slogan of your campaign: “Absolute honesty!” What do you reckon the voters will think when they find out that you started your career with Oliver Paxton’s money?” Bruno said, slowly finishing his cup of tea.

Making threats just a moment ago, the premier decided to sit this round out.

“I can help you answer this question: there will definitely be someone thinking that you are one of Paxton’s gang members who somehow escaped the arrest. Maybe Oliver Paxton would still have time to answer a question or two that no one asked him up until now,” Bruno persisted.

After a short silence, the prime minister spoke up.

“You know, Bruno,” he said seriously, “when I attended the ceremony held in your honor to celebrate your promotion, I offered to help because I wanted to thank you, the nation’s hero, personally, for your sacrifice to society. I wanted to somehow reward you for the hard work, support you, or straighten out a few things for you, if needed. I must admit, I regret it now. You used my sincere intentions against me to pursue your own

goals,” he said, standing up and walking over to a cabinet. Opening its bottom doors and taking out a decanter of whiskey and one glass, he placed them on his desk.

Threats turned into pathos—the next stage of defense, Bruno decided.

Closing the doors of the cabinet, the premier poured half a glass of whiskey and, without even looking at Bruno, took a big gulp. Putting the glass back on his desk, he exhaled deeply, took off his coat, and threw it over the chair. Loosening up his tie and undoing the top button of his white shirt, he sat down on his massive leather chair.

The prime minister looked crushed. Retiring behind the desk, he seemed to have dissociated himself from Bruno, who still sat on the corner of the couch.

“As a detective, you must perfectly understand,” he began, breaking the long silence, “that I’ve done nothing wrong in accepting legal financial support from Oliver Paxton, who hadn’t yet become infamous for his atrocious deeds, just like I did from other individuals and organizations wishing to see me take this position. Think about your actions, Bruno. By exploiting this controversial case, which left open wounds in the society, you are resorting to threats and extortion. Tell me, how do you fancy this picture yourself?”

“I’m not touched by your little sob story—the money I am asking for is not for me; it’s for the children, who seem to have been forgotten by both the government and private sponsors. If you were a bit more accommodating, we wouldn’t have had to go there.”

“If I were complaisant and agreeable with just anyone, I wouldn’t be the prime minister, would I?”

“You are probably right,” Bruno said with a smile.

“Unfortunately, Detective Bruno Brawling, I must admit that I can’t see how you are better than the ones you are chasing if you are trying to achieve your goals with such means.”

“Leave the moral dilemmas to me, Your Excellency. Let’s pretend that you are just an influential politician who will be, for once, used to the benefit of the people who, time after time, allowed you to use them.” There was not the slightest sign of compassion in Bruno’s face.

The prime minister looked straight into his eyes, and without uttering a word, he grabbed the glass from the desk and took another gulp of whiskey.

Accepting support from Oliver Paxton, who at the time was just an ordinary businessman, was no foul play on his part; therefore, he should not give in to extortion—he should show Bruno Brawling his place. After all, throughout his political career, he had won much more brutal verbal battles against many strong opponents of various political levels and got what he was striving for.

On the other hand, the prime minister didn’t wish to be associated with the infamous Oliver Paxton. Not now, anyway. If the fact of his financial support got out, it could lead to unstoppable talk and speculation, putting his position and entire political career at risk, and the premier wasn’t prepared to lose either.

Understanding that Bruno meant business and not expecting that a new round of threats would be effective, having weighed everything out, the premier was ready to back down. He was going to strategically admit his defeat to continue the war on the quiet. Contemplating being well prepared for the next duel, which Bruno wouldn't even expect, he intended to strike a decisive blow against this bully who was giddy with today's victory.

Just you wait, squirt! I will get you! the prime minister thought, consoling himself.

Turning to his guest and piercing him with his eyes one more time, the premier exhaled, undeniably admitting his defeat. Watching his companion, Bruno realized that his mission was accomplished.

"You win, Bruno," the prime minister finally uttered. "I will see what I can do, even though there is not much time left. Tell me one thing—how did you find out about Paxton's assistance at the start of my career? Did he tell you that himself?"

"No, he never said it directly. When in prison, I was trying to absorb his every word, but I must admit, many of his stories seemed like make-believe and incoherent thoughts. On several occasions, Oliver mentioned an acquaintance who had taken a top-level position, who received a considerable amount of cash from him to boost his career, and whom he expected to help if need be. At the time, I thought that he was boasting again; however, later, after the operation, I realized that he was talking about you."

"How is that?" the premier asked.

"He mentioned that the acquaintance of his was sometimes referred to as the Invincible. Coincidentally, I came across an old fragment of your advertising campaign and saw that this was how they referred to you during the elections. That's when Oliver's words started to make sense."

Frowning, the prime minister nodded, barely noticeably, but did not respond.

"Having checked the financial proceeds of your first campaign, I've discovered skillfully concealed money transfers from Oliver Paxton. Because we have common interests, nobody will find out about it, but if you try to pull anything stupid, it will end up in the press. The fact that you've been trying to hide this until now will only increase the suspicions."

"I don't doubt that," the prime minister replied. "However, if you ever think of blackmailing me again, I promise you that I'll do everything to make sure you regret it, whatever it may cost me! Try to remember that, Bruno Brawling!"

Bruno watched the prime minister, who was staring ferociously right at him and whose face and stance projected the seriousness of every word he'd just said. It was clear that his threats were very real.

"I'll be looking forward to hearing the good news. Call me," Bruno said, placing his business card on the table. "Don't wait too long. When the time comes, you will have to inform Lana Moore about the assistance yourself. When I get your confirmation of the financing, I'll make sure to set up an appointment. Keep in mind, the sponsor will be offering support to Sparkle, a special education center for children, and this must be done

through Karis Panti, headed by Lana Moore. The funding must be announced officially. I'll let you decide for yourself whether you want your name to be mentioned."

"I accept," the prime minister responded after a short pause, without taking his stare off Bruno.

"I must warn you, though, to keep a kind and positive tone during your conversation with Lana Moore. Reserve all your anger and hatred for me."

"I'll do just that," the premier replied earnestly.

"Well, then, thank you for your time—and good luck," Bruno said, rising from the couch.

"Remember that today you made a new enemy, Bruno," the prime minister warned, trying to instill a bit of fear in him before bidding a cold farewell.

Bruno calmly walked out of the room without reacting to what was just said.

Finding himself alone, the premier felt completely beaten down. Calling his secretary on the internal line, he asked to cancel all the meetings planned for today and fell into deep thought about the conversation that had just ended.

He couldn't recall the last time his butt was so brutally kicked, but he knew perfectly well that it was not the time to give in to emotions or feel sorry for himself. Unprepared for any of this, he now had a new problem to take care of, and the time to deal with it was running out.

Drinking up the last sip of whiskey, the premier was thinking about his loyal supporters, trying to decide which of them would lend a hand at a difficult moment. He knew that asking for money wouldn't be easy, but with a little pressure and some promises, he'd be able to find someone who could help.

Then it would be time to decide how to get even with Bruno Brawling.

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Third week of August

After finally hearing back from Sally, Lana had right away regained interest in her daily affairs and the world around her. She was longing to talk to Sally, which would disperse the last of the confusion caused by the maddening silence.

Still worrying a little, Lana promised herself to be more protective of her beloved in the future and was planning to do something sweet and memorable to make up for the tribulations they both had to endure.

Getting a call from Sally that same afternoon gave Lana yet another adrenaline rush. She immediately answered the phone.

"Hello."

"Hi, Lana."

“Oh my God, Sally, it’s you!”

“Yes! It’s nice to hear you after all this time!”

“I can’t believe I am finally hearing your voice, darling. Where are you? Is everything OK? I’ve been worried sick!”

“Everything is fine. Forgive my long silence—it was longer than I’d wished. I was scared and hiding from everyone. To be honest, the day of departure was one of the hardest things in my entire life.”

“Oh, Sally,” gasped Lana, “my love—”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. Tell me how things are going for you. Is everything OK?”

“The most important thing now is that I can hear your voice again. The work won’t go anywhere—I’ll manage. I must admit I didn’t know what to think. I even thought that you were angry at me . . . I know that it’s all my fault you had to suffer through all this.”

“Don’t say that, darling. You’ve suffered no less than I did. Everything was just so messed up. . . I could never be mad at you, and you should not blame yourself.”

“Thank you, Sally. I am grateful you are fine. It would be wonderful to see you.”

“Now that I have finally calmed down, I feel like I would be able to come soon, but I don’t know exactly when.”

“I don’t want to rush you. Come when you are ready. Just know that I miss you insanely.”

Lana noticed Juliana brush away a tear of joy.

“I can’t wait to see you and hold you close to me, my sweet Lana. I hope it won’t be long.”

“I will be counting the seconds, Sally.”

“Me too, my love.”

“I am planning to issue an official press release”—Lana turned to Juliana, who gave her a big smile—“and everything will fall back into place. You’ll see.”

“I trust you with my heart and soul, darling. I am sorry, but it’s time for me to go. Kisses, my love.”

“I love you, Sally. Can we talk again soon?”

“Definitely!”

“Kisses. Bye.”

“Bye.”

The torture of the unknown had finally ended. Feeling like she suddenly grew wings, Lana hugged her friend Juliana. Now there was nothing she couldn’t do, and no one in the world could stop her.

It was time to call the press conference.

Delighted to have scored a glorious win, Bruno Brawling was heading home. On the way back, he reflected on his confrontation with one of the country's top leaders and was rejoicing that his companion, who had laughed at his words at the start of their conversation, was forced to throw in the towel at the end.

The victory over the prime minister was not achieved with the kindest of measures, but Bruno realized he couldn't afford to back down. Wishing to help Lana, he had to act quickly. Besides, what he did was for a noble cause; therefore, he felt no remorse when threatening the premier.

He, of course, knew that the prime minister didn't do anything shady. He was merely a victim of unfortunate circumstances.

Happy that he would be able to help the special education center and Lana Moore, who was facing various difficulties, Bruno couldn't wait to receive the call confirming the financing.

Halfway into his three-hour journey, he was starving and needed to use a bathroom, so he decided to stop at a small restaurant on the side of the highway.

Walking in, Bruno saw only a few people inside.

Good, no lines, he thought, satisfied.

Waiting for his minestrone and beefsteak, Bruno ran through the day's to-do list in his mind and passively watched the news.

After the soup was served, he quickly emptied the bowl, enjoying every spoonful of it, awakening his appetite even more. A moment later, cutting into a soft, juicy steak, he felt genuine gratification.

Imagining how he would pleasantly surprise Lana Moore with the unexpected good news, Bruno was already enjoying the future moment and even felt a little proud of himself.

Having ordered a slice of chocolate cake and café latte for dessert, he knew he'd be seriously stuffed, but after winning such a major battle, he felt like he had the right to indulge.

Enjoying each sip of his coffee and savoring the cake, Bruno was watching the TV report on Oliver Paxton. The day of August 24 was approaching. At 9:00 p.m. that day, he would receive the death penalty.

Having been buried with work, Bruno had forgotten about him, but now he suddenly remembered the time spent in prison, the stories told in the cell, and Oliver's loyal friend Andrea.

I wonder where she is now, he thought, smiling.

Thinking of Oliver Paxton, the only thing Bruno regretted was that the death penalty wasn't executed much sooner.

He slowly finished his dessert and had two cups of coffee.

Mmm . . . What a delicious cake.

Having paid for his lunch, Bruno walked out of the restaurant and headed toward his SUV. He then received a call from the head of department, Hubert, who briefed him on the newest information offered by the anonymous source and informed him that the police operation against the Gentlemen had been moved to the first week of September.

This was the only work-related matter on his day off. Getting into his car, Bruno made a mental note of the restaurant, and after making several personal calls, he took off for home.

While driving, Bruno fell into thinking about Lana Moore. The end of the summer was approaching, and so was the deadline for him to get closer to her, as promised to his colleagues.

None of his coworkers could even imagine that the pursuit of this amazing woman, which started as a wish to demonstrate his abilities, had in a very short time radically changed him and made him feel what he hadn't felt toward another woman since Agnes Stiffler.

It didn't take long for him to fall in love with Lana, however strange it might sound.

Bruno wasn't planning to hide his affection. He therefore decided to meet her, share the news of the availability of the funding, and reveal his feelings to her.

He didn't dare to try to guess what Lana's response would be and what his colleagues would think of the finale of his challenge. He only knew that he needed to do it and was most of all worried that he'd scare her.

109

Third week of August

The conference hall at 49 Olive Street was packed with a crowd of journalists who had gathered there to hear the official statement to the press to be issued by Lana Moore. Getting comfortable on the chairs lined up in several rows, everyone was eager to listen to what she had to say about the recent scandal.

Mario K. Habbermann was nowhere to be seen.

Arriving at the conference hall from her office, Lana had gracefully emerged from behind the curtain, followed by the flashing lights of cameras and looks of several dozen journalists, and now stood behind the podium.

Placing a sheet of paper in front of her, she adjusted the height of the microphone stand and assuredly spoke to the audience: "Thank you for coming. I would like to address

the public and dispel the suspicions created by Mario K. Habbermann, who illegally publicized an episode of my private life. At the end of the statement, there will be time for your questions.”

Lana made a short pause, ran her eyes across the room full of people, and looked down at her notes. The hall went silent in expectation of the news.

“On August tenth, *M. K. H. Limited* published a photo of me of a personal nature. The publication was issued without my consent and aroused a storm of gossip and confusion around my persona, which caused me a great deal of stress and public pressure. Consequently, I have lost the trust of part of the community. Mario K. Habbermann trampled on my right to privacy.”

Lana Moore paused again. Then, lifting her head up, she looked at the audience. Her statement was being aired live.

“I’d like to emphasize,” she continued, “that my personal characteristic displayed in the photo published in *M. K. H. Limited* does not have any influence on my integrity and work, and I would like to assure you that there is no reason to doubt my ability and willingness to serve society. Like any citizen of this country, I want to live an undisturbed life without having to be shamed or harassed for who I am. This right is granted to me by law. Thank you.”

Raising her eyes, she made it clear that this was the end of the statement.

The reporters stirred up, waving their hands in the air, wishing to ask questions. Lana Moore pointed to one of them.

“Had the photo not been printed, were you planning to tell society about your relationship with Sally Lockerbek?”

“I had no intentions of hiding it; however, it would have been made public only at a time acceptable for the both of us,” Lana replied, then picked another reporter.

“Where is Sally Lockerbek now?”

“Sally’s reaction to such cruel publicity about her private life was particularly painful. Therefore, she left the city for an indefinite period of time.”

Another question came quickly: “There are rumors that you chose Sally as the winner of ‘The Silent Legacy’ because of your friendship. What can you say about that?”

“This gossip has no real grounds. I didn’t know Sally at all before the final event and had met her only once, during her interview as a future participant. Our friendship emerged only after the Midsummer Festival, and I can assure you that her victory was absolutely fair.”

“What are your future plans with Sally Lockerbek?” asked another journalist.

“I would like to remain silent on this private matter.”

“Why did you wait to make this statement?” asked a journalist from the back row.

“Such insolent intrusion into my private life had thrown me off my stride and disturbed my emotional balance. I needed time to regain my inner strength and reclaim my life.”

“Are you planning to sue Mario K. Habbermann?” asked another journalist picked by Lana.

“I have no such plans; instead, I would like to conserve my time and energy for work. This person caused enough havoc in my life, and I want to put everything behind me. Allow me to thank you all again for coming. Have a good day.”

Ignoring the buzzing of the journalists wishing to ask more questions, after saying goodbye, Lana Moore quickly disappeared behind the curtain of the small conference hall.

The statement was now completed.

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Last week of August

Just a couple of days after their meeting, Bruno received a call from the prime minister. Having been promised that the special education center would receive substantial financial support and that the official statement confirming the intention would be issued, he started preparing for his following move.

Dialing Lana Moore’s number, Bruno suddenly realized that this was the first time he was calling her—all previous conversations had been initiated by Lana.

“Hello,” she answered.

“Hello, Lana. How are you?”

“Hello, Bruno. Thank you, I’m actually fine. It’s been a while. How you’ve been doing?”

“I’ve been very busy lately, but otherwise, everything is great.”

“Good to hear.”

“Thank you. Listen, I am calling regarding a matter I would like to discuss in person. I am talking about the sponsorship for the special education center. Can we meet?”

He is going to tell me that he didn’t succeed, but he wants to deliver the news in person, Lana decided.

“Sure. Would you like to stop by Karis Panti?”

“I’d like to meet in the city center, at the promenade, in the late afternoon of the last day of August.”

Lana hesitated for a moment.

Seriously, Bruno? Do you really need to tell me the news in such a place?

“Don’t take me wrong, Bruno, but as you can imagine, I’ve been through quite a lot recently. I would prefer not to meet in public. People watch my every step as it is.”

“I understand. This Habbermann deserves to be nailed to the wall.”

Lana giggled.

“I am sure that the statement to the press has clearly demonstrated that you’ve been used and victimized. The way I see it, a brief public appearance would be just the right thing, but don’t think I’m nosing about in your business.”

“No, no, Bruno, of course, I don’t. But I have to admit—that might make me a little uncomfortable.”

“I promise that nothing bad will happen to you. I need to tell you something important and would be really grateful for a short, official meeting. I am sure that the afternoon promenade would be perfect.”

“To be honest, I’m still trying to avoid public places . . . However strange that might sound coming from such a public figure like me.”

“Meeting in a place like that would be an excellent opportunity for you to see that you no longer have to hide.”

Bruno’s encouraging tone gave Lana a brighter perspective on her situation. Having no reason to doubt the decency of his intention, she was considering his offer.

Maybe he needs to discuss something? I must use every opportunity, she thought, just to be on the safe side, justifying the decision in her mind.

“So, Lana, what would it take to convince you?” Bruno said cheerfully, breaking the silence.

“OK, agreed. Is six o’clock fine with you?”

“Sure! I’ll be waiting at an outdoor table at the Midpoint Café.”

“All right.”

“Good, then. I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye, Bruno.”

111

Last week of August

It had been nearly half a year since Bruno accepted the challenge to pursue Lana Moore’s affection, but none of his colleagues taking an interest in this matter had reason to believe that he was even a step closer to achieving his goal. Funny enough, Bruno felt the same way himself.

When accepting the bet to get close to Lana, Bruno had a clear action plan, and seeking to prove his superiority to everyone, he was plotting to gain her trust and use her to his advantage, but before long, Bruno fell in love with her, and that’s when things became confusing.

Falling for Lana had trampled Bruno’s deep-rooted pride and the desire to show off his dominance, which often was the decisive factor in his behavior. He no longer cared about what others would think, even if it turned out that he failed in his endeavor.

Bruno was anxious to end this madness around a challenge that no longer made sense.

Knowing that his coworkers would not let it slide, he decided to put up a small show at the promenade. Having invited three of his colleagues, he asked them to judge on the outcome of the challenge for themselves.

Bruno was planning to invite Lana over to his place that same evening and confess his feelings. He knew he could freak her out and possibly even damage their friendship, but he was determined to do it anyway.

Prepared to be ready for anything, Bruno had been thinking about it every day, but he was still unsure about the consequences of his actions. He had in store significant and joyful news to share with Lana concerning the funding he found, which, in his mind, should somewhat mitigate the situation that might emerge at his home.

On the night before the meeting at the promenade, Bruno had once again checked the weather forecast—it seemed rather promising. Tomorrow’s passersby didn’t even suspect that they would become the witnesses of his performance, but just thinking about the fateful evening gave Bruno collywobbles. It was that same feeling he got only at the most critical moments in his life.

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August 31

Determined to put the lid on his foolish challenge, Bruno left work earlier, and having hastily tossed his stuff into the trunk of the SUV, he took off to the city center.

Despite the fact that he was expecting a complicated situation to unravel tonight at his house, on the way to see Lana Moore, Bruno didn’t feel any tension and was in fact quite relaxed. He was wondering how she would react to the news about the critical issue of funding being solved and was anticipating all the positive things that would happen in her life because of this.

Having arrived at the promenade, Bruno left his car at the south end. Walking to the middle of the avenue, he sat down at one of the tables outside the Midpoint Café.

He ordered a glass of sparkling water and looked around. Kenton Collins, Germund Keel, and Martin Silverberg, the guys he invited, were already sitting at the table on the other side of the promenade.

Lana Moore didn’t keep anyone waiting—she soon appeared, coming from the northern end of the avenue.

As she approached, Bruno stood up and greeted her: “Hello, Lana. Please sit down.”

“Hi, Bruno. This is my first such public appearance since the press release, and I must admit, I am a bit nervous,” she explained, cowering slightly.

“I think everything will be just fine and hope that this meeting will only do you good.”

“I’d like to think it would,” Lana replied in a way that sounded like she didn’t believe it herself.

“Would you like to order?” asked the waiter attending to their table.

“One latte, please,” Lana said.

When the waiter left, Bruno felt her questioning gaze—she needed answers.

“I would like to speak to you about the funding matter for the special education center, which I was hoping to help you with,” Bruno said.

Just as I expected, Lana thought.

“We agreed that you’d set this matter aside for some time,” Lana said, outpacing him.

“Yes, but—how do I put this—I looked around, spoke to some people, and tried to find the solution, so now I need to tell you something.”

Suddenly Lana no longer believed that he had invited her there to give the bad news in person.

Bruno continued in an official tone: “I am happy to inform you that I managed to find someone to sponsor this project, and I can now assure you that the center is no longer at risk of closure.”

Slowly removing her large sunglasses, Lana speechlessly stared at him. She couldn’t believe what she’d just heard.

“In the coming days, the benefactor will need the legal details of your organization to make the financing officially managed by Karis Panti, but I’m sure it’s just a formality. All I have left to do is to introduce you to the supporter,” Bruno added and smiled.

It seemed that Lana Moore had finally snapped out of the initial shock.

“Oh my God, Bruno . . . Are you serious? How did you do it? I can’t believe it . . . I don’t even know how to thank you! Who agreed to fund Sparkle?” Lana bombarded him with questions, still unable to take in the news and struggling to find the right words.

“I never would have thought that this is what it takes to bewilder Lana Moore.” Bruno laughed. “Let’s just say that I managed to find a common language with someone with a lot of power.”

“This is the best news I’ve received in . . . I’m not even sure how long,” Lana said, smiling for the first time.

Suddenly she hugged Bruno and kissed him on the cheek. This was the first surprise of the day. Even for Bruno.

“You’ve earned this,” she uttered, releasing him from her embrace.

Her mood had brightened distinctly, and she didn’t put her sunglasses back on. Bruno noticed that she now looked the way he was used to seeing her.

“Thank you. I didn’t realize that this matter was so important to you. Or do you kiss everyone who helps you?”

Lana giggled.

“You can’t imagine how grateful I am to you, Bruno. I can’t wait to hear more. How did you manage to pull this through, and who was it that agreed to help?”

“I’m delighted to hear it. I am planning to meet with the sponsor tonight and would like to invite you to join. You’ll be able to find out everything you need.”

“I’d be happy to. Just tell me where and when,” Lana said, glancing at her watch.

“Eight o’clock, at my place.”

“Great! I’ll be there.” Lana grabbed her phone, ready to take Bruno’s address.

“Ninety-one Riverside.”

“It’s still hard to believe that you got such a crucial matter moving. You are incredible, Bruno. It seems too good to be true. You really need to teach me how you do it,” she said quite seriously.

Bruno was glad to put a smile on Lana’s face. She had lately been under siege by the media onslaught, and he was hoping that this sponsorship would become a perfect aid to back her up.

“I am happy to be of service,” he responded professionally.

“No need to be modest—you are a true hero,” Lana complimented, looking warmly into his eyes.

“Thank you for your kind words. I take great gratification in them.”

“You absolutely deserve it!”

Bruno finished his water, and Lana had the last sip of her coffee.

“Do you mind if I make a quick stop at home before going to your place?” she asked, looking at her watch.

“Not at all.”

“Great.”

Bruno put a ten-dollar bill on the table, and the two rose to leave.

“Will you walk me to my car?” Lana asked. “It’s at the end of the promenade.”

“With pleasure.”

Lana took him by the arm, and they slowly paced toward her car.

Bruno glanced at his colleagues on the opposite side of the street, who were also moving in the same direction.

“This funding issue is important not only for the children in this city but also for their parents and me personally,” Lana said cheerfully. “I must admit that, quite possibly, this could mean a breakthrough in my career. I owe you everything. You did me a huge personal favor.” Lana turned to Bruno and looked at him, her eyes full of gratitude.

“It makes me twice as happy.”

“Thank you, Bruno,” she said, gently squeezing his arm.

Her face was radiating, and random passersby kept turning their heads toward the two of them.

Reaching Lana's vehicle, they set the time for their next meeting. Lana had once again thanked Bruno wholeheartedly, giving him a hug and a peck on the cheek. Promising to see him in a short while, she got into the car and waved goodbye.

On his way back, Bruno turned to the three colleagues watching him, smiled, and gave them a thumbs-up. He wasn't at all concerned about the challenge because he had something more serious to worry about—keeping the situation about to crop up at his house under control.

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August 31

Following the scandal that broke out at the beginning of August, things at Lana Moore's organization went downhill. She feared it might be the end of her career.

On the way to meet Bruno, Lana felt uneasy and was anxious about such a public place chosen for the rendezvous. Having reconciled herself to all the misfortunes surrounding her lately, she was expecting to hear more bad news from Bruno and was simply stunned by what he had to tell her about the funding for one of the most challenging projects. She couldn't wait to learn further details.

Driving home to change and pick up the legal papers for Karis Panti, Lana was restless. It was hard to believe that Bruno, who had no experience in this field, had managed to solve her most complicated problem.

She realized that it must not have been easy, yet he never complained, he spoke firmly, and he looked like a man in control of the situation—a breed of sheer professional one could trust.

He always acts like an earnest, straightforward, and well-mannered gentleman. If only I'd never met Sally, she thought to her own surprise, captivated by Bruno.

Remembering her beloved Sally, Lana exhaled sadly. Now that everything had finally fallen into place, she could start thinking about the next stage of her career, and she missed Sally more than ever. She was longing to share this news with her and was hoping it would become an excellent excuse to bring Sally back.

Pondering over tonight's meeting, Lana was feeling the excitement rising inside of her and was boldly dreaming about the positive changes in her life that could materialize. Carried away by the successful solution of the most significant assistance project, she had no clue what she was up for that night.

Bruno wasn't nervous. He was waiting for Lana Moore, who was soon to arrive, and was glad that the months full of crazy events would finally end today.

Even though he made Lana very happy at the promenade, he couldn't dare to predict how things might unwind in the coming few hours.

Bruno was planning to reveal his feelings and was hoping to cope with the ramifications awoken by this confession. He was ready to do anything in order not to scare Lana and to make her feel safe and was, therefore, prepared to unconditionally respect her reaction, whatever it might be.

Having checked the setup of the video and sound equipment, Bruno looked out the window and noticed the silver SUV parked near his house that had followed him from the avenue—driven by his three coworkers, of course. He wasn't at all surprised by this.

I wonder what they are expecting to see, Bruno thought, skeptical about the abilities of the threesome to understand the events of this evening.

His colleagues were apparently intrigued by what they witnessed at the promenade; however, neither they nor Lana Moore knew that the most significant part was yet to come.

As soon as she arrived home, Lana changed her clothes and collected the necessary documents. She was already mentally preparing the questions for the prospective project sponsor. Thinking about the meeting this evening made her feel a bit nervous.

After locking up the house, she got into her car, entered Bruno's address into the navigation system, and took off.

Upon entering the suburban district where Bruno lived, she noted the perfect tidiness of the streets and the surrounding harmony. Driving slowly toward her destination, as if hypnotized, Lana was admiring the idyll of this place, cradled in the arms of the evening serenity so comforting to one's heart.

Approaching Bruno's home, she noticed the outdoor lights go on. Having parked her car, she walked to the door and rang the bell.

Bruno Brawling, looking all dapper, answered the door. He greeted her and smiled.

"It's so lovely and beautiful here," Lana complimented, looking around and making a gesture with her hands.

“Thank you. To tell the truth, I can’t get enough of it myself,” Bruno said with a grin. “Please, come in.”

Stepping inside, Lana couldn’t stay indifferent to the fusion of space and natural light she saw and, in her opinion, the tasteful interior design.

“I had no idea that detectives could have such great taste.”

“I’m glad you like my place,” Bruno said, smiling again.

But however cozy Bruno’s house was, Lana was missing an essential piece—the third party she was coming there to meet.

“Is the sponsor late?” she asked.

“Unfortunately, due to certain circumstances, the person who agreed to help will not be able to make it,” Bruno unexpectedly replied. “But no worries—just as I promised, all your questions will be answered.”

Lana looked dubiously at Bruno.

Seriously?

Feeling a little perplexed, she was awaiting an explanation.

Seeing the question marks reflected on her face, he hurried to clarify the situation: “Don’t worry, the meeting will still take place just as planned. Even though the benefactor is unable to attend in person, he agreed to talk to us and answer all your questions,” Bruno said, pointing to the laptop connected to a large TV screen in the corner of the living room.

Lana hadn’t noticed it before.

“We just need to wait a moment,” Bruno added, glancing at his watch.

Lana Moore smiled.

“Bruno, you don’t cease to amaze me.”

“I hope so.”

She giggled.

“OK. Let’s try to connect.”

“I am a little restless,” Lana admitted.

Approaching the laptop, Bruno pressed “Enter.” The ringing tone followed.

Standing there in front of the screen, Lana and Bruno saw their own image in high resolution. Then, someone answered Bruno’s call. A black square window soon appeared in the large part of the screen, revealing the person on the other side just a moment later.

To Lana’s great surprise, smiling directly at her was the country’s prime minister himself.

Unable to recall a time when she was more surprised, before she could even collect herself, Lana was speaking with one of the top leaders in the country.

“Good evening, Your Excellency,” Bruno said, feeling Lana’s little hand slide softly into his.

Gently squeezing it, Bruno offered her more confidence. The video camera did not capture this detail, and the premier couldn’t see any of it.

“Hello, Bruno,” replied the prime minister. He then greeted Lana: “Good evening, Miss Moore. How are you?”

“Good evening! What a surprise!” Lana responded.

“He-he,” he tittered sedately. “How could it be, when they show me on TV every day!”

“Yes, but this is the first time they’ve shown you right on my home cinema set,” Bruno said, stepping in, and all three of them laughed.

“By the way, I’m not alone,” the minister said and looked intently at Bruno. “I have an honorable guest here with me.”

The prime minister waved at someone to join him.

Appearing there next to him was a tall, slimly built forty-year-old man wearing an expensive suit. Lana and Bruno immediately recognized him. It was Harold Muncer, the chemical industry magnate who took over management of the business empire from his retired father several years ago.

“Let me introduce you,” the prime minister suggested.

“Harold Muncer,” his companion said.

“Bruno Brawling.”

“Lana Moore.”

Bruno knew that the stare of the prime minister pointed at him was concealing a hint of problems, which he could expect for disturbing the peace of such powerful men. Bruno, however, kept his cool and behaved as usual—he didn’t want to let it bother him, not right now.

“Miss Moore, it’s a pleasure to inform you that Mr. Harold Muncer and his corporations will contribute to the funding of the special education center called Sparkle, starting at the beginning of next year. It’s a great honor to give you the news,” the prime minister said in a grand voice.

“Thank you, Your Excellency, and thank you too, Mr. Muncer. This is great news! It will make many children and their parents happy,” Lana said emotionally.

“You are most welcome. You know, Bruno had me convinced in no time that we just couldn’t allow the closing of this important center. Luckily, Harold was there to gladly offer his help. I am really grateful to him for this decision.”

“Our company has simply fulfilled its civic duty,” Harold Muncer said modestly and fixed his piercing eyes on Bruno.

Having noticed his loaded look, Bruno realized he had just made another enemy.

“I hope it won’t be too burdensome on you, Mr. Muncer,” Lana replied.

“Oh, not at all!” the prime minister jumped in. “People like him have definitely got what it takes. Bruno knew exactly whom to ask,” he said, casting another look at Bruno and smiling insidiously.

Although he perfectly understood the hints addressed to him, Bruno didn’t want to give them any prominence at the moment. It was only necessary that Lana did not realize there was a hidden meaning in the words of the prime minister and the tycoon.

“No worries, Miss Moore,” Harold replied kindly. “It’s our pleasure to make a contribution to the common good.”

“I am happy to hear that,” Lana responded.

“Well, now,” the prime minister began, attempting to maintain the tempo of the conversation, “speaking business, Harold will need your company’s details, as the assistance funds will be registered through Karis Panti.”

“Yes, I will send all necessary information by email,” Lana replied.

“Then we can also decide when to make an official announcement,” Harold added.

“Great!” Lana exclaimed in approval.

“My secretary will contact you in the coming few days,” Harold pleasantly informed her. “You will also be able to discuss the content of the press release with her. I will read it personally during a special press conference. Is that all right?”

“Wonderful. Thank you in advance,” Lana said and emotionally pressed Bruno’s hand.

“Excellent. So, it’s settled, then,” the premier summarized, pausing shortly. “Miss Moore, let me tell you how impressed I am by the ideas and initiatives you are bringing to life. I am speaking as a citizen of our country and as its prime minister, who greatly values your sacrifice and hard work. It was an honor to assist you in this vital matter—you deserve our greatest respect. Good luck to you in all your endeavors.”

For a moment there, Lana Moore was rendered speechless. Bruno felt how her hand was trembling with excitement and therefore squeezed it a bit tighter.

“Thank you for your kind words, dear Prime Minister. I am sincerely thankful to both of you, and I promise to persevere in my work to meet your expectations and those of other people,” Lana said, almost unable to conceal her emotion.

“Miss Moore, you deserve all the praise,” Harold Muncer added solemnly.

“Thank you so much,” she responded.

“Well,” the prime minister intervened, “however pleasant this conversation may be, it’s time to round it up. Miss Moore, before I say goodbye, let me again wish you all the best. Good luck!”

“On behalf of all the center’s employees and the children under its care, I thank you from the bottom of my heart,” Lana replied. “Goodbye.”

“I’m much obliged to you, too, Your Excellency. Thanks a lot! And you, too, Mr. Muncer,” Bruno said.

“I wish you success with your business, Miss Moore. We’ll talk soon. Farewell for now,” Harold Muncer said, glancing at both Lana and Bruno.

When the conversation was finished, Lana gently released Bruno’s hand. He walked to the laptop and closed its lid.

Lana was simply ecstatic.

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August 31

It’s incredible! How did Bruno manage to attract the attention of people of such eminence? How could he possibly convince the prime minister himself to become involved? Just getting an appointment with him is an insurmountable task for an ordinary man. Obviously, Bruno isn’t just any ordinary man. It seems like whatever the gravity, the circumstances somehow succumb to his will.

Lana could hardly follow her erratic thoughts.

“I hope this conversation met all your expectations,” Bruno said.

“I must admit, I can’t even imagine what you are capable of, Bruno. I could only dream about such a resolution of this assistance case, and when I saw who was on the other end, I didn’t even dare to speak. That’s why I grabbed your hand.”

The doorbell rang.

“Just a minute,” Bruno said and went to open the door.

Having paid the pizza boy, he walked in carrying two medium pizzas and put them down on a table in the living room.

“I don’t know about you, but I could do with a bite to eat. Please, join me,” Bruno invited, placing the plates and cutlery next to the pizza boxes.

“Thank you,” Lana said, sitting down.

“Excuse me for just another moment,” Bruno said, heading to the kitchen.

“Sure,” Lana called after him.

Bruno returned shortly, holding chilled champagne in an ice bucket and two glasses.

“I think this calls for a little celebration,” he suggested. “Do you mind?”

“Not at all. I’ll happily celebrate!”

Bruno popped the cork and filled the glasses with sparkling champagne.

“Here’s to you, Bruno!” Lana was the first to make the toast.

“Here’s to me,” he said with a smile.

Having clinked the glasses, the two sipped in unison.

Lana was looking at her new hero, Bruno Brawling, with gleaming eyes, and having absorbed an enormous dose of positive emotions, her face radiated with happiness.

Watching her, Bruno felt hopelessly in love.

“Please, help yourself,” he offered, pointing to the pizzas on the table.

“Thank you.”

They started eating.

“Please, don’t get upset with what I’m about to say,” Lana began, “but for a while there, I had some doubts about you.”

“Really?” Bruno seemed not at all surprised.

“Yes, but only a little. When you offered help, I thought there was something behind your motives, but you always acted like a true professional. I am amazed by what you’ve managed to achieve, Bruno. It’s a real pleasure working with you.”

“Thank you. I can’t recall being more flattered.” He smiled again.

“I am curious—how did you pull it together?” Lana asked, taking a sip of champagne.

“It’s quite simple, actually. It turned out that the prime minister and I have more in common than any of us could have ever thought,” Bruno responded, being purposely vague.

“Please, don’t think I am trying to meddle in your business. I just want you to know that I respect you.”

“Thank you, Lana. I’m delighted to hear that coming from you. Speaking of the assistance for the children’s center, I succeeded only by coincidence, and I am not afraid to admit that. However, I am no less happy about it—the outcome is what counts.”

“I totally agree,” Lana said, finishing her drink.

Bruno refilled both glasses.

“No worries. I am absolutely satisfied with the results of your work,” she said with a chuckle.

“Thank you.”

“Like I mentioned before,” Lana said, swallowing another gulp of champagne, “for me personally, this assistance project does not end with securing the necessary funding. There is more to it.”

Bruno was listening.

“First of all, I hope that solving this issue will help me regain the trust of society. You know, being a public persona is a challenge in itself, and when you are dragged into a scandal”—Lana imitated a spinning head—“there is no place to run. People, even those you make sacrifices for, don’t like it when you keep things secret from them.”

“Are you referring to the photo of you and Sally published in the paper and the scandal that followed?”

“Yes. Secondly, I will tell you my little secret: after many years of working on various charity projects, actively participating in the Midsummer Festival, and taking on a number of other minor matters, for some time already, I’ve been seriously thinking about the next stage of my career. It might well be that you, Bruno, just made it possible.”

“How so?”

“It’s simple, really. I think that when the news of saving Sparkle gets out, I will be able to reinstate my name, which, in turn, will give me a new career opportunity, even though, I must admit, only recently, I thought about quitting everything and resigning,” Lana said, opening up.

“Don’t you think you’d regret it? The people of this city love you so much.”

“No, not really. I would pass on the management of charity funds to the younger generation with an easy mind—there are plenty of capable people who could do just fine.”

“Do you have a specific position for your next career step in mind?” Bruno asked.

“Yes. I would like to run for the post of the minister of social affairs as an independent candidate. I have the necessary experience and understand the national social system—its financial peculiarities, strengths, and weaknesses—and I know exactly what it lacks and how to use the state funds more efficiently.”

“Impressive. No one could ever doubt your skills, and I think you are the perfect candidate for this position of responsibility. Now I am twice as happy for you, Lana,” Bruno said, raising his glass.

The two simultaneously took a sip of champagne.

“Talking about the scandal, I think your press conference was an excellent move.”

“Thank you. I hope that everything will get back to normal. That’s why I can’t stop saying how important this charity project is for me.”

“I understand. I want you to take full credit for saving the center, and I hope that it will really help. In fact, my involvement does not make it any less your victory. Honestly, since I won’t be directly taking part in the assistance matters, I would prefer not to be officially mentioned by name. Let’s say that I merely contributed to the common cause.”

Lana was surprised. She had never met a man who had done so much for her without exaggerating his merits and asking something from her in return.

Am I missing something? she wondered.

One way or another, Bruno seemed to be a man she could trust.

“You are too modest, Bruno. I can’t disregard your request. I’ll do what you ask.”

“Thank you. By the way, if you don’t mind, from today on, I consider this case back in your hands.”

“Of course. You don’t have to worry about it anymore.”

“Great.”

The fact that Lana Moore, happy and cheerfully spirited, was sitting there right next to him was the true reward for Bruno's immense work and patience. Being able to talk freely to his beloved woman, hear her kind words, and bask in her gentle look, Bruno allowed himself to ignore the unrelenting halo of impermanence hovering in his home and was truly happy in the moment.

"You know, I am starting to believe that everything is going to be fine. There is just one other thing that still troubles me," Lana said, sharing her thoughts.

"What is it?"

"Sally Lockerbek."

"What about her?"

"Trying to get away from the scandal, she fled the city, leaving me all alone, and as far as I can see, she doesn't dare to come back, even though she's the one I need the most right now," Lana admitted.

Bruno was listening carefully.

"Sometimes, I try to comfort myself by thinking that I don't even know Sally and that she simply responded to everything in her own way. I won't lie—I also wanted to drop everything and go after her," she added a little more cheerfully. "On the other hand, just a few days ago, I couldn't even dream about such a spectacular outcome in this assistance case. That's why I must stay optimistic and hope that one day Sally will be back."

Bruno grew uneasy. Understanding that since the topic of their conversation had taken a new turn and Lana might decide to go home at any moment, he was determined to reveal his secret and prepared to irrevocably alter the atmosphere of the evening.

The truth was that even Bruno Brawling himself was getting jittery just thinking about it.

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August 31

It was time to proceed to the toughest part of Bruno's plan. All the good news Lana received so far was just an attempt to set her in a positive mood, by which he was hoping to cushion her possible reaction to what was about to come.

Bruno glanced at Lana with a serious, slightly unsettled, and somewhat guilty expression. Wishing to be able to keep the situation in control, he gathered himself for the fateful moment. There was no time to wait.

"Lana," he began, pausing slightly, "there is something important I need to tell you. I hope you will hear me out and won't get angry at me."

Surprised by Bruno's words, Lana pricked up her ears.

“Even though I did all these things for you, I have to admit that I did you a bad turn, and I want to tell you about it.”

Lana seemed puzzled and a little frightened.

Could it be that I will now find out the true price to be paid for his help? she wondered.

“I don’t know if I deserve the right to ask you this, but I need you to trust me and hear me out.”

“You are scaring me, Bruno.”

At the moment, she couldn’t even grasp what Bruno was talking about; therefore, she was instinctively prepared for the worst.

“Forgive me—it wasn’t my intention to frighten you. I just ask you to listen to what I have to say.”

“OK. I am listening.”

“I want to confess something.”

Bruno made another brief pause, composing himself, then carried on: “Before we had accidentally run into each other a few times at the beginning of this year, I heard only good things about you and thought highly of you. Following our first encounters, however frivolous, I already started feeling a growing attraction toward you and was thinking about you a lot. After Habbermann’s tabloid published a photo of the two of us, suggesting a possible relationship between us, the men at my station wouldn’t stop asking me about it, and I, being selfishly arrogant as I was, took on a challenge to prove to them that I could gain your friendship and become involved with you.”

Lana was listening intently.

“Even though I did want to help you,” Bruno continued, “I decided to contribute to charity projects partially because it would give me an opportunity to stay in touch with you and eventually get close to you,” Bruno openly admitted, looking Lana in the eye.

“I always thought your intentions were nothing but sincere,” she responded with slight disappointment and confusion.

Watching her rather cool reaction, Bruno assumed that Lana Moore, being a charming woman, had probably faced similar conduct of men many times and therefore was able to stay calm.

“Tell me one thing, Bruno. Was the news about the funding also just a good act? Is this what you are trying to tell me with your confession?” She spat out the simple and somewhat cold question.

“No. I assure you that everything you’ve heard was real.”

Lana seemed relieved. The fact that Bruno confessed to having been secretly seeking her affection wasn’t the worst or most insulting thing she had ever heard. In one way or another, she’d had a similar experience with more than a dozen men she’d met in the past year. The only difference was that Bruno’s actions translated into actual support for the children’s center and that he was candid about it.

“Thank you for your honesty, Bruno,” Lana said. “I am not mad. I can’t understand why you chose to tell this to me now. During all these months, I haven’t caught the slightest hint of personal interest.”

Lana Moore was absolutely right, but what she’d just heard from Bruno was far from everything that he was prepared to tell her that night.

“I will, of course, answer your question, but let me first tell you something else.”

“OK.”

“However foolish it may sound, up until recently, I felt a powerful inner urge to prove to everyone that I can do anything and that I am the best. That’s why I made a wager with my colleagues that I could get close to you. However, now, when I think about this stupid challenge, I still don’t regret accepting it.”

Allowing Lana a chance to ask her question, Bruno got quiet.

“You don’t regret it?” She couldn’t understand.

“Not a bit.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t regret it because only by resolving to befriend you, even if only as a consequence of that idiotic desire to prove my abilities to others, I had a chance to spend time with you, talk to you, get to know you, and experience the most beautiful feelings toward you. Even though I don’t care about that silly challenge, I am happy that I did take it on because it gave me a chance to fall in love with you.”

“Now you’ve lost me!” Lana retorted. “What are you trying to say? We only met a couple of times and talked purely about business,” she contradicted in confusion.

Never before had Lana encountered such a weird and unfathomable case of displayed affection—Bruno surely knew that there was a woman she loved, and it had to be genuinely obvious that she had no feelings toward him. Unable to comprehend the essence of his confession, for the first time since she knew Bruno, Lana felt uneasy around him.

“I realize that my words sound strange and unfounded, but there is something more I need to tell you. Please, just listen to me.”

Bruno’s gentle and caring voice and the guilty and kind look on his face made Lana feel safe again, and she was prepared to hear him out.

Bruno wasn’t planning to stop there and was ready to tell her *everything*.

After another short pause, he gathered himself and continued: “Now I will explain what I meant.”

His serious look manifested that something extraordinary was about to be revealed. Lana only understood that Bruno was getting nervous and trying to tell her something really important.

“Like I’ve already mentioned, since I first met you, I’ve spent lots of time thinking about you. From the very beginning, I noticed something in your conduct and manners

that kept me puzzled, and I couldn't shake that feeling. After long consideration, I realized that your body language clearly speaks of your sexual orientation—that you are a lesbian.”

Lana didn't ask him any more questions; she just let him talk.

“Having in mind my determination to earn your friendship, this revelation meant that I needed to cardinaly rethink my strategy of pursuit.”

Breaking off, Bruno quickly refilled his empty glass and took a swig of champagne.

“I didn't want to give up my plot to seek your attention, so after long contemplation and being unable to see another way out, I ventured upon a crazy step—I created Sally Lockerbek.”

Lana's eyes opened widely. She sank into the chair and froze up, trying to quickly assess the absurdness of Bruno's words.

“Forgive me,” Bruno added.

What nonsense! What is he talking about?

“Is this some kind of sick joke?” asked Lana unable to believe what she'd just heard.

“I am serious . . . All those months, I was pretending to be Sally Lockerbek. She doesn't really exist.”

Lana Moore tried again to grasp the meaning of Bruno's words.

No, it's simply not possible . . . All this time . . . It's . . . It's absurd! Her thoughts were tumbling around.

Rejecting this possibility yet again, she was still unable to comprehend why Bruno was saying these things.

“If I didn't know you, Bruno, I'd be freaking out right now,” Lana said, looking deep into his eyes as though weighing his reliability. “I realize you are capable of practically anything and that you know how to surprise people, but *this* . . . I'm sorry, but no!” She shook her head in disbelief.

Bruno didn't respond, but his facial expression hadn't changed since the very moment he made his confession.

Trying to understand this look, Lana once again weighed Bruno's words.

Is he serious?

“It just can't be true!”

“This is the main reason I was able to succeed,” Bruno responded earnestly.

“What about the participant interview, the TV cameras, the festival?” Lana named the weakest points of his act.

“With proper preparation, all that was just a matter of skill and self-control. Most importantly, nobody ever suspected that Sally could be someone else, especially me.”

“I still can't believe it.”

“I could tell you something only Sally would know.”

“No, thank you,” she declined, unwilling to be exposed in such a way. “Better to prove it. Can you dress up as Sally and show me now?”

“All right, but promise that you won’t freak out,” Bruno said after some consideration.

“Freak out? I promise I won’t.” There was a hint of curiosity on Lana’s face.

“Then you’ll have to wait at least twenty minutes,” Bruno said and swigged the rest of his champagne.

“Fine.”

Leaving Lana in the living room, Bruno walked up the stairs.

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August 31

Alone in the living room, Lana fell into thinking. On the one hand, Bruno was speaking very seriously, and the look on his face suggested he wasn’t lying, but the things he said just couldn’t be true because that would be something supernatural. After spending many hours with Sally, she would have never doubted that Sally . . . wasn’t Sally.

Refusing to believe what Bruno had said and waiting for him to appear, Lana was trying to imagine what she’d actually see.

Speculating on what it was that Bruno could have been doing for at least twenty minutes, if not transforming into a woman, she was all of a sudden struck by a thought: *What if it’s really true? He has already proven what he is capable of, so why not this?*

Lana looked back on how Bruno impressively solved the most complicated charity project, how he reassured her with his confident tone of voice when she called him after hearing the news about a woman murdered in her own home, how convincing and encouraging he was when inviting and convincing her to meet at the promenade—he always demonstrated some incredible self-assurance.

Recollecting Bruno’s conduct, Lana started to realize that for a man who had seemingly infinite confidence in his own abilities, a flawless impersonation of a woman would not be an impossible task to achieve.

What if . . . slipped through her mind again, but she immediately cut it short. *Stop it, Lana!*

She remembered how Sally was often very timid, kissing cautiously, and wasn’t open to much intimacy. Assuming what Bruno said was true, suddenly it all started to make sense.

Does this mean that my beloved doesn’t even exist, and Bruno is telling the truth? Slightly shaken up, she started to doubt herself. Is he the man I fell in love with without even knowing it?

Leaving Lana in the living room, Bruno walked up to the second floor of his house where he kept most of the attire necessary to transform into Sally Lockerbek. Even though he was done impersonating a woman and didn't expect to ever need these things again, he decided not to throw them away just yet—should anything happen.

Having provoked Lana's interest by his confession rather than scaring her, Bruno felt uplifted and was about to hurriedly dress up. Placing the implements and clothes he needed on the bed, he began applying the makeup and then, impromptu, decided to pay a last tribute to his colleagues waiting it out at his house to witness the ending of the challenge.

Walking up to the window, Bruno cracked open the black curtains. He slowly gazed over the neighborhood without looking directly at Martin's car and wasn't at all worried about the makeup he had already managed to apply because they wouldn't have been able to make it out anyway.

Feeling like he had relieved the tedium of the sitting for the threesome at least little, Bruno disappeared behind the drapes.

I wonder what they will think of today's events, he thought and, having inspected the items laid out on the bed, got to business.

Dressing up as Sally Lockerbek, Bruno was thinking about Lana's reaction. Able to avoid scaring her or having her display anger up until now, he was hoping that Lana, however shocking the situation that was about to present itself, would be able to keep her emotions at bay and wouldn't make a scene.

The time went flying by. In about twenty minutes, Lana heard footsteps coming down the stairs. Not knowing what to expect, she concentrated and braced herself.

Shortly, standing there in front of her was her beloved, Sally Lockerbek.

"Hello, my darling," Sally greeted.

Oh my God. Lana was rendered utterly speechless.

Her last thought in an attempt to rationally explain the situation was that Bruno knew Sally and decided to invite her over as a surprise.

Stepping closer, Lana quickly noticed that Sally didn't look entirely perfect.

"I needed more time for a perfect transformation," Bruno explained.

Not expecting to hear a man's voice, Lana pulled away. In total astonishment, she finally accepted the real origin of Sally Lockerbek's persona.

"Oh my God!" she said aloud.

Most of all, she was surprised by and couldn't comprehend the dicey affair Bruno had dragged himself into. Lana felt a bit ashamed that he fooled her like that; however, she also felt relieved to finally do away with the unknown.

The genesis of Sally Lockerbek was now in the open.

The emerged situation, having in mind such forthright behavior on Bruno's part, looked hilarious to her.

"Not in a thousand years would I have guessed," she uttered, finally gathering her wits. "You really fooled me!"

"And not just you—everyone." Bruno grinned.

Recollecting the interview at the TV studio, the Midsummer Festival, and the havoc raised by Mario K. Habbermann, and realizing the absurdity of those situations, Lana Moore burst into hearty laughter.

"How are you going to explain all that, Bruno?" she asked, having gathered herself.

"I am hoping for an easy way out—Sally left and is never coming back."

"But next year the journalists will definitely try to contact her as the festival's winner."

"I don't think they'll ever find her," Bruno said with a smile.

"Now I finally understand what you were talking about," she said with a sigh.

In the moment's silence, Lana Moore carefully examined Bruno dressed like a woman, as if she was trying to once again find assurance of the reality of what had just happened.

"So how did you figure out my secret?" she asked curiously.

"It took me a while. I caught on with your body-language tells. Unable to find another explanation, I made a compelling assumption about your sexual orientation. I decided that it just had to be it."

"And where have you mastered such flawless femininity?"

"I got the introduction back in prison when I was there undercover. I had a great teacher."

Lana wanted to say something but refrained.

"Incredible . . . simply amazing," she whispered. Then she added: "Were you not afraid to take all this risk? It could have turned into an immeasurable scandal, and you could have lost your name and your job. I would have definitely said that I knew nothing about it—and probably branded you a pervert."

"I knew from the very start that I could be unmasked, and I was prepared for it."

"Why did you decide to participate in the Midsummer Festival? That couldn't have been easy!"

“I thought it would be a perfect way to get closer to you and maybe attract your attention. Winning the final event helped tremendously.”

“How on earth did you manage to win it?” she asked.

“I must ask you that,” Bruno replied, and they both chuckled.

“But it must have cost you a tremendous effort, Bruno?” Lana wondered, realizing the scale of his act.

“Yes, it was an enormous test, but it was worth every bit of it.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Those four weeks I spent with you as Sally, I was enjoying your friendship and counting the minutes to our next meeting. When I was with you, it felt like I met my soul mate. I learned about your desires and dreams, I was given a chance to get to know you and fall in love with you. That’s why all the difficulties and risks related to pretending to be Sally were absolutely worth it. Later, when I was leaving the city, knowing that I wouldn’t be able to come back, it was very hard to say goodbye. At that moment, I’d rather have been Sally Lockerbek than Bruno Brawling because then I could have had a little more time with you.”

Lana was quietly looking at Bruno with eyes filled with astonishment and intensity.

Bruno continued: “I realized that I was misusing you through my actions, and I always knew that the day was nearing when I would have to take away the hope that I gave you and confess everything. Today is that day. The price you had to pay for what I’ve done was much higher than all my struggles and pretending, and I would like to sincerely apologize to you. I am prepared to accept the consequence. You can tell me what it’s going to be.”

A brief moment of silence had befallen the room as Lana thought about Bruno’s words.

“And now . . . Do you still love me?” she asked.

“Yes. When I was with you as Sally, I meant every word I said,” Bruno answered, looking into her eyes.

Lana Moore needed a moment to think. She was struggling to digest the fact that only yesterday, she was being crushed under the weight of her failing career and Sally leaving the city, whereas now, hardly a day later, everything had gained a fresh perspective—and all that thanks to one extraordinary person.

Yes, Bruno had indeed used her and lied to her, messed up her affairs, and gave her the hope of things that could never be fulfilled, but he had also skillfully put everything back where it belonged and courteously apologized.

If his acts were exposed, it could have ended up in another scandal, which would certainly put an end to any of her career hopes, but luckily, it hadn’t. All because of Bruno’s professionalism and devotion.

Lana knew very well that no other man she’d come across in her life had ever gone through some much trouble just for her. No one had ever made such incredible sacrifices

or took such huge risks, and the help that they offered was nothing like what Bruno did. Of course, she wasn't planning to condemn him because, in addition to everything, Bruno Brawling even managed to become *her* Sally.

This whole story now looked like a crazy adventure, and Lana was in no way prepared to trade the restored clarity and new prospects for yesterday's uncertainties.

Coming to terms with the new reality and having mentally measured the consequences of Bruno's revelation, she felt relieved.

Standing there silently in front of her was Bruno, awaiting the verdict. Lana exhaled.

"However ingenious and intuitive you might be, you did miss one major detail," she finally uttered.

Bruno concentrated on her words.

"When the photo of our kiss got out," she explained, "everyone kept on shouting: 'Lana Moore is a lesbian!' The public was in such a hurry to share the breaking news that they forgot to ask me about it. The truth is, I am bisexual," Lana said, looking into Bruno's eyes, and then paused. "You have no idea how hard it is to find a good man . . . It's just so much easier with women."

"I absolutely agree."

The two laughed in unison again.

Lana walked up closer to Bruno, staring silently into his eyes. Capturing her evocative look, he felt the overpowering inevitability in his whole body. In a split second, they threw themselves into each other's arms, caressing passionately, kissing and undressing one another.

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August 31

The subsided fervor was followed by silence. Bruno and Lana were lying there, holding each other, in the bedroom on the second floor. Their clothes were scattered all over, dropped on the way from the living room on the first floor up to the bed.

Both could hardly believe what had just happened, but neither had any regrets whatsoever.

"All the time I spent thinking about how my revelation would end, I'd never would have imagined that it could end this way," Bruno admitted.

"What did you think it'd be like?"

"I mostly feared that you'd storm out screaming and would never even look at me again."

Lana giggled.

“So no one ever realized that you were a man pretending to be a woman? Do you think anyone grew even a little suspicious?”

“No, no one noticed, even though I was worried about it a lot at the beginning. By the way, before I began making regular public appearances and trying to secure my place in the festival event, I tested Sally’s image, language, and manners in all imaginable situations, but I’d better keep the details to myself.”

The two tittered.

“What would you have done if someone had noticed?”

“I’d take a powder—no one had any idea who was hiding under Sally’s outfit anyway.”

“Where did you get Sally’s ID? You couldn’t have done it without one,” Lana asked somewhat unexpectedly.

Before answering, Bruno obviously hesitated.

“I forged it.”

“Oh, God,” she said, startled.

“Well, yes, but I did it with good intentions.”

“I agree.” She chuckled, gently stroking the skin next to a cut healing on Bruno’s left shoulder. “What happened?” she asked, looking at the wound.

“Just a scratch. Cut myself during training . . . I barely notice it,” Bruno replied without giving any prominence to the attempt on his life.

“Looks like quite an injury,” she said, softly caressing the palm-size cut.

“How long would it take you to fully transform into Sally?” she asked.

“At first, I wouldn’t succeed even if I spent the whole day. Then it took me hours and hours until, finally, I’d manage within half an hour or a little longer. I literally devoted all my free time to practice.”

“Wow.”

“Yes. This adventure forced me to devote more effort and patience than I’ve ever had to in my entire life,” he said with a smile.

Lana kissed him tenderly on the lips.

“I told you, though, it was all worth it,” Bruno added.

She smiled.

“In the beginning, I was really nervous about the festival, but by the time I was standing there with all the cameras on, I had already sufficiently weighed and tested my abilities, and I was convinced that I wouldn’t be so easily unmasked.”

“Why did you keep me in the dark after you left the city? You must have imagined that I was worrying myself sick about you.”

“However hard it was for me to say goodbye, I needed to forget Sally Lockerbek for some time and catch up with my own life. I had too much business to attend to. Living a double life, I’d fallen behind with tons of things, including the search for a sponsor. When Sally went away, I simply plunged into work, which would distract me at least for some

time. I knew that I would never see you as Sally again, and I really struggled with that thought. A temporary silence and lots of work helped me to restore the mental balance. But of course, I couldn't just disappear because you'd probably send the police after me." He grinned. "Besides, I knew that you were in agony, so in a while, I showed up again, but by then, I'd already decided to soon make my confession."

Bruno didn't mention anything about the attempted murder of Sally. There was no reason to frighten Lana, especially because he was hoping it to be a one-off incident, which now had been taken care of.

"I must be honest with you, Bruno. At first, your confession sounded terrifying, but luckily, I decided to hear you out. I think, in the end, it was curiosity that took over. And when I saw Sally standing in front of me, I didn't want to go anywhere."

She kept on asking about everything, carefully listening to Bruno's answers and sharing her impressions.

In a little more than an hour, the two started to feel the fatigue, but before going to sleep, they merged into a slow trance of kissing and foreplay and made love again.

Wishing each other good night, they closed their eyes and lapsed into silence.

Thinking about this bizarre day, Lana felt like she still had her Sally, only in a different form. To her own surprise, she found a man who was also able to be a perfect woman.

It's an advantage, isn't it? She smiled and fell asleep.

Before dozing off, Bruno pondered over everything that had happened. He thought it was surreal how Lana managed to digest the news, and that made a big impression on him.

This woman is not one to be easily thrown off her stride, he concluded before succumbing to sleep.

123

September 1

As soon as Bruno was awake, he was thinking about Lana. She was sleeping naked right next to him while he had her embraced in one of his arms.

So, it wasn't a dream . . .

After lying like that for a minute, he decided to get up. Carefully removing his arm from Lana's perfectly smooth, light-brown back, he tiptoed out of bed.

He looked at the clock, put his boxers on, grabbed a neatly folded set of clothes, and quickly dressed. Then he gathered the clothing articles scattered on the floor and stairs, separated Lana's things, and placed them next to her side of the bed.

Walking up to the window, he cracked open the curtains and glimpsed outside—Martin Silverberg’s SUV was gone.

Lana’s car was parked at the house all night. They must have understood what happened, Bruno concluded.

Presuming that he would be credited with victory, Bruno grinned. He thought that yesterday’s events must have looked incomprehensible to his coworkers. Them and him both.

“Yesterday was the weirdest day in my life,” he heard Lana’s voice say; she had just awoken. “First, the news about the funding, then there was the call to the prime minister himself, later . . . Sally . . . that is, you . . . And finally, the two of us.” She smiled.

“Good morning. I hope you’re not trying to say that you are disappointed?”

“Definitely not—I was dying to see how you made your breasts.”

Both broke out into laughter.

Putting Sally’s clothes into a wardrobe, Bruno went to the bathroom adjacent to his bedroom and began washing his face in the sink that was installed right next to the door.

“I hope that was the last time I’ll need to put her on, however sweet your company,” he said, peeking out through the door.

“What if I start missing her?”

“Still no,” Bruno replied from inside the bathroom.

“Hmm . . .”

Shorty, Bruno appeared again in the doorway, holding a toothbrush clenched between his teeth. He demonstratively extended the open palm of his right hand toward Lana and exaggeratedly dropped a curtsy.

Lana burst out laughing. Bruno bowed down and returned to the bathroom to continue brushing his teeth.

“You have to stick to the program!” she shouted.

“Tell me, do you by any chance have Russian blood?” Bruno asked, popping his head out of the bathroom again.

“Why? What do you mean?” Lana wondered in confusion.

Bruno picked up the towel hanging next to the washbasin and, drying his face explained: “Well, I’ve heard that Russian women are very lenient, and since you forgave me everything yesterday, I thought you might—”

Lana sat up, and covering up her breasts with a blanket, she swung a pillow right at him. Catching it, Bruno threw it back. She quickly ducked under the covers, then peered out and smiled.

“Will you have breakfast with me?” he asked.

“I’d like that. Don’t you need to get to work?”

“No, you?”

“Not yet.”

“Then I’ll get breakfast ready. The bathroom is all yours. I left a towel and a new toothbrush on the washing machine for you.”

“Thank you.”

Bruno went downstairs.

124

September 1

Lana walked downstairs to find that Bruno had already prepared some toast with butter and smoked salmon. The kitchen was filled with the pleasant aroma of coffee. Having doubted for a second whether she should be starting the day with such an amount of fat, Lana sat down at the table.

In a moment, both were greedily devouring the food and drinking coffee.

“This is rather peculiar,” she said. “I’ve just spent a night with you, and now we are having breakfast together. What do you think will happen next?”

“I think you will go to work.”

Lana smiled.

“Jokes aside,” Bruno added, “I wouldn’t want this to end with just that.”

“Me neither.”

“Wonderful.”

“By the way, do you remember when we met at the restaurant back in winter?”

“I sure do.”

“It was the time when my girlfriends and I stopped by for a quick lunch after an unsuccessful meeting with potential sponsors for the special education center.”

“Seriously? What a coincidence.”

“Exactly,” Lana said, finishing her sandwich, but she didn’t dare to take another one.

“Please, help yourself,” Bruno encouraged.

“It’s really good, only a little too fat—butter, salmon . . . If I keep eating like that, what will I turn into?”

“I promise to take into account the requests of my regular customers.”

“How very kind of you,” she said with a smile.

“I really don’t want to sound imposing,” Bruno said seriously, “but only yesterday, I’d come to terms with the thought that it would be last time I would see you, so the fact that we spent the night together, and now you are having breakfast with me, is almost inconceivable.”

“I am happy to hear that, Bruno. I am definitely not indifferent toward you. It’s just . . . You might think it’s stupid, but to me, a twenty-seven-year-old woman, a serious

relationship is a quite a new thing. I need some time. I am just as surprised about spending this wonderful night with you as you are. That said, I really don't want to devalue you."

"No pressure."

"Thank you for understanding." She leaned over the small kitchen table toward Bruno and kissed him softly on the lips.

"I feel truly honored," he said, smiling.

Lana took a bite of the sandwich and another sip of coffee.

"I still cannot get past the thought of how you would have explained yourself if someone did unmask you," she admitted.

"I think I would write a book and try to sell its publishing rights," Bruno replied.

"Not a bad idea! It would make you even more famous."

"Both of us."

The two burst into laughter.

Soon their first breakfast together came to an end. Glancing at the clock, Lana was ready to leave, and Bruno was about to drive downtown.

"I would like to see you again."

"I am not going anywhere," she replied, smiling.

"Great. Soon I'm going on a little vacation, which I planned a while ago, but before that, I've got lots of work to do. I would love to see you before I go, though. Every day, at the very least."

"I would like that as well," Lana said with a warm smile.

A ripple of excitement spread through Bruno's chest. He walked up to her and, before saying goodbye, passionately kissed her on the lips.

She responded with the same amount of flame.

"I better go before things get red hot," Lana said.

"You're right."

"So shall we keep in touch?"

"Sure. Would you like to grab lunch together?"

"Why not?"

"All right, then. I'll call you."

They kissed again, and Lana left.

How do I tell Juliana about this? Lana contemplated while getting into her car.

Driving to the meeting with the assault team, Bruno was thinking about the pleasing outcome of events. He'd never expected things to end up this way, and for the first time,

he felt he had a chance to live a normal life—without any pretense, intrigue, or having to prove anything to anyone and, most importantly, with a lovely woman in it.

Now he was able to see many new prospects ahead of him. Perhaps it was this feeling that triggered a memory of his former love Agnes saying that he would find someone better than she'd ever been. Bruno could still clearly remember himself standing there in the rain, clenching anger in both of his fists. Refusing to even hear about it then, he was now ready to believe Agnes's words.

Bruno knew that he had changed and was expecting more transformations in his life. Whatever they might be, he was hoping to face them with Lana Moore, his beloved woman, at his side.

Preparations for the operation against the largest criminal organization in the city and its execution were the only job-related activities Bruno had to take care of. In only a couple of days, the Gentlemen would receive the fatal blow, following which, he'd be a man free of any professional obligations, and he would be able to leave on his long-desired vacation.

As of today, he had quit his job as a detective but promised the head of the station, Hubert, to help with this operation.

Head over heels in love with Lana, Bruno noticed that on this morning, the world around him was more beautiful than ever. Thinking about all the positive things that came into his life after meeting this extraordinary woman made him feel like a free man.

IV

When creating his action plan and plotting how to get closer to Lana Moore, Bruno had little hope of becoming her lover and was convinced that the *only* way to win her affection was to become a woman himself.

Even though he knew what an extraordinary challenge he was going to face, under no circumstances would Bruno give his hated colleagues the pleasure of seeing his defeat; thus, he wasn't about to quit.

At the beginning of his challenge, Bruno still didn't know how he would admit to his coworkers the fact that he had achieved his goal or failed it. He left this issue to be resolved in the future so that he could act as he considered appropriate given the eventual circumstances.

Puffing on the cigarettes that kept him company, Bruno had anticipated losing his job—the news about the professional detective pretending to be a woman would instantaneously spread across the country and raise a massive storm of discussion. He would have no other choice but to resign. Bruno had even come to terms with the thought that he might have to leave the city or even the country.

Having concentrated his attention on making a conquest of Lana Moore, he rented a small apartment with windows facing the Karis Panti office just across the street. After changing both locks without the owners' knowledge, Bruno bought tons of makeup, toiletries, clothes, shoes, various accessories, and many other implements. Then, having placed two large mirrors and improved the lighting in the room, he arranged a studio for his transformation.

Bruno had no problem coming up with the name Sally Lockerbek; however, this is where the easy part ended. Having studied a number of women's magazines and watched many videos, he set to work.

Continuously searching for new information, he dropped by his studio nearly every day and spent long hours practicing—endlessly experimenting with beauty and makeup products, jewelry, wigs, eyelash extensions, and artificial nails, trying everything both on himself and specially acquired mannequins.

Bruno was using all the tricks for a feminine appearance that he could remember learning in prison from Andrea, but he would often have to spend several days working on it until he managed to create the desired look. Despite the hardships, he continued to set himself the highest standards.

One of the toughest challenges was imitating a feminine voice—it was a painful and very exhausting procedure. Only single tones of Bruno's voice sounded womanly. His vocal cords quickly tired, and he would be absolutely drained from the effort.

Bruno often became irritated and would critically reconsider his plan.

First Glen Norton, now Sally Lockerbek. When will I finally be able to simply live my life? he thought on one such occasion.

Looking somewhat wistfully across the street at the main trophy—the lovely Lana Moore—Bruno could overcome the encountered difficulties and relieve the rising desperation; however, it was no secret that at times, he just wanted not to give a damn for his grand plan.

■

Wearing women's clothes was a whole new challenge for Bruno. They were weird, tight, and completely didn't suit his body type.

You wanna know what men and women have in common? An ass! Bruno had raged.

On one occasion, getting pissed at his failures, Bruno flung aside Sally's attire, removed the makeup, hastily looked at himself in the mirror, and went to a bar to have a beer. Even though he didn't return to the studio that evening, in the late afternoon of the following day, he got down to business again, and there was lots to be done, like always.

After a week's worth of tremendous efforts in learning to imitate a female voice, gestures, movements, and a manner of speaking, Bruno was ready to put himself to the test.

He called several companies and introduced himself as a nonexistent woman looking for information. Bruno was left rather satisfied with how the test went, but his small victory was quickly undermined by another search for women's clothes able to perfectly conceal his masculine shape.

Bruno purchased the first outfits with the help of a shop assistant, saying that he was looking for something for "a woman with a figure like mine"; however, he needed many more outfits and could not avoid having to go shopping again.

Wishing to quickly fill up his wardrobe, Bruno was buying clothes a bunch at a time, often only giving them a brief look. Having found the appropriate clothing and suffered a painful leg and arm waxing, he was ready for the next testing stage.

■

Having spent several thousands of dollars and sacrificed three weeks of his free time, Bruno succeeded in creating quite a pretty character.

Never, ever would I have thought that being a woman is this exhausting and expensive.

Having decided to put himself to the test on the streets, standing there in front of the mirrors in his studio, Bruno examined Sally from tip to toe—her appearance, clothes, and posture—until he was satisfied that everything looked flawless.

Now I know why it always takes them so long to get ready . . .

After taking a short walk in the city, Bruno gave a sigh of relief—Sally Lockerbek had passed the first public-appearance exam with commendations.

Having achieved the second positive result, Bruno rewarded himself with a little break.

Soon, transformed into Sally, he was able to go shopping. Buying various items, he was testing the look and demeanor of the woman he had created in real-life situations, although, feeling nervous about using a female voice and his manly manner of speaking, he kept communication with other people to a minimum.

However tiring the process, Bruno took every opportunity he had to change into Sally and walk around the city. Watching the reaction of the passersby, he visited public places, secretly observing how women held themselves, and kept learning.

Having gotten into character and become comfortable with the female subtleties, Bruno had refined Sally's appearance and felt more confident talking to people.

Not long after that, he could freely transform into Sally Lockerbek and was ready to move on to the following stage of his pursuit.

■

Having created an immaculate image of Sally, Bruno took her pictures and designed a signature; then, using his special privileges as an agent of the Homeland Security Department, he created her digital identity.

In an attempt to avoid suspicions about Sally's fabricated biography, Bruno had enriched it with some made-up facts.

Her existence did not raise any suspicions—without any problems, Sally was able to pick up her new driver's license, as she "lost" her old one. Wishing to unmask her, one would have had to scrutinize every fact and detail of her life.

When applying for participation in the Midsummer Festival, Sally knew she had to work hard for the good of the city and its people; therefore, she was always running around, taking up volunteer work.

Bruno was prepared to withstand any hardships. Within a few months, he had conclusively mastered the standards of feminine conduct and felt very confident.

He even found it entertaining to fool the people who didn't have a clue about his true identity.

■

With the investigation of Kelly Patterson's murder taking place at the end of May and attempting to secure a place in "The Silent Legacy" as Sally, Bruno did not have any time left to devote to the sponsorship matter. He was, however, still determined to resolve the issue, but he knew that it would only be possible after the festival.

Having received a lot of positive feedback, Sally knew that she would be admitted to the main event of the Midsummer Festival celebrations. Right around that time, she got an invitation for a TV interview where she would be introduced to the public, and she started the preparations.

As if all the work and troubles he already had weren't enough, one June afternoon, Bruno noticed that he was being followed by two men sitting in Germund Keel's car. It was more than obvious that the second silhouette reflected in the rearview mirror was that of Kenton Collins.

It did not surprise him. Bruno knew that the challenge he accepted had raised an immense wave of speculations at the station. It had been months since then, and he had shown no progress whatsoever; therefore, such actions of his coworkers were to be expected.

They are probably just bored and want to know what I've been up to. Well, are you ready for the show? Bruno intended to show them something.

Having decided to toy with his colleagues, he drove to Olive Street, parked his car, and set off for Lana Moore's office. Secretly watching his "tail," he picked a good moment and dove behind a small delivery truck.

Hiding behind the vehicle from Kenton and Germund, who were sitting at a table of the café, Bruno crossed the street back to the other side and vanished.

Taking over the initiative, he walked to the building where he was renting an apartment. Entering it, Bruno could clearly discern his coworkers sitting on the café terrace.

"Just wait . . . Gonna show you my cards," he mumbled and started changing into Sally.

In a little more than half an hour, taking one last critical look in the mirror, Sally walked out into the street.

Letting bus 71, driven by a female driver, pass, Sally headed directly toward the outdoor café. Her two acquaintances were still there. Taking a seat at the table right next to them, she ordered a glass of Coca-Cola and pulled out her phone. Without raising any suspicions, Sally was sipping her drink and browsing the internet.

She could clearly hear the conversation between Kenton and Germund and was listening with amusement to the assumptions on Bruno's progress made in his pursuit of Lana Moore. Sally could hardly suppress her laughter.

After about fifteen minutes, she had nonchalantly left.

Bruno, who never lacked self-confidence, had revealed his biggest secret and had the last laugh.

Andrea would have been proud of me, he thought, grinning as he walked away.

■

The participants of the Midsummer Festival, including Sally Lockerbek, had to film a live television interview with the main event's hostess, Lana Moore.

This was Sally's first encounter with Lana and yet another test of her female appearance.

Having gathered valuable experience by that time, the self-assured Bruno couldn't wait to speak to the woman he was pursuing and was, therefore, particularly in the mood for the interview.

During the conversation, Lana was very warm and encouraging. Several times, she had openly admired Sally's willingness to help others, despite the fact that she, being a newcomer in the city, still hadn't been able to find a job.

After the interview, Bruno smirked with satisfaction—he had fooled Lana Moore too.

■

Before the Midsummer Festival, Bruno had already put Sally's appearance and manners to the test in all kinds of different situations. Yet the main event, which was meticulously covered by a great number of reporters and surrounded by speculation, intrigue, and special attention to its cast, was in itself a test of a whole new level.

Bruno was also concerned about the evening gown—even though it was an ankle-length dress with long sleeves, he was worried that such thin apparel might reveal his true identity.

Having performed several experiments, Bruno decided to use a thin layer of soft fabric under the gown in certain areas of his body, this way hoping to dissipate any doubts about his looks.

One Sunday, after meeting other festival participants and the event's organizer at the largest city stadium, Sally spent the afternoon rehearsing and preparing for "The Silent Legacy."

It was an opportunity to make sure that there was no need to worry about the garment.

■

Sally was the only one to arrive at “The Silent Legacy” with a child in her arms.

When the show started, silence befell the stadium, and the eyes of the spectators and dozens of cameras were turned to the participants gracefully floating to the center of the field and lining into a horseshoe-shaped hoop.

Right until that very moment, Sally didn’t think that she would be so excited about the finale of the festival, but she was overtaken by exactly that feeling. Even the infant she brought along, who was curiously wriggling and boldly looking around, suddenly calmed down and was silently observing the ceremony.

A little while ago, Sally wouldn’t even have dreamed of winning “The Silent Legacy,” but it was she who was to become the chosen one as maiden Flora approached the end of the formation.

The purpose of pretending to be Sally was to come as close as possible to Lana Moore, to capture her attention and win her friendship, but Bruno got a lot more. He knew that he fooled thousands of people, who, on this memorable day, became the audience appreciating his artifice and hard work.

Bruno felt very proud of himself.

■

Winning the event made Lana Moore much more approachable—Sally was meeting her nearly every day for a walk or some pastime.

In her company, Sally always felt her friendly openness, attention, and warmth—it was so different from Lana’s official tone and the interaction she displayed around Bruno.

Trying not to overstrain her vocal cords, Sally wasn’t up for long meetings and talked very little, so Lana Moore sometimes had to literally pull the words out of her.

However, Sally openly admired Lana’s victories and devotion to her work, rejected any help she was offered, and was determined to achieve everything on her own. Of course, Sally wasn’t really looking for a job. By demonstrating independence, she only wanted to show that she was self-contained and hoped to make a good impression.

Lana Moore indeed considered Sally to be an independent, strong, and charming woman.

It was exactly what Bruno wanted.

■

During his meetings with Lana, Bruno often spotted Kenton Collins and Germund Keel sniffing around, who would sometimes be joined by Martin Silverberg. This irritated him a little because when accepting this challenge, he specifically asked everyone to stay out of his way.

On several occasions, Bruno used his phone to secretly film them. In one of the videos, to make things more exciting, he filmed himself as Sally and sent greetings to the colleagues, speaking in his own voice.

Bruno saved these recordings for the epilogue of the challenge as direct evidence of him fooling everyone and actually getting friendly with Lana Moore. Now there was no way for him to lose the challenge.

Obtaining evidence of the three coworkers engaged in illegal activities was supposed to be used as a means to mitigate the consequences of his playact. Being hostages of their own actions, his colleagues wouldn't make his impersonations public, and who knew, he might even get away with it.

Bruno had been waiting for Lana to show the first signs of affection toward Sally, and rejoicing in being very close to the finish line, he started looking for a way to naturally and irrevocably disappear from her life. If such opportunity wouldn't come along, he was prepared to create it himself.

As for now, Bruno wasn't in a hurry—having come this far, he was enjoying his rendezvous with such an amazing woman like Lana Moore, savoring her attention and keeping everyone for a fool just a little longer.

■

Having gathered enough evidence and indulging in his friendship with Lana, Bruno was often thinking about how to end his challenge, but suddenly, he was facing a serious problem.

After spending all this time with Lana, Bruno saw her as an amiable, lovely, clever, and devoted woman—she was no longer the object of a gamble dictated by his pride.

Lana had the most admirable qualities he could ever name; thus, his interactions with her had become all-consuming. What Bruno felt in her company was above his

shortcomings, anger, and ridiculous desires. Around Lana, he was simply greater than his former self.

The old Bruno Brawling was gone.

When Lana kissed him for the first time, Bruno had responded with utmost gentleness, and there was nothing else he wanted more than to be with her.

Suddenly everything changed, and the silly challenge had instantly lost its meaning. Bruno fell in love.

The very next day, the photo of their kiss appeared in the press. This scandal was the only thing everyone in the city seemed to be talking about. Wishing not to cause any more pain to his beloved woman, Bruno had, without any regret, destroyed all the evidence of him pretending to be Sally Lockerbek and was prepared to lose the challenge.

The beautiful and romantic dream was coming to an end. Sally had finally found an excuse to leave the city, but it was the last thing she wanted.

■

Saying goodbye to Lana, Sally was feeling the sadness rising deep inside, but she managed to contain her emotions. Holding her weeping lover firmly in her arms, Sally wanted to curse the ambiguity of the situation—with the farewell kiss nearing, she wanted to feel free and unrestrained, yet she knew perfectly well that unveiling her true nature at that moment would completely crush Lana. So she gently kissed her on the lips.

Watching her beloved drive away, Sally grabbed her suitcase and headed toward a bus station situated at a respectful distance. She knew that there was a small industrial district on the way, where she was hoping to find a secluded place to remove the makeup and quickly transform back into Bruno—all the necessary accessories, clothes, and personal items were in the suitcase.

When she finally reached a suitable narrow alley, Sally suddenly came to an abrupt halt. Due to the recent emotional turbulence, she was on the verge of ignoring her intuition—the man-size trash containers in front of her were sending chills down her spine. On the other hand, this place seemed perfect for changing.

Reluctantly, Sally listened to her feelings and stepped into the gloomy darkness with extreme vigilance. Slowly pulling her suitcase and listening to the echo of its rolling wheels, she started thinking that there was no reason to worry when, suddenly, a man jumped out from behind a huge container.

Letting go of her suitcase, Sally swiftly leaned back, just avoiding a blade aimed at her chest.

Having failed his first attempt, the attacker immediately threw himself at her and tried to stab her again. Pulling away, Sally had barely dodged the knife.

She quickly looked around to check that there was nobody behind her—the stranger was acting alone.

Adroitly maneuvering in a narrow alley and slowly pulling back, Sally managed to avoid the treacherous thrusts and occasionally punched the assailant back with a heavy and well-trained fist. Yet despite the resistance, the young and athletic man obstinately continued the onslaught.

Sally had no idea who this person was and why he wanted to kill her; however, seeing his determination, she knew that she was in trouble unless she could somehow stop the assault.

After several unsuccessful attempts, Sally managed to give a heavy thump to the attacker's head. The man fell down, but without making a sound, he instantly got back on his feet and struck again.

Even though Sally's fighting skills were good, she realized that her opponent was stronger, and in order to defeat him, she would need some luck—the stranger was clearly in excellent physical shape, his attacks were well coordinated, and he had a weapon.

Suddenly, Sally's luck ran out—swinging through the air, the blade of the dagger brushed against her left shoulder and made a deep cut. Bruno screamed out with pain.

Hearing the male voice, the man grew motionless and looked at his victim with a perplexed glare.

Despite the pain, Bruno took the initiative. Without wasting a second, he twisted the attacker's arm, snatched the dagger, and plunged it into his chest with a single powerful blow.

Everything happened very quickly. The man shrank a little and froze. Unable to comprehend what had just happened, he was silently looking at Bruno.

"Who are you, and why did you try to kill me?" Bruno asked, but the stranger was getting weaker and slowly sank to the ground.

Kneeling down, Bruno carefully grabbed his shoulders and laid him on his side. A pool of blood was quickly spreading around his body.

"Who are you, and why did you want to kill me?" Bruno repeated, louder this time.

Quickly fading away, the man was inquisitively staring at him and didn't utter a word. A thin jet of blood streamed out of his mouth.

Soon after, he slowly closed his eyes. Bruno felt for his pulse, but he could no longer find it.

The thoughts tormenting him from the moment of separation with Lana Moore had been dispersed in an instant. Bruno felt struck by the unknown, which meant that he missed something essential.

He needed to quickly find the answers. Having searched the deceased, Bruno found a Mercedes-Benz car key and a thin leather wallet with a credit card, several hundred dollars in various bills, and a driver's license issued in the name of Dorian Elby.

Who are you, and why were you so desperate to kill Sally Lockerbek? he wondered.

Bruno pulled the dagger out of Dorian's body. A capital letter *G* was daintily engraved on the blade right next to the handle. This letter wasn't part of Dorian's initials, so the weapon might have belonged to someone else.

Bruno quickly evaluated the situation.

What did I miss? Who are you, Dorian Elby—young, athletic, and dedicated. . . And why were you so eager to kill Sally Lockerbek? Bruno thought intensely, not knowing what to make of this.

I really wouldn't mind a cigarette right now. . .

■

Bruno wasn't emotionally shaken because he had killed Dorian Elby in self-defense. Had he hesitated even for just a second, he would be lying there instead.

This was the first time he had killed a man. The situation was extremely delicate; therefore, all the normal regulations, protocols, or warrants were out of the question. Bruno wasn't planning to report the murder, but he had a huge personal interest in figuring out who, although apparently unaware of the real identity of Sally Lockerbek, had tried to kill her.

It was important to clean up the crime scene as quickly as possible and get out of there.

Glancing into the closest container, Bruno left it open, dragged the body closer, and having gathered his strength, dumped it in. He then climbed into it himself and hid the corpse under the bags of garbage.

Jumping out, he took off his outer garments and examined the wound—there was a span-long cut on his left shoulder.

Opening his suitcase, he took out a large bottle of water and his shirt. Tearing it up and dampening it with some water, he cleaned and dressed his wound.

Then Bruno washed his hands; wiped his face; and removed the rest of Sally's clothes, accessories, and shoes. Putting on his own attire and shoes, he stuffed his and Dorian's personal items into the pockets and checked his appearance in a small mirror.

After wiping the blood off the ground with the taken-off clothes, Bruno threw them into the suitcase along with Sally's other belongings and the dagger.

He then washed off the rest of the blood on the pavement with water and sprinkled the spot with the dirt he found at the sides of the narrow alley to cover the last visible traces of the murder.

Having critically evaluated the place from the viewpoint of a random passerby, Bruno had once again washed his hands, shoved the locked suitcase into the container, closed the lid, and left.

■

Bruno had easily located Dorian's car on the outskirts of the industrial district. Finding there a professional photo camera, he quickly reviewed the pictures. After discovering many shots of Lana and Sally, he ejected the memory card and put it into his pocket. Bruno also took Dorian's phone and keys, which he found in the storage compartment under the armrest between the front seats. He then thoroughly wiped any trace of his fingerprints and went to check the trunk. Finding there the tools for digging a hole in the ground, and seeing that the inside of the trunk was lined with plastic, he threw Dorian's phone, smashed it with the pick, locked the car, and walked toward the city center until he caught a taxi and drove home.

Having disinfected and cleaned up the wound, Bruno was thinking intensely about what had happened. Because of all the work, he had been skipping his martial arts training and hadn't been exercising much lately. He felt very lucky that the previously acquired skills were sufficient to defeat a quick and well-prepared assailant.

Bruno could remember every single detail of the confrontation. At all hazards, he wanted to know the motives for this attack and was worried about Lana's safety. Unable to calm down and eager to take action, he rushed to the station and locked himself in his office. Using his special privileges, he accessed the database of video footage collected by the city surveillance cameras.

There was only one camera in the small industrial district where his fight took place, but it didn't record anything Bruno needed to worry about.

He then checked Dorian's identity. Dorian was a twenty-seven-year-old man who had studied at the university and held a part-time job in one of the advertising agencies several years ago. He had left the job after ten months and soon quit his studies. Later, Dorian had started a successful small business and was still running it—his past provided no clues Bruno was looking for.

Searching for an explanation for Dorian's actions and a clue as to what kind of life he was living, Bruno noted his address and went home.

Arriving well after midnight at the place of residence of his assailant, using the keys found in his car, Bruno entered the apartment. Luckily, Dorian had no alarm system installed, and Bruno quickly realized why.

One of the walls inside was almost completely covered in photographs, newspaper articles, and magazine clippings with Lana Moore's images. It was apparent that Dorian Elby was obsessed with her.

Having closely inspected the contents of the wall, Bruno noticed a section devoted to Sally Lockerbek. All her pictures had a red *X* across them.

It was now clear why Dorian Elby attempted her murder. By becoming Lana Moore's close friend, Sally threatened to ruin his plans, whatever they were.

Bruno knew that by killing him, he might have saved Lana's life.

After a thorough search of the place, Bruno found only an encrypted laptop, which most likely contained more images of Lana and Sally.

Fully aware that sooner or later the police would come to search the apartment and unwilling to allow the news of Dorian's manic fascination to reach Lana, Bruno had ripped all the photos off the wall and put them in a plastic bag he found in the kitchen. Bringing along the laptop he found lying on the table, he quietly left.

Under disguise and armed with a gun, Bruno returned to the crime scene. After removing the contents of the trunk of Dorian's car and placing them into his own, one by one, he brought Dorian's corpse and the suitcase from the trash container and placed them in the trunk of his SUV.

Driving out of the city, Bruno found a remote place to bury the body.

Farther down the road, he pulled over, opened the suitcase, and took the dagger out of it. He then placed the bag with the photos from Dorian's apartment, the laptop, and the smashed phone inside the suitcase and scrupulously burned everything.

On the way back home, he threw the tools and Dorian's keys into the river.

■

Falling in love with Lana Moore made Bruno a different man who was ready to embrace the change. He felt more mature than his old "self" and no longer wanted to prove anything to anyone; therefore, whatever the outcome of the adventure of pretending to be Sally Lockerbek, he was determined to turn over a new leaf.

In August, Bruno had handed in his resignation. Asking Hubert to keep it confidential and promising to be part of the police operation against the Gentlemen, Bruno left the chief's office.

Before revealing his secret to Lana and probably scaring her away for good, Bruno wanted to settle the sponsorship matter. He felt that for all the trouble he caused to Lana by Sally's existence, he needed to do something kind, at the very least.

Sitting in the premier's waiting room, Bruno finally broke the silence and sent her several messages promising to call her later that day.

Led by his inner motives and realizing how important the matter of securing the funding for the special education center was to Lana, Bruno played the trump card he had been saving all those years and made himself a new enemy, but the money was found. There was simply no time to look for a sponsor using niceties.

On his way home, Bruno stopped for dinner in a small restaurant. Inserting Sally's SIM card into his phone and practicing a little to speak with her voice, he called Lana.

Hearing her ecstatic voice and sweet words, Bruno immediately felt happy. This short conversation was a greater highlight of the day than his victory over the country's prime minister himself.

■

Bruno didn't want to postpone his confession to Lana and was looking for a good moment. Hoping that she would not disclose Sally's real identity to others, as it would cause another scandal, he wasn't afraid to confide in her before the important police operation and didn't worry that it might be compromised.

Knowing perfectly well how much Lana was longing to see Sally, Bruno had no intention of torturing her any longer and wanted to come clean. As soon as he received the confirmation about the funding for the children's center, he made up his mind and picked a suitable day.

As the events were coming to a resolution, Bruno felt himself on the verge of exhaustion.

Planning his vacation, he returned the key from the temporarily rented apartment, bought the plane tickets, booked the hotels, and called his lawyer, asking her to take care of something and making an appointment with her.

After some consideration, Bruno decided to change his car and placed an advertisement to sell his SUV.

On the last day of the summer, carrying a small cardboard box easily fitting his scarce personal belongings, Bruno left the station for the last time.

Placing the box into the car, he drove to the promenade to meet Lana Moore.

If there was one thing Bruno wished for, it was to cause as little damage by his confession as possible.

Thinking a lot about the possible scenarios of the finale, he couldn't even imagine what it would actually bring.

Epilogue

126

September 1

On September 1, having arrived to work earlier, Martin Silverberg and Kenton Collins gave an account of the ending of Bruno's challenge to their colleagues. There weren't any doubts left that Bruno had succeeded in getting close to Lana Moore.

Shortly after that, the head of the department, Hubert Nilsson, announced the unexpected news—as of today, Bruno Brawling had quit his job and wasn't coming back to the station. He would be replaced by the detective Samantha Bair, who would start in a few months. In the meantime, the department would have to manage with their only detective, Kenton Collins.

Stunned by the news, the men exchanged looks. The majority of them felt respect toward Bruno.

Wishing everyone a safe day at work, Hubert asked Kenton into his office and temporarily assigned the investigation of the Kelly Patterson murder case to him.

On his way out, Kenton heard Eric Hudson speaking excitedly: "Mario the Scavenger won't give up! Just listen to this:

*Yet another public display of Lana Moore's feelings:
rendezvous at the promenade and a night with Bruno Brawling."*

After reading the title of the article written by Mario K. Habbermann aloud, Eric passed his phone over to his colleagues.

Under the headline on the front page of *M. K. H. Limited*, there were two photos of Lana Moore and Bruno Brawling taken at the promenade yesterday afternoon.

One of them displayed Lana embracing and kissing Bruno on a cheek, and the other one showed the two walking down the alley, smiling, Lana holding on to Bruno's arm.

Kenton had personally witnessed these scenes yesterday at the alley.

Mario probably bought someone's pictures and was first to announce the news, he thought.

After the long months of waiting, the men were perplexed by Bruno's victory and felt completely puzzled. Bruno Brawling was like a magician whose tricks were realistic and inscrutable.

They could only hope that one day, at least some of their questions would be answered.

127

First days of September

Due to intensive preparations for the police operation that could be launched at any moment, in the first week of September, Bruno had little free time. However, he kept in touch and regularly met with Lana Moore. Their dates would often start or end with passionate lovemaking.

Bruno felt unspeakably happy in the company of his beloved woman.

At the beginning of September, he sold his SUV. Now being without a car, he took a taxi and went to one of the car rentals.

Unable to find a suitable car and unsatisfied with the alternatives offered by the manager, Bruno didn't want to waste any more of his time trying his luck at another rental.

"We usually advise our clients to fill out an online application. That way, you can see the available vehicles and avoid any inconveniences," the manager said, risking to irritate the client without even realizing it.

Trying to figure out what to do, Bruno noticed a white Lexus with a company logo entering the driveway and stopping under the office windows.

"What about that one?" he said, pointing to the car.

"That vehicle is unfit for renting," the manager replied.

"Why?"

"It's in repair."

"It seems in perfect condition to me," Bruno said, as he saw no flaws at all. "I'll take it!" he added.

"Renting this car would be against the company regulations—"

"Don't be so tight—it will only hurt more!" Bruno abruptly interrupted.

Not fully understanding what was meant by that, the manager fell silent and shot a look at him.

"Listen, I'm ready to pay for this car. If you won't take the money, you will have to explain yourself to your supervisor because I'm going to write a complaint. Better hurry up with that rental agreement. I am in a rush!" Bruno said in a merciless tone.

After a moment of hesitation, the manager started filling out the form.

It must be all this stress lately, Bruno thought, evaluating his tone. I really need a vacation.

128

Early morning of September 5

The dawn was just breaking. Before leaving on holiday, Bruno wanted to inspect the scene of the police operation one last time, even though he had spent many hours there only yesterday.

Driving slowly on the nearly empty streets of the city, he approached the area cordoned off by the police. Showing his ID to the officer on duty, Bruno drove farther on.

Soon he spotted the final scene of the operation. A double-decker bus turned on its side, destroyed by an internal blast, was still there. A bunch of seats, several suitcases, various debris, and shattered glass fragments were scattered all around the roof, cut open by the rescue team.

The police were still patrolling the scene. Recognizing Bruno, the cops saluted him.

Passing the bus, Bruno turned onto a narrow one-way street, where more aftereffects of the operation were to be seen: a fading gray smoke was coming from the blown-out windows on the third floor of a luxurious hotel; the window frames were torn down into splinters; and several broken chairs, a couch, and a thick wet mattress were lying on the ground amid the glass shards.

The city cleaning personnel, who had just arrived, waddling over the long hoses and pools of water, set to work.

Even though the police operation didn't go exactly as planned, Bruno was satisfied with the outcome and was happy to have been a part of it.

Not a bad way to end my career.

Having no work left to do in the city, he slowly drove out of the territory and turned toward the special education center—the one he had arranged the funding for.

129

September 5

Having spent less than an hour there, Bruno took off in the direction of the capital city, finally allowing himself to think about leisure.

The only thing he would really miss in the city he was leaving behind was Lana Moore, but no matter how strongly he wished to spend the vacation together, the smartest thing at the moment was to go alone.

While driving, Bruno was pondering his secrets that Lana knew nothing about. Although he had come clean about pretending to be Sally, he had refrained from revealing some other things and felt a little guilty about it.

Wishing to start an open relationship with his beloved woman, Bruno was planning to tell her another little secret as soon as he got back.

This secret was currently sitting in the back seat of his car. It was his fourteen-year-old daughter, Sofia, really excited about the vacation but still a little sleepy at this early hour. Bruno had just picked her up from the children's center.

Sofia received professional care at the special education center, which Bruno couldn't do without.

He had no intention of hiding his daughter from Lana, but having just unmasked Sally, Bruno didn't want to rush with unloading more surprises on her shoulders. Besides, it would be better if he first told Sofia about Lana. He knew that such an opportunity would come along very soon.

When, at the beginning of the year, Bruno had received a letter from the director of the children's center about a possible restructuring or even closure of this institution, he had called her to find out more. Realizing that the financial situation of the center was rather dismal, he started looking for possible solutions. And when he was pursuing a friendship with Lana Moore, he decided to solve this matter through the Karis Pantı organization she was heading.

My confession isn't over. Bruno exhaled.

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September 5

Halfway through their journey, Bruno stopped for a quick snack at the highway restaurant, the one he had dinner at after his conversation with the prime minister.

"Are you hungry?" he asked his daughter, knowing that she had only a light breakfast.

When Sofia didn't answer, he took the chance to remind her of their agreement: "This was part of our vacation deal, wasn't it?"

"All right."

Bruno parked the car, and the two stepped inside the restaurant.

The food was delicious. Even slender Sofia, who usually only tossed her food around the plate and ate like a bird, this time took several big bites.

"So are you excited to finally go on vacation?"

Sofia nodded in accord.

“Me too!”

After paying for their meals, they went back to the car.

Walking up to the driver’s door, Bruno spotted a two-span-long area of damage on the roof of the car, which had already been evened out but not yet repainted. This was the reason why the manager didn’t want to rent the car.

Bruno ran his hand over the surface, which felt nothing but smooth.

That’s nothing, he thought.

Getting inside, Bruno waited for his daughter to get settled in the back seat. He noticed a car parked on his right, where a young man turned sideways to him was sitting behind the wheel and repeatedly trying to kick the car door open. Almost hitting Bruno’s car, the door kept slowly closing by itself. The man, apparently waiting for someone, was dealing with his broken door in this manner.

Soon after, several vehicles drove into the tiny parking lot of the highway inn, and a group of young people poured out. The guy Bruno was watching jumped out of his car and went to meet his friends.

Spread around, the people in the group were greeting each other and chatting.

Bruno drove away.

Shortly, he noticed that Sofia was reading a book.

“What are you reading, sweetie?”

“About a legendary defender of the city called Kai.”

“Is it any good?”

“Very much. By the way, Daddy, what are slaves?”

“Slaves are people forced to work hard, in the hopes of becoming free, but they almost never make it. Do you understand?”

“I think so. That’s what I thought.”

For the rest of the journey, they hardly talked. Driving into the capital city, the father and daughter were welcomed by a beautiful sunny morning.

Bruno turned to the port quay, found an elevated parking area, and left the car there. Taking the stairs down, he and Sofia walked on a pedestrian path next to the quay stretching along a small bay.

There were many people strolling and jogging around. In about ten minutes, they reached an outdoor café, where they saw an elegant, middle-aged lady.

As soon as she saw Bruno, the woman smiled warmly. This was his lawyer.

“Hello, Bruno. Hi there, Sofia,” she greeted, standing up.

“Hello, Diana,” Bruno replied, shaking her hand.

“Oh, dear, she is so slim,” Diana said, sounding a little surprised, and gently squeezed Sofia’s hand, who didn’t utter a word.

“She is on a diet,” Bruno joked.

Sofia was shy and didn’t say anything.

When everyone took a spot at a table, Bruno and Diana discussed the matters pertinent to Sofia's first trip abroad. Suffering from epilepsy and diabetes, she needed special medicine and care; therefore, certain aspects of her health and travel insurance needed to be taken care of.

Asking questions and listening to Diana's recommendations, one after another, he signed the documents she prepared.

Even though Sofia was living at the care center, Bruno spent a lot of time with her and was well aware of how to act when she had her epileptic seizures. He was experienced in coping with his daughter's illnesses and was not afraid to take her abroad.

Aside from his lawyer, whom Bruno hired right after Sofia's mother passed away, only a few other people knew about his daughter, and Bruno was planning to keep it that way. He only intended to tell Lana about her.

Saying goodbye, Diana wished them a wonderful vacation and a safe trip. As soon as she went to her office, Bruno and Sofia returned to the car and drove off toward downtown.

They spent the entire afternoon shopping, having fun, and enjoying each other's company. Before they knew it, it was already evening. At the airport, Bruno quickly arranged all the departure formalities. Luckily, having business-class tickets really helped to speed up the check-in procedure and provided a lot of comforts.

In anticipation of the flight, finishing up her dessert, Sofia asked: "Daddy, how long are we staying there?"

"As long as we wish," he replied, unwilling to name specific dates and wiping chocolate mousse off her nose with a finger.

Sofia giggled.

Soon after the boarding was completed, the airplane took off from the runway, glinting the color of pure gold in the beaming light of the evening sun.

Having waited many months and spending a long day, Bruno Brawling and his daughter, Sofia, traveling to a warm land far away, regarded the journey that had just begun as a most promising prospect.

It was almost nine o'clock in the morning.

Having gone through some very eventful months and almost losing her self-confidence, the brown-eyed woman by the name of Lana Moore, walking with the energetic pace of a self-assured person, was on her way to 49 Olive Street, where she had an office.

Her flawless figure accentuated by a stylish business suit, gracefully floating through the rays of the morning sun, easily attracted the looks of passersby, causing them to follow her with their curious eyes—after all, it was Lana Moore herself, the city’s diligent beauty and its modest celebrity.

Upon entering the building and swiftly walking up the stairs, Lana exchanged greetings with everyone she recognized and awarded them a smile. Having ascended to the third floor, she stepped into her office. Sitting there behind her desk and sipping fresh coffee was Juliana Spencer, Lana’s assistant and her best friend, with whom she had already shared her crazy and astounding latest news.

“Good morning, Lana. How was your weekend?”

“Morning, Juliana. Fine, thank you. Despite it being somewhat sad, the days flew by very quickly. How are you?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“Great! Anything new?” Lana peeked at the computer screen.

“No, nothing yet. Silent and quiet.”

“OK. Going to make some coffee—you need anything?”

“No, thanks.”

Lana turned her computer on and went into a tiny kitchenette installed behind the door in the corner of the office.

In a few minutes, sitting at her desk with a cup of hot coffee, she was scrolling through a short list of new emails. Suddenly, Lana spotted a very important message. She began reading it immediately.

“Oh my . . .” she soon muttered.

Abruptly raising her eyes, Juliana glanced at her colleague.

“Oh my God!” Lana said slowly, stretching out the words, as she stood up and stared at the monitor.

In a split second, a worried Juliana was standing next to her.

“Did something happen?” she asked, alarmed.

“No . . . Forgive me if I scared you,” Lana said, excited. “Come, read it yourself.”

Curious to know the cause of her boss’s reaction, Juliana quickly read the message, which was open in full-screen view.

“Good God . . .” she murmured, covering her mouth with her palm.

Stunned by the news, Juliana looked at Lana in total disbelief.

“*Incredible!*” Lana emphasized cheerfully.

“*Unbelievable!*” Juliana responded.

Embracing each other and jumping for joy, they squealed like two ecstatic teenagers.

“Congratulations! I am so happy about the center and, of course, about you,” Juliana said, the first of the two to return to reality as the ecstasy subsided.

“Thank you! I still can’t quite believe it myself,” Lana joyfully stammered while trying to catch her breath.

Turning back to the screen, she once again read the most important lines in the email she had received this morning from Muncer Chemicals: *We are happy to contribute to the well-being of the special education center Sparkle and are planning to allocate at least \$12 million for the needs of this center during the coming three years.*

“In the best-case scenario, I was hoping for the funding to cover twelve months, but look at this . . . a whole three years. Almost unreal!” During her entire career, Lana Moore had never seen such a substantial long-term commitment.

“I can’t even imagine how he pulled this off,” Juliana said, nodding her head in agreement.

Rejoicing about the rescue of the special education center, Lana found herself drawn into thinking about the new stage of her career opening before her. Everything now seemed feasible and realistic. It was almost a magical moment—definitely one she would never forget.

Even though she knew that Bruno was temporarily out of reach, led by emotions, she took the phone into her shaking hands and typed a message: *I can’t wait to have you back. You are simply amazing. A warm hug and the sweetest kiss . . . Lana.*

Reflecting on Bruno’s extraordinary achievements, she exhaled, thinking: *What would I do without him?*

END OF PART ONE

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