



ANTOINE DUPONT

THE SILENCE of SOHO

a novel

"These revelations of a Frenchman who lived in London will inspire your imagination and turn you inside out." — André Kouspits

The Silence of Soho

by Antoine Dupont

Dedicated to K. C.

“A hot, steaming, brutally accurate portrait of Britain's capital city.”

Tobin Auber,
former Editor-in-Chief of The St. Petersburg Times
London, Great Britain

“It is a story that will inspire your imagination and turn you inside out.”

André Kouspits
Literary critic, London, Great Britain

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July 2018

Alex's Diary

"In this life, everyone has a red line of fear. Step over it, and you'll fall. And watch as your enemy, the brute that you feared, hated and scorned, tramples every last thing that was dear to you.

But that's not the only possible future. There is victory. Won with honor, or through lies. A feast held before the eyes of your defeated enemy. Expensive wine spilt from an exquisite glass onto a beautiful bosom...

There is only one thing I know for certain. Cross that line, and you reject everything that went before. Forever."

August 2018

Alex

"It's a robbery!"

How many times had he heard that line in films? How many times had he shouted out those words as he stood in front of the mirror in his flat in Shoreditch?

But now it was for real. No way back. Greg's vile, savage voice cutting through the air, just a few words that left everything that had passed before, his entire life, locked up in the past.

It had been a daredevil plan and, at first glance, it had been devilishly promising.

They'd spent too long nurturing it, thinking through every tiny detail, trying to get to know one another, and trying to build trust. Alex, tired of his old life, wanted to forget all his failures and disappointments, he wanted to start his life from scratch, and he wanted it all too badly.

He would spend an age recalling those fourteen minutes. How they went into the bank on the grounds of the British Higher School of Design.

Each of them was in place and knew exactly what to do.

Alex cracked the guard over the head with a section of a pipe, putting all of the hate that burned in him into that blow. In that second, all of those pushes and shoves that the "scum" had given him were whirring in his head — the local kids in the gray, eternally damp yard of his building in Ilford, out in the suburbs.

He'd never wanted to move there, his family had never asked his opinion, they'd just ripped him away from his childhood friends when he was fifteen. An age when life was supposed to start smiling on a kid as he matured into a man.

Like a rock hitting a rusting iron wall, a spark flared up in his memory – that sorry autumn evening when he walked Elaine home after a gig. Deep Purple had been playing. A nasty autumn rain was spitting, but neither of them cared. Like all teenagers in love, they were just laughing, carefree, holding hands and singing their favorite band's evergreen hit – "Smoke on the Water." And that was when they ran into the "scum."

A dark flash of shame flared up in his mind. Elaine, his first love, beautiful, delicate Elaine, in tears, running away, covering her head as that rabble humiliated Alex. The local tough guys that he despised and feared.

They stood round in a circle, pushing him round like a ball, a cheap toy that could be dropped in the mud and kicked about. Which is what they did. They threw him down into the dirt and gave him a good kicking, jeering loudly and cursing.

The section of pipe cracked into the back of the guard's head.

The thirty four years that Alex had lived up until then, his entire life, the ups and downs, his time studying philosophy at the London School of Economics, his first real relationship with Maria that left him scarred for life... searching for himself, those insane experiments with his body and soul and the doubts about his orientation that followed, the tortured jumble of his relations with his mother, all those complexes he'd stored up – this whole toxic, nuclear mess was the devil's catalyst in his decision to take part in the robbery and to carry out this very simple and, at first glance, devilishly promising plan.

The crack of the section of pipe across the head. And the guard falls to the ground.

"It's a robbery!"

July 2017

Vickey, Diana

The morning after the first time, they woke up wrapped up in one another. Diana was lying on her back on the brown leather sofa, Vickey was curled up between her legs, her head on Diana's stomach, the light prickles of her pubes on her cheek.

Vickey opened her eyes for a moment, then squeezed them shut again, thoughts whirling in her mind. "I won't let her know I've woken up, I have to think. I need time – I want to understand."

Her body ached with a sensation of happiness, but she couldn't stop thinking that she'd done something very wrong, something terrible. She felt the tender touch of Diana's warm, light arms on her shoulders, her thighs, her breasts, but in her mind there were only thoughts of panic. What's going to happen to me? What does it all mean? Who am I now?

A hot flush of shame rolled across her body. Sin, a fall from grace, joy, all jumbled in her mind. Vickey could physically feel this scorching concoction that she yearned for washing over her body and through her thoughts.

She remembered how the night had started. Diana had phoned and invited her to a party at some friends' place. At first, Vickey had tried to refuse, she didn't want to meet any new people, and her mood, to put it mildly, was gloomy. But Diana was relentless: "How long are you going to sit there waiting for your precious Alex?" she asked, laughing. "I can't bear to watch it. Come on, take your mind off it all for the evening. In our age of medicated progress, depressed people don't inspire sympathy. They're just annoying."

Diana was so beautiful, so strong on the outside, that it never took her long to talk someone round.

And Vickey agreed.

And to be fair, three months had passed since that horrific day. Alex had probably gone off somewhere, as he always did, without saying a word about when he'd come back, or if he'd come back at all. She couldn't let herself dip back into depression, she had to crawl out of the hole.

Then there was the beautiful house in the elite gated community of artists in Hampstead, the verandah decked in glimmering, colored lights, the light summer dresses of the girls and the fashionable print t-shirts of the boys, vodka, DJs and dancing. A real, warm, Bohemian evening in London, where everyone is chilled, they all know one another, or almost do, and where everyone is unfailingly friendly.

And Diana, magnificent, beautiful, clever, ironic Diana, dancing close by and drinking tequila, for a joke licking salt off Vickey's naked shoulder, her neck, and higher, around her earlobe, tickling, intimate. At once yearned for and shameful. Diana laughs. Vickey sees a lock of her hair casually falling across her girlfriend's brow, drops of sweat on her freckled nose, and a cheeky look in her eye. Diana is openly teasing her, but it's just a joke, right?

They have another drink and Diana starts dancing again. Vickey's head is spinning slightly from the tequila, and she follows her girlfriend, dancing to the rhythm of the music, answering the flirt of Diana's movements. She dances so beautifully, Vickey thinks. The grace of those slender arms and legs in motion.

Alex had introduced her to Diana, of course. He'd said in his careless way: "Vickey, meet Diana, a friend of mine. Remember we were talking about 'real Londoners'? She's an incredible girl, a heartbreaker, but she knows how to put them back together again, as she's a heart surgeon. Although she says that she's not interested in men anymore, which has definitely been great for our long, sincere friendship. Because Diana's one of those people that it's absolutely impossible to refuse. So, kid, be careful with her."

Vickey's heart missed a beat. Alex had never talked about anyone with that kind of admiration, desire and regret all in one. To avoid going out of her mind with jealousy where Diana was concerned, she decided she'd do everything she could to be friends with her. She'd try and understand why her man, who she'd been in love with for so many years, was so keen on this sweet, slender girl with her dark, rich hair cut so short.

So now, when Diana had phoned and invited her to hang out, she looked at her with enchantment in her eyes. She liked Diana's friends, she was flattered by her girlfriend's attentions, she liked Diana, and she really wanted to be liked too. She was drunk and happy, and she didn't notice that she'd started flirting with Diana, the distance between them as they danced getting shorter, their arms, shoulders, legs touching. The closeness of Diana's body excited her. Swaying in the dance, she almost fell into Diana's embrace, their faces up close, and she asked a question: "Are we going to kiss?" And Diana, without thinking for a second, said: "Of course!"

Vickey would remember that kiss forever. In the middle of the dancefloor, in front of all those friends, ashamed of nothing, ashamed before no one, Diana touched Vickey's lips with a long, gentle kiss. She gently pushed Vickey's teeth apart with her tongue, and entered within. Time stopped for Vickey, her heart pounded in her chest, her legs wilted at the thought that she was kissing a woman, that she liked it, and that she didn't want it to stop.

Diana got a bottle of Olmeca tequila at the bar and they went back to Diana's. A black piano stood in the center of the airy, spacious studio in Camden, an aspidistra in a pot standing next to it. Opposite there were two armchairs, a vast leather, slightly aged sofa, and the obligatory tall book cases to be found in the home of every member of London's intelligentsia.

Diana poured the Olmeca tequila into cut glasses and sliced up a lime. The hushed lighting of the shaded lamp created the impression of a picture from the distant past come to life. Vickey saw visions of the Bloomsbury set, the writers

Virginia Woolf, E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, formal speech, the word “feminism” was just beginning to appear, and the invention of the mobile telephone was far off in the distant future.

“Do you play?” asked Vickey, touching the keys on the piano.

“No,” answered Diana. Then she looked at Vickey and added, “Barely. I saved this old instrument when its owners were trying to throw it out. I’ve always dreamed of learning, and even took some lessons. But I don’t have that lightness I find when I’m dancing, so I lost interest.” She carried on looking at Vickey. “Do you play?”

“Seven years of music school.”

“You’ll play?” To Vickey, Diana’s question sounded entirely appropriate.

“All right,” Vickey answered, somehow relaxed.

As she went over to the piano, she thought she could see herself and everything that was happening to her from the outside. It was like some kind of film she might have watched after a good meal with a sophisticated drink.

Vickey was a master of the instrument, she could play it in any state. It was as if she spoke through the keys.

She wanted to play for Diana, something light and misty, like the evening had been for her. She played Liszt’s “Dreams of Love.”

Immersing herself in the sounds that she gently caressed out of the piano, she only thought of Diana, of badly wanting to taste her lips again. It was strange and unexpected. She’d always thought of herself as being such a grownup, so experienced, having seen and done so much, she’d kissed her girlfriends at school in order to scare her parents and teachers with more than a pierced nose and the sounds of Janis Joplin, her favorite rock diva, blaring from her stereo. But no girl had ever inspired this kind of curiosity, this burning, shameful desire in her quite like Diana.

The idea that Alex was to blame kept spinning round in her head. If it wasn’t for his terrible behavior, if he hadn’t wanted Diana so badly, and so obviously, none of this would have happened. Vickey, trembling from fear, was drawn to her new desire.

Diana came up to her from behind and put her arms around her shoulders. Vickey turned to her and they began to kiss again, the music breaking off. Again, that feeling that all this wasn’t happening to her. Her fingers touching Diana’s fingers, reaching for one another, she got up from the piano. They moved to the center of the room. Diana, releasing her fingers, went over to the bottle and glasses, looking Vickey in the eye every step of the way. Vickey felt shame and a sense of lightness at the same time.

Another shot of tequila, and Diana began to undo the buttons on Vickey’s dress, pulling it down to her waist, laying bare her large, milky-toned breasts and nipples. Diana slowly lowered her face into the rift between Vickey’s breasts, running her tongue down the skin and placing her delicate fingers, the nails neatly cut short, on Vickey’s nipples.

Vickey shuddered at the waves of arousal washing over her entire body. Diana’s touch was precise, tender, confident. She kissed Vickey’s breasts, her tongue lowering down her stomach, her hands freeing up Vickey’s waist and thighs from the dress.

She stopped suddenly, raised her head and looked at Vickey, a question in her eye, just as she gently passed a finger over a small scar on her belly.

Vickey understood Diana’s question without words. Her heart started beating faster, she sensed how her entire body had become heavier, the lower part of her stomach pulsing in expectation of joy. A thought overcame her – this is the last

chance to stop it. But the answer to this question that came from nowhere was obvious.

For a moment it seemed that all her unthinkable desires had built up in the tip of Diana's finger, and the scar had become her erogenous zone. Vicky breathed in deeply, filling her lungs with air, closed her eyes, and almost imperceptibly nodded.

Diana helped Vicky to pull her panties off and moved her tensed-up knees apart. Vicky's body instinctively unfurled to meet her, her thighs opened, and her shoulders and head fell back, limp. With her index fingers, Diana opened her pussy, revealing the tender head of the clit, blood swelling the genital lips of her new lover. Vicky groaned in impatience. But Diana was in no hurry. First, just the tip of the tongue, barely touching; then, the tongue pressing harder and harder, she slipped up and down and into Vicky's naturalness. Again and again, circling, faster and faster, narrowing the perimeter of her movements around the clit, already crimson from tension.

It was sweet torture. She didn't know why, but she was afraid of crying out at the ecstasy. Another magical touch from Diana. Vicky bit her lower lip to fight back a treacherous moan. But she couldn't resist when Diana slipped three fingers into her, wet from arousal, found the small groove on the upper wall and began to actively move her hand, whilst her tongue and lips focused on Vicky's clit.

Vicky's orgasm came in just a few minutes, she didn't even have time to realize what had happened. Her entire body sparked up in an uncontrolled flare of satisfaction and joy. For an instant she thought that she had wet herself – yes, it was a similar sensation, but totally different at the same time. She looked at the transparent liquid on the inside surfaces of her thighs and on the chair, she felt terribly ashamed and embarrassed, and she clamped her thighs back together in confusion.

"Sorry," she said, forcing the words out.

"Silly," Diana whispered tenderly. "What, you've never come like that?"

Vicky looked at Diana, totally lost.

"Don't worry, it's not wee," said Diana, conspiratorially. "It doesn't have any color or smell." Diana glanced a fiery look at Vicky. "Do you want to do it again?"

The second time wasn't so unexpected, but it seemed longer, more intense. And then again, and again. They moved onto the sofa and, caressing one another, fell asleep towards morning.

And now it was time to wake up.

April 2018 **Alex, Vicky, Leon, Maxim, Greg**

They sat round the table in silence. They understood that at the end of this conversation the lives of each and every one of them could be irreparably changed.

They were very different. But they shared a common trait. They were united by the fact that none of them had any illusions about this world. Each of them needed freedom, their own kind of freedom, and they were ready to risk everything to change their lives.

Leon, who went by the nickname of Fatty, was the most nervous. He'd been invited to come along by Max, who owned the apartment and was sitting next to him. Leon was a tubby young man, twenty-five years of age, average height, with a

receding hairline and little grey eyes that flittered about because of his chronic lack of confidence.

He earned his living as a so-called “white hat hacker”: he would find loopholes on various commercial sites and send this “info” on faults to their owners, requesting payments for his professional “diagnoses.” As a rule, he didn’t ask for much and the business owners found it easier to transfer the required amounts to Leon, rather than take the risk of him publishing his “technical revelations” on the Net.

Max, Leon’s cousin, was his total opposite. Tall, fair-haired, confident. A former policeman.

He’d started working in the Metropolitan police force at the beginning of the noughties when people began to work out that the enforcement of law and order in Britain’s capital wasn’t nearly as squeaky clean as people liked to think and when no-go areas began to appear across the city. Perhaps no worse than any other capital city, but any decent guidebook to London warned foreigners to be careful about which neighborhoods they walked through on the way back to their hotels. You could still get clubbed over the head or knifed in the very center of the city for the sake of your wallet or your mobile.

It wasn’t ideological considerations that led Max to join the force. After school, which he barely graduated from, he simply had nowhere else to go. And the police were taking anyone they could get back then – there was a manpower shortage. He worked there until 2015, when he quit over a row with his superiors.

He’d worked at several different private security agencies since then. Then he’d been a driver, exhausting himself at the wheel of a cab for chump change, but that was the best that fate was offering him. Until his old pal Greg phoned him.

Although it was a stretch for Max to call Greg a colleague. Max had caught Greg in 2007 when he was burgling an apartment in Kentish Town. He’d caught him and let him go. Shit happened.

That day there’d been a phone call to the police station from a pensioner, from a woman on Islip Street. Through the spyhole onto her apartment’s landing, she’d seen a man trying to crowbar the neighbor’s door open. Max and another officer were sent to check it out. When they arrived, Max’s partner went in from the street side, so that the burglar couldn’t escape over the balcony. Max went in through the main entrance, and came face to face with Greg.

Max instantly realized what was going on, but he couldn’t get to his holster in time – Greg’s powerful, muscled hand was already on his wrist, and Max froze. Neither of them needed to give any explanations.

“Don’t, chief.”

Greg spoke as if giving a command, there was an authority in his voice that couldn’t be faked. “Don’t,” he repeated.

Max froze up.

They stood there, looking one another in the eye. According to the procedural rule book, Max was supposed to cuff Greg and march him back to the station, but who cared about the rules if you were risking your life to enforce them? And for what? For some pensioner’s belongings?

“I haven’t got a shooter,” Greg added, just as quietly, with the same authority.

Max understood what he meant.

Greg carried on looking him straight in the eye. “With my left hand, I’m going to take some dough out, chief.”

Greg, very slowly, reached into his pocket, and with two fingers pulled out a small wad of pound notes, tied up with a rubber band.

"Are we done here, chief?" asked Greg, weighting his words, and raising up the cash.

Max, still looking into Greg's eyes, nodded.

"Good," said Greg.

Greg slowly handed the greens to Max, and then just as slowly took his hand off him.

"We cool, chief?" Greg asked with confidence, grinning. "Quits?"

Max gave another nod.

The door creaked behind Greg, and he disappeared. Max breathed out the fear hard. His arms and legs were shaking. He knew that, instead of the money, he could've got shanked under the ribs with a knife.

Greg reappeared in Max's life a few months later. Just as unexpectedly. Max was eating in a small café on the high street in Kentish Town. He was just finishing his three pieces of fried chicken when Greg, all of a sudden, sat down in the chair directly opposite him.

"No objections, chief?" asked Greg.

Max recognized him immediately. He realized that Greg wouldn't have found it hard to track him down, knowing which police station he was assigned to.

"No objections," Max replied dryly.

That day they spoke calmly about a lot, and specifically about Max covering up Greg's shadier "escapades." In exchange, Max was promised a cut from the takings. Greg would also give him tips on collaring some petty thieves, usually those coming in from the provinces, so that Max would have a good record at the station and get promoted. They went into business and would meet fairly often, as a rule away from the center of town, at shabby cafes out past the ring road.

Greg hadn't pulled off any major jobs, but it was all enough for them to get by. Right up until Greg came up against a hefty security guard when he was trying to clean out a corner store on Prince of Wales Road. Greg had to use the knife he carried for such eventualities. After that, Greg had gone under the radar, and he'd only reappeared in Max's life half a year ago.

Alex and Vickey sat opposite Max. Alex was holding Vickey's hand under the table. He knew why he'd taken her on this risky job. He knew, but he hadn't really told Vickey the whole truth yet. Just as he hadn't told her the whole truth about the weight on his soul. He'd just told her that he needed this really badly, and that without her he couldn't do it.

They sat their waiting for Greg to speak.

"Go on, Greg," Max said, impatient.

Greg slowly drummed his fingers on the table. Then abruptly stopped tapping and asked, "So, guys, what would you say if you were to get one mil each without even having to work up a sweat?"

Max, just as he had the first time he met Greg, froze, taking in every word. He knew that Greg didn't talk about stuff like this without there being something to it.

In the circles that Alex, Vickey and Leon hung out in, they didn't talk in the slang of London's criminal underworld. But like many in Britain, they understood it. Old films and TV shows about cops and robbers were packed with it.

Max was the link between Greg and the others in that room – Max had grown up on the same street as Alex. They'd gone to kindergarten together. Then they'd been in the same class at school. They were best friends, joined at the hip.

At the end of the day, Max was Alex's only friend. They'd got into trouble together so many times, protecting each other: Max, older and stronger, didn't let the older kids and the local gang touch Alex, and Alex, in turn, helped his friend to avoid trouble with his teachers and the cops.

Then they'd gone their different ways, but their childhood memories bound them tight.

"A million," Leon muttered to himself.

"Let's get acquainted to start with," said Greg. "Everyone knows Max. I'm Greg. I've done a few scams. Max will vouch for me. I've never been done for theft. I worked as a guard."

"I'm Alex. A journalist."

"Victoria. I'm out of work right now. I used to work in marketing."

"I'm Leon..." He could barely be heard, and he had no idea what he should add beyond his name in a conversation like this.

"One million?" Alex asked, checking he'd heard right.

"Yes," replied Greg.

"What makes you so certain?" asked Alex.

"If I say a million, that means I know," Greg answered dryly.

Greg looked over them all pointedly, weight in his words, and continued:

"We're talking about a bank where I worked. As a guard. I know the place inside out. It's ready for the taking. They don't even have glass between the bank tellers and the clients."

Alex looked at Max. He gave him a subtle nod.

"So that you can understand what I'm talking about, we'll send in Fatty," said Greg, nodding at Leon. "He'll open an account at the bank. They won't suspect anything. Leon will confirm the basic information about the bank. I'll also take a look round there. I know how to do that on the low down. But we'll get to that later."

Alex turned and looked at Vickey, who was listening attentively to every word.

"On a certain day there's about six million in there," Greg continued. "There are five of us, and a driver who'll give us cover if the situation gets out of control."

"What do you mean by, 'situation gets out of control'?" Vickey asked, interrupting.

"I mean," Greg replied, with a hint of mockery in his tone, "that they might start shooting."

It was clear that Greg didn't like a girl butting into the conversation. The words "sexism" and "equality of the sexes" simply didn't exist in the environment that he inhabited, and all of his friends knew that guys were more important than girls, and that women should keep their traps shut when men are talking. Greg looked at Vickey with irritation, and then at Max.

A pause hung in the air. Max wanted to say something, but Alex got there first.

"I want to say right from the go," Alex began. When he saw that Greg was listening attentively, he stretched out the pause before continuing. "Until we know the whole plan, Vickey and I aren't agreeing to anything." Alex turned to Greg. "So, if there are any disagreements, we just go our different ways and forget each other."

Alex hadn't liked Greg from the jump, he found everything about him irritating: from the dirt under his fingernails to the way he spoke to people, putting them down and scaring them.

Greg looked straight at Alex and kept silent. Alex sensed that he'd taken the initiative. And, of course, he knew that as long as Max was there, there wouldn't be a fight. It'd been like that since they were kids.

Greg started speaking in a different tone. "I..."

"I'll just finish," Alex said in a calm tone, interrupting him again.

Greg fell silent, barely fighting back his discontent.

"If Max brought us all together, that means he's got his reasons," Alex continued, rapping out every word with precision. "It means he trusts us. And that means we can discuss everything calmly and make a decision."

Greg kept his silence.

"I've got several questions," said Alex, staring at Greg. "Is there a real risk that we'll end up in a gun fight? Who's this driver? And, finally, and most importantly: Why us?"

After a short silence, Greg, staring at Alex, started talking.

"This is a big job, and it's a good one. Chances like this come once every ten years. The driver's someone we can trust; you don't have to know him. Leave that to me and Max. And Max will be your insurance that you all get your cut."

"All right," said Alex. "Let's assume that's all true." He looked at Max again. "But why us?"

Greg looked them all over slowly, and then finally got down to business.

"When we knock the bank over, the cops will be looking for specialists in this kind of job," Greg began with feeling. "They'll be looking for safe-crackers, wetworkers and so on. And, of course, anyone who's already done time for ripping off banks."

All four of them listened to his every word very carefully.

"As we've got a woman here," Greg continued, "the cops will go through their files of every lady that's been caught playing in a job like this. The investigators will get lost in that whole mess. They won't be able to find their way out with a compass and a map," he smiled, very happy with himself. "And we'll already be drinking expensive cocktails a long way from the Big Smoke."

Greg sounded convincing.

"This is a really easy job," he continued, "so I need 'passengers' with a clean record, no rap sheet. People they won't ever suspect. People who've never been linked to crime. That way we're untouchable." Greg left a pause, and then continued. "There's almost no security at this bank," he said, clearly liking his own idea. "One poor bastard from a security agency."

Vickey squeezed Alex's hand hard under the table.

"There're several getaway routes. If everyone's in on this, I'll tell you the plan. But then there'll be no going back."

"A million?" whispered Leon ecstatically, looking at Max. "I can move out of my Mom's apartment?!?"

Greg sneered.

"It's a clean job," he said. "And simple." He looked at Max and added: "I've found their weak spot, bro. This will be like the Great Train Robbery – a Great Train Robbery for the 21st century!"

Silenced reigned in the room.

"You got any questions, Fatty?" Greg asked, suddenly turning round to Leon. "Do you trust Max?"

"I get it so far," Leon quickly answered. "Yes, I trust him." He still had a load of questions, of course, but he didn't want to be the one to start an argument.

"It's just a lot of information in one go," Max said calmly, looking round at them all.

Greg looked at Max and nodded.

“Let’s have a little rest, drink some coffee, and continue,” suggested Max.

“That’s a good idea,” said Vickey, letting out a deep breath. Although she knew what they were talking about, and although she thought she was ready to play her part, Greg’s speech had been a bit of a downer. But, for reasons that only she and Alex knew, she wasn’t planning on quitting.

All of them, apart from Alex, headed into the kitchen. Greg cracked some jokes, Max laughed quietly, Leon tactfully laughed along. Vickey, unable to get into their conversation, poured herself and Alex a coffee.

Left alone in the room, Alex leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes.

When Max had said that he’d need a woman for this job, Alex had immediately thought of Vickey, of course. To be honest, despite their three-year romance, Alex wasn’t “serious” about Vickey. Sure, he liked her, but there were a lot of other people he liked along the way, and he easily forgot about her when he got caught up in some other escapade.

He didn’t want to get too close, and he’d often disappear. She always waited for him. He could tell he was hurting her, and there had been several times when he’d wanted to break off. But every time, Vickey had somehow got their relationship going again. New escapades would come and go, but for some reason Vickey was always there.

And so, right now, Vickey was the only person that Alex could trust, the only person who’d agree to help him start a new life, crossing that invisible line with him, a line that would cut them off, forever stop them going back to their former lives. He understood, of course, that what had happened to Vickey in the recent past, her insane, wild story, was bound to influence her decision to take part in this deal. Just like him, she had nothing to go back to. And, like him, she had nothing to lose.

He recalled their conversation. Her tears, her despair, her pain. He remembered his words, how he’d told her he was tired, that he’d got mixed up, didn’t trust himself or his decisions. That he felt like a boat adrift at sea. That, without her, he wouldn’t take part in this deal, couldn’t bring himself to commit. That he needed her support. He was telling the truth, and was truly grateful that she was with him.

“This is the Rubicon,” he thought, “that invisible line that you cross...”

There was no way his mother would have approved of this meeting, he sneered, and then winced. When he thought of his mother he’d start to shake, and then it would take time for him to calm down. But he would’ve given a lot for his mother to be here at the table, so that she could see his behavior. Independent, criminal and, most importantly, flying in the face of all her values.

Alex felt a wave of anger and bitterness building up in his chest, eating up, devouring everything that was good and kind in its path. He pictured that meeting with Robert, the psychiatrist, which had happened so long ago. He’d gone, even though he was sure that all those doctors were “cranks and conmen.” He’d gone because he understood that he was standing on the brink.

June 2016

Alex, Robert

Alex was sitting in the office of Robert, an expensive psychiatrist who’d been recommended by Jake, an acquaintance from his business projects. In London, you often find doctors and other specialists through recommendations from friends. You never know who you might end up with if you go to one of the state hospitals, even if

it's free, and the same was true of the private clinics if you didn't know the right name. Jake had said that Robert was great to talk to, a professional, if you wanted to talk about yourself. And that was what Alex wanted, he badly needed to sort himself out. He was approaching middle age, but he hadn't found the answers to the questions that were torturing him, and most importantly, he hadn't made peace with himself.

Alex had been looking over the interior for ten minutes – it was all very austere, understated: three armchairs, two for the clients standing opposite “the chief's.” A low coffee table with two volumes of Lacan on it. Next to them stood a gaudy cup of green tea. The cup was clumsily made, perhaps by a child. On the other side of table there was a glass of water that had been offered to Alex by the doctor's attractive assistant. A large quartz clock was hung on the opposite wall. And that was it. Alex, who hadn't said a word since he'd sat down in his chair, continued studying the low-key sequence of objects in the interior. He couldn't keep himself occupied with that forever, though. He looked up at Robert, a dark-skinned black man, and spoke:

“I'm a journalist, talking is my profession. But now I don't even know where to begin.”

Robert looked about 55 to 60, he had an open, straightforward look in his brown, trusting eyes, he had flecks of grey in his hair around his temples, and the attractive, ageing face of a man who had once been very handsome, and hasn't been tempted by plastic surgery. He wore a dark blue velvet jacket, a shirt, well-worn jeans and trainers.

He answered Alex in a calm, low tone:

“Adult problems are rooted in our childhood - what were you like as a child? Who surrounded you? Start with a striking memory from your past. Tell me about it in the tiniest of details, everything that you remember about that moment.”

Alex gained confidence from the psychologist's appearance; from the way he spoke.

“From my childhood?” he asked, not waiting for an answer before continuing. “All right. I was ten years old. It was March.” Alex paused for a second, and then went on. “To quote a classic, ‘when winter is still sprinkling snow on the asphalt, but every day the morning sun gives hope that spring will soon arrive. And it will be warm, and there will be new life.’ On that day, I struck lucky twice in one go.”

Alex smirked bitterly.

“I got an A grade in my math test – usually I found them tough. But best of all, I came first in a writing competition and was allowed to join the school theater. That was where the older, cooler kids, would hang out. The theater was where all the crucial, thrilling stuff at our school happened. I dreamt of getting in there, the way that some boys dream of getting into a football club. I was just an assistant to an assistant to one of the scriptwriters, of course, but I knew that it wouldn't be long before I'd prove myself – I had so many ideas! I was incredibly proud of myself, I imagined how all my teachers and classmates would respect me. I didn't run out of school that day, I flew, my winter coat not even done up, smiling from ear to ear.

“I ran all the way home with that smile and shouted out, ‘Mom, I got into the theater!’”

“Mom came out of the kitchen into the corridor, drying her hands on a towel, and just looked at me hard for a long time.

‘Where're your hat and your scarf?’

"I felt this icy shiver. I was forever losing them. Four times that winter alone. Mom would always give me a really bad telling off. She'd call me an idiot, a moron, an ungrateful pig. And she hated the way they'd cut my hair, she said I had a moron's haircut, the kind a 'paedo' would have, she wanted me to wear my hat the whole time, she didn't want to see that 'revolting' fringe. The day before she'd threatened to superglue my hat onto the top of my head. And now I'd gone and lost it again.

"I could see my Mom's face contorting, and she started wrapping the towel around her fist.

"I could hear her furious voice. "Right ... go and find them. Don't come back without them.

"I was sure I'd left my hat and scarf at school, so I ran back. But they weren't there. And nobody had seen them. I went home and told Mom I couldn't find them anywhere. Mom walked up to me, not saying a word, grabbed me by my shirt collar, like a puppy, and dragged and kicked me out of the apartment.

"I decided to go back to school, but very slowly, looking around the whole way. I had to find my scarf and hat – they might have fallen out of my coat pocket as I was running, and someone might have picked them up and hung them on a bush, or a tree, or on a bench. I spent about an hour getting back to the school, instead of the 20 minutes it would've usually taken me. The sun had already hidden behind the clouds, and a cold wind had blown up. I was frozen to the bone and starving.

"There was nobody there by the time I got to the school. I looked round the empty classrooms that had already been cleaned and tidied up. I woke up Nina, our school cleaner, and although she threw every curse she knew at me, she agreed to open up the assembly room – the base for the school theater.

"I searched on the stage, backstage, in the dressing room, the wardrobe room, I looked under every single chair in the auditorium, even though I'd only been there five minutes that day and didn't go beyond the corridor. Obviously, I didn't find the hat and scarf.

"Nina told me to go home, because it was already 7 in the evening, the sun had gone down 'and kids shouldn't be wondering around the cold streets on their own, especially without a hat and scarf.'

"But I knew that I couldn't go home. Even if I begged for forgiveness, Mom would be angry and she'd definitely give me a painful hiding with Dad's belt, she'd regret having given birth to me and wasting so much love and energy that I didn't deserve.

"I went out into the street. We lived in a council house on an estate. The school, as I said, wasn't far off. You probably don't know about living on an estate...?" Alex asked, suddenly breaking off from his story.

"No," replied Robert. "Only secondhand. But I can imagine. Dirty streets, cheap shop windows, streets packed with takeaway joints, cheap alcohol, snickers and cigarettes." Robert continued without taking his eyes off Alex. "People hurrying to get the bus or tube, or just loitering, dubious, unpleasant groups of men, high, women soliciting on the streets of the capital. Not the best place for a ten-year-old boy."

Alex noticed that Robert's calm voice and his way of slightly stretching out his words inspired him with an uncanny sense of trust, and a wish to carry on telling his story. "It's like giving confession," he thought, before going on.

"I went back out into the street and headed the opposite direction from home. I didn't know what to do or where to go. First, I wandered about in the alleyways around the school, and when I got really cold, I tried to get into a residential block; it's

entryway was beautifully lit. But a couple of heavies kicked me straight out – they must’ve been guards for some rich guy who’d bought himself some more real estate right here in the center of town.

“At some point I decided to go and see my class’s form teacher, maybe because it was the only address I knew. So off I went. She lived at the next tube stop along. I didn’t have any money for a ticket, so I went on foot. It was already about nine in the evening when a nasty, fine sleet added itself to the piercing wind. I couldn’t feel my ears or nose from the cold.”

Alex again stopped his story.

Robert, realizing that Alex needed a break, waited calmly for him to continue his story.

“Miss Greaves, our form teacher,” Alex began again, “was about 40, but life had tired her out. She was in a dressing gown and hair curlers when she opened the door. She was amazed that I’d managed to find her, she listened to my incoherent story, never stopped arguing with her husband for a second, gave me some old scarf which I could’ve entirely wrapped myself up in, and said she’d phone my parents if I didn’t go home immediately.

“On the way home a pack of stray dogs started following me. I could hear them pitter-pattering along after me in the empty, quiet night alleyways, occasionally barking at one another. I did everything I could not to look back and not to speed up, because I knew I shouldn’t run. If you run, they’ll jump you and tear you to pieces. That’s what I’d been taught. I walked and wept from fear, but I lost them. Crying, I ran all the way home.

“Lights were on in the windows. And in that moment, standing about a 100 feet away from the house, I finally understood that I couldn’t go in, and that I had nowhere else to go. I just stood there in the middle of the street, and as luck would have it the door opened and Dad came out with the rubbish in his hand. He came up to me, put his free hand on my shoulder and said: ‘Let’s go and throw the rubbish out, and then go home!’

“He appeared in an instant; it was like a fairytale where everyone gets saved right at the end. My Dad! It felt like his heavyset build was warming the air around me, because I suddenly stopped shivering from the cold and followed my father. Then we went back, and I summoned up all my resolve to tell Dad what I’d done, and how I’d angered Mom.

“I wanted to tell him that I couldn’t go in there with him, that she wouldn’t let me come home. But I was afraid that he’d go, and leave me all alone in the street. In silence, we went up the stairs and entered the apartment.”

Alex stopped again to get his breath back and take a couple of sips of water.

“I stood in the corridor and looked at the door into the room. It opened. Mom came out. I thought I wouldn’t cry, but I bawled my eyes out. I begged for forgiveness, I said that I was to blame, that I wouldn’t do it again, and that tomorrow I’d find the hat and scarf, definitely, I just needed to spend the night at home, and in the morning, I’d go straight out and find everything.

“Mom listened to me, she didn’t interrupt, she was totally calm, she even had a slight smile on her face – that happened sometimes, her anger just passed, and then she turned round and took my ‘lost’ hat and scarf off a hanger. I’d left them at home in the morning.”

Alex fell silent.

Robert didn’t break the silence for a while, and then asked:

“You were only beaten by your mother?”

"Yes," Alex replied quickly.

"What did your father do? How did he behave?" asked Robert.

Alex gave a deep sigh.

"Father? Father earned for two by doing three jobs. Mom, essentially, didn't work, and he didn't get involved in her 'housekeeping.' He left early in the morning and came back late in the evening. He saw the bruises from the beatings on my body, but he chose to believe that a mother would have boundaries, and that it was all part of bringing me up."

Alex closed his eyes for a few seconds and shook his head, as if he himself couldn't believe what he was saying.

"He loved me, of course," he continued, "but when he tried to express his opinion, Mom would get hysterical, put on a whole show for him, she'd hurl heavy objects at him – he had a great constitution, and that was the only thing that saved him. He was a big guy and he didn't like scandals. She did what she liked with him. You know, even when I was a kid I was amazed at how they'd ever got married."

"Often, love can't be reduced to any formulas," Robert said quietly.

Alex looked at Robert attentively, and then continued.

"Just imagine. He was an unattractive, overweight man, a peace-loving, agreeable wimp, an introvert and a serious scientist. And mother was a delicate angel, had been to a ballet school, a prima in London just getting started, all grace and bearing, a woman of incredible beauty, hungry for fame and recognition.

"He was madly in love with her, of course, he fussed over her, they got married, they had me, and they were even really happy for a time. Dad was doing well in his job, his works on molecular physics got published in international scientific journals. Mom went back to work after maternity leave too and she was determined to get back into shape and to get back on track in her career. They left me with my grandmother, Dad's mother, for the most part – she was still alive. They said that everyone was happy, up until there was a tragedy."

Alex could feel a lump rising up in his throat. He had to make a real effort to continue:

"A tragedy that began it all. And I don't know how it will end."

Robert could see that Alex's glass was almost empty. He took a bottle of Perrier from the table, twisted the lid off and poured the water into the glass. Alex gave a nod of gratitude.

"I was a year old," he continued. "It was my birthday, and Mom was hurrying home from our walk, pushing the pram, so that she could hand me over to Grandma. Even then she didn't like to spend a lot of time with me on her own. It was rainy and wet in the street, she slipped, fell and broke her leg in three places. That was the end of her ballet career, she was too young to be a choreographer, she was only twenty-two, and she thought that being a mere dance teacher was beneath her. So, she just stayed at home and channeled all of her raging fury as a failed genius into my upbringing.

"And it seems that that was what really disappointed her in life. First it turned out, at just three years of age, that I 'lacked any feeling of rhythm', and my movements were 'clumsy and painfully rigid', which really upset her. By the age of seven she was blaming me for having lost her figure because she'd had to stay at home and bring me up. By the age of ten she didn't even need a reason to hate me.

"Mom was always disappointed by me in every way imaginable, and she was forever comparing me with Susan, my cousin, who lived in her hometown of Manchester. She was my age and did better than me at everything. Secretly, I hated

my goody-two-shoes cousin who wasn't really to blame. I envied her – her parents, particularly her mother, loved their daughter. They just loved her.” Alex sensed that he was about to cry, but he finished his thought: “The parents loved their daughter. It's so simple.”

Alex could sense tears welling up and rolling down his cheeks.

“I was brought up being forced to eat soup that had gone off because I'd forgotten to put the pot in the fridge, and being made to kneel on peas in the corner because I'd got a bad grade at school.”

Alex slowly shook his head, as if to himself.

“I can't remember,” he said, “how old I was when insults and humiliation stopped being enough for her, and she started beating me. I think it must have been fairly early.”

July 2016 **Vickey. Diary**

“We haven't seen each other for three months and twenty days.

I'm going nuts. I had a dream. I thought I was at Alex's in Shoreditch. When we were together, it was all so real, we were going our separate ways, and he was going off to Amsterdam or something for a journalism project, and he was in that cozy Dutch town for a whole year, where you can smoke anything, you have a mind to.

He rented out his apartment to some blonde and left. And I was dreaming that he'd come back, and that he was living in that same apartment that he'd rented to that skinny blonde, and I was there too. I came to see him. And he was pleased to see me, and he loved me again.

It wasn't like it was at the end of our relationship (like it really was), when he was supposed to be leaving London forever, when he wanted to change everything, when he'd started to drink a lot again, to smoke grass, to disappear with some dubious people. I left the city back then. I moved to Manchester, to my cousin's, although I'd never felt comfortable there because of the chilly weather. Alex flew off to get away from London. And me. Even when he's not here. How? A city with countless people, and I'm hurting because of just one of them, because of him, one of ten or fifteen million people living here.

I left. And then I came back, and I went to him, I left Manchester for London just to see him, even if for just a couple of minutes... It was different. As if he'd come back for good. We sat on the big sofa in the living room, we held hands. In the dream, Alex had to move, and I helped him pack his stuff, he took me with him – he said we should live together.

... Then we went back to mine, and when we were sitting in my parents' apartment, and everyone was talking, and everyone understood that Alex wasn't just an acquaintance or a friend, he was my man, I was so overjoyed that I wasn't worried anymore about how they'd treat him, or if he'd like ... I brought him home as a member of the family, and I didn't even think about it... Yes ... I just wanted to take him back to my parents. But I was too late.

That was the dream.

Maybe the people who say that I'm just looking for a replacement for him are right. Because after that dream all my tender feelings for him came back.

And we haven't seen each other for three months, two days and fifteen hours.”

April 2018
Alex, Vickey, Leon, Max, Greg

"Are you all ok, Alex?" Vickey's voice brought Alex back to reality.

Alex shook his head and looked at Vickey.

"Yes, yes," he said quietly. "Everything's all right. I was just thinking."

Vickey looked at him attentively, putting a cup of coffee on the table.

"The way you like it," she said. "One spoonful of sugar."

Everyone had come back into the room and sat down in their places again.

Leon nervously clenched his sweaty fists, staring at Max. Max had always been a hero to him. And everyone understood that Leon would be in the game.

Alex took a couple of gulps of coffee, and they finally brought him back from the memories of that first meeting with the psychiatrist that had unexpectedly overcome him.

Everyone was back in their places.

"What's so special about this bank?" Alex asked Greg.

Greg took a long hard look at Max. In turn, Max, squinting, looked straight back at him.

"Tell them!" snapped Max. "I'm responsible for Alex and Vickey. If Alex isn't in, nobody will find out a thing. I give you my word on that."

Greg nodded. He lit up a Marlboro, took a deep drag on it, and slowly exhaled smoke. The moment he'd been preparing for had arrived.

"It's called the Trust Bank," Greg began. "You've all see the billboards up around town."

Everyone at the table knew what he was talking about.

"So," Greg continued, "as a rule, banks are located on big, busy streets so that there are lots of people around, so that everyone can see the shiny adverts and all of that. Right?!"

Leon nodded quickly, signaling that he understood.

Greg looked round at everyone present and continued:

"But there's one Trust branch that's in a special place – it's on the territory of the British Higher School of Design. And that bank is used by the staff at the London Polytechnic too."

Max looked at Alex and nodded towards Greg as if to say "listen carefully to this."

"The bank's on the School's territory," Greg repeated. "So no one's even thought about guarding it properly. There's a dork of a guard inside the bank, he's probably done a few day's training and he's pulling down minimum wage – a few hundred quid a week in all ..."

They were all following every word coming from Greg very closely now.

"All right," continued Greg. "The distance between the bank and the School's entry gates is about a few hundred feet. There's no chance that a police car will accidentally pull up at the door."

"Who guards the entry gates to the School?" asked Alex.

Greg looked at Alex with interest.

"You've already done a job?" Greg asked Alex, instead of answering his question.

Greg kept his eyes on Alex.

"The gates to the School are guarded by two complete chumps. From another private security firm. They're just there to check who's gone in, who's come out, and to run the private parking lot. They don't even check anyone who's driving out."

"But there's a guard inside the bank?" asked Max.

"Yes," Greg answered with a cunning smile. "But that's no big deal. He's alone. A section of pipe across the back of the head. He'll come round and live another fifty years out in the 'burbs."

Leon was breaking into a sweat, the drops on his forehead glistening in the light of the yellow lamp that hung over the table. He was as surprised as everyone else when he heard himself asking a question.

"What do you mean a section of pipe across the back of the head? What if the guard dies?"

Everyone looked at Greg.

"What if he dies?" Leon repeated.

Greg looked at Leon, thinking about something, but didn't reply.

"If it's like that, then I heard nothing, I saw nothing, and I'm on my way," Leon said quietly.

"Wait, Leon," said Max. "This isn't our first job. It's like with the chemists'... I always take the risks. You know that."

"Yes," replied Leon. "But we never killed anyone. That's totally different." He again started to rub his sweaty hands together. "That's totally different," he repeated nervously.

"That's not the plan here either," said Max. "Remember – like we always said: 'Whatever happens in life, no one gets out alive'? So we have to try and go that extra mile."

Leon tried to force himself to smile.

"Trust me, Leon," said Max, looking him in the eye.

Leon had always been a bit of a coward. Max knew that. He also knew that Leon had skillful hands and a good brain. He could calculate how the security cameras were working, hack into a server. Leon was just an unrecognized genius at anything like that. Max also knew that he could always talk Leon round. He'd give him a little time, paint a pretty picture of some promising prospects, and then he could sign him up to anything he wanted. They'd already done a few jobs together. They knocked over some chemists', or, to be more precise, Max had waved a gun around and Max had played a terrified customer who was at the chemist's by chance. And even if they'd been caught, they'd agreed that Leon, his bro, wouldn't be taking the wrap. But they hadn't been caught.

A pause hung in the air. Greg was thinking about something, tense, and, like the rest of them, he didn't break the silence.

"How long are we going to be yakking on about all the details for?" Max asked Leon. "All right, they'll get me one day. What'll you do then?! Spend your whole life living with your Mom out in Ilford?!?"

Leon let out a deep sigh.

"With this one, we're in and we're out!" Max said, inspired. "We'll catch fortune by the tail and be off, just like you wanted: Thailand, Sri Lanka, Bali. Girls, cocktails. When you've got some dough, life's for the taking, bro!"

Greg gave Alex a piercing look.

"What about you, Alex – have you worked with Max before?" asked Greg, already knowing the answer.

Everyone looked at Alex. Alex turned to look at Max.

"Come on," said Greg, "if you have, let us in on it. This is the perfect time."

Alex looked at Vickey. Vickey hadn't been expecting that kind of question to be posed to Alex. But most importantly, she understood what the answer would be.

"Go on, Al'," Max said to Alex.

"We robbed a few chemists'," said Alex. "Max and I. I distracted everyone, and then hassled the shop girls to hand over the money. Max and I had a deal that if anything went wrong, I had nothing to do with it."

Alex turned to look at Vickey. She was looking at Alex, rapt. As if she'd just heard that he'd carried some poor old woman out of a burning bus, rather than having knocked over several chemists' with a childhood friend. She couldn't tell, however, if Alex had taken part in the robberies because he needed the money or if he did it for the thrills.

Greg focused his gaze on everyone there, he didn't miss a word or a gesture, and he liked the fact that all of them, apart from the girl, had been "stained" by some minor misdemeanors.

"How're you planning to stop them hitting the security alarm button?" asked Leon cautiously.

"Max wasn't joking when he said you're a technology crackerjack," answered Greg. "I'll answer your question shortly."

Greg had been waiting for his moment to give Leon a professional compliment, and judging by Leon's reaction – he'd given his first smile of the evening – he'd been right to do so. Greg understood people well. He understood that he'd almost achieved his goal. They were all ready to work on his job. And he would undoubtedly be the boss.

"I told you, I worked as a security guard there, I studied everything in detail. When I was there a couple of months ago, I saw that they never change anything," said Greg. "The staff would change, but the guards would always be the same."

Greg leaned back in his chair.

"The entry into the bank isn't guarded, as I said," he continued. "We take out the guard. There's an alarm button at each cash desk, so we have to take control of the line of tellers immediately. I'll do that. The girls at the desks will take fright immediately. You'll see – nobody is going to try and be a hero for just over minimum wage – that's under twenty grand a year..."

Max looked at Greg with clear respect.

"Next," continued Greg. "There are several rooms in the bank. They don't have any alarm buttons in there. Only the boss has got one. Max will handle him."

Max nodded affirmatively.

"Our goal is the room with the safety deposit boxes and the big safe. Nobody knows what's in the boxes. But there could be a lot of interesting stuff in there. Cash, valuables, knickknacks. Basically, everything people don't like to keep at home, and that they want to keep quiet about."

"Who's got the keys to the safe room?" asked Alex.

"The boss," Greg answered, keeping it short.

Greg slowly took out another cigarette and lit it. He was clearly in control of the situation.

Vickey realized that she couldn't keep her eyes off Greg. It was as if she was taking part in the shooting of a film. This was the first time in her life that she'd ever been involved in a conversation like this.

"Leon distracts the guard when I'm already at the cash desks," continued Greg. "The guard turns towards Leon, and that's when Alex cracks the guard over the head

and handles all the clients in the bank. Leon starts shouting 'Don't shoot!' and keeps an eye on the clients. Our guns and his shouts should keep the crowd quiet for a few seconds."

Max, his lips tightening, nodded in agreement.

"Vickey," said Greg. "Vickey, when we go in, stays outside by the door. They've got a sign up there – 'open-closed.' She turns it round to 'closed', stays outside and takes out questionnaires, something like that, like she's running a poll – people don't like stuff like that, so they'll leave, planning to come back later."

"Got it," was all Vickey said.

"If there's a girl at the door, the public won't have any questions," said Greg.

"Got it," repeated Vickey.

"Leon's playing the role of a client," said Greg. "When I heard all the bank tellers into the center of the room, I grab Leon and stick a gun up against his head..."

"A gun?" asked Leon, frightened.

"Calm down," said Greg. "I'll have the safety catch on. I grab him, threaten to kill him, and pressure the boss into opening the safe room. There's nothing they can do, trust me," said Greg, sneering unpleasantly and flashing his rotten teeth, yellowed from smoking.

"So far, so good," said Max.

"On the level of a plan it's ok," said Alex.

"You can't have a good robbery without a good plan, Mr. Grade A Student," Greg answered him.

Alex didn't like listening to Greg. He found him unpleasant. But he thought it made sense not to notice the unpleasant remarks aimed in his direction. "I'll say something if he dares to insult Vickey," he thought.

"So," said Greg, when he realized that Alex wasn't going to respond to him, "the customers and the staff are on the floor, we've taken their mobiles off them. Max pushes the boss and Leon – he's still playing a 'customer' – into the safe room. The boss opens the safety deposit box room and the main safe, and we knock him out. While I'm cleaning out the safe, Leon opens up the safety deposit boxes. We've got no more than 15 minutes to get all that done."

"That's possible," said Max enthusiastically.

"Max said you've worked with explosives," said Greg, turning to Leon.

"A tiny bit," said Leon. "And I was always sticking to the health and safety rules. Remote explosions."

"We're going to have to do something like that," said Greg.

Max looked at Leon and nodded approvingly.

"Five million quid. That's my calculation for all the pay and stipends for the number of students and teachers there – that's enough for a million each, Leon. It's worth taking a risk for dough like that. Especially if it's a certainty. I think it'll go smooth," said Greg.

A million pounds. A huge, life-changing amount. Alex knew what he would've done with money like that in his former life: he'd put the money in various banks, so as not to attract attention.

Get interest on it all. He could probably get a decent rate of interest and stop working. He could use some to go traveling and to really live it up. He could invest in a promising start-up, so that he'd have the chance to become indecently rich.

But not now. Now Alex knew for certain what he was chasing that money for, they had a deal with Vickey.

This job wasn't meant to make him a millionaire. But it was going to entirely change his life. It was going to draw a line under everything that had gone before and turn over a new page in his life. This job meant freedom for him.

It was simpler for Vickey. She wasn't thinking about the amount of money that she would get if it went well at all. Her head was ringing with the deafening pain of the losses that she'd experienced. She knew for certain where her cut would go – every last penny. She couldn't give a damn about anything. If it didn't work out, she had no reason to live. Alex's phrase "I need you" was ringing in her head too.

"There's another option," said Greg. "I get some more guys involved, and you all act as if you're customers. You get a hundred grand each for taking part, you help with the prep." Greg, the lids of his eyes tightening up, looked at Alex, then Vickey.

Alex couldn't stand the way Greg was looking at Vickey and he had to hold himself back in order to avoid a conflict.

Max realized that he had to immediately get into the conversation.

"It's a sure thing," said Max. "If there are any risks, they're minimal. No more than at the chemist's." He left a pause, and then concluded: "But this could be our last job. Before a new life. Just like we dreamed of, once upon a time, Al."

Max smiled to Alex.

In fact, Max didn't trust Greg one hundred percent, of course. But the robbery had been proposed by Greg, and Max couldn't do it without him. As they said in the circles that he and Greg hung out in, that would be breaking the "mob rules." And if someone broke the mob rules, he could get punished. Greg had come up with a perfect plan and he was dictating the rules of the game. Max had given himself some insurance by getting his people – people he trusted – involved. That meant the chances of success were significantly higher.

For him, the million would also mean freedom. Freedom from having to do any more robberies. Freedom from the continual risk of being caught and put behind bars. Max knew that being an ex-cop behind bars wasn't an enviable fate. He dreamt of getting his cut and leaving London. A guy he used to work with lived in Durham, up north, he'd opened a small taxi firm and he'd invited Max a couple of times to join him. He needed a partner and, as he told Max when they chatted on Whatsap every now and again, with some serious money, they could "really get things moving" ...

"I haven't told you the main thing," Greg said casually. "This isn't the first job we're going to do."

Max noted how everyone's attention perked up.

"First we'll do some training on our old favorites – the chemists," said Greg.

Max, Alex and Leon smiled.

Greg knew what to say and when. He had to get everyone to relax. Especially Alex. If he agreed, then they'd have a team.

"We'll get to know each other a little better," continued Greg. "Get used to each other, as it were. And we'll make some money for the main show. And I'll start telling you about the details of the main strike. We've got a lot of time before that happens."

Greg's final words hit the mark. Everyone got the impression that they were in control of what was going on.

"I'm going to pour myself some more coffee," said Greg, and headed in the direction of the kitchen.

That was another subtle move. Leaving the old friends alone for a while in the room. So that they could check out each other's reactions, have a chat, and calm down.

He spent about five minutes in the kitchen, and when he came back into the room, he sensed that the mood had changed. It had clearly become tense.

"And another thing, guys," said Greg, using a friendly tone for the first time. "What's the main thing about what we're doing here?" Greg gave a cunning smile. "We've got lucky dudes sitting here. Nobody's ever been caught. The cops won't be looking out for us. I need people who could pass as students if they put some sunglasses and ripped jeans on. I'll say it again – this is a winner. And the more you learn about it, the more certain you'll be that I'm right."

Max smiled. Alex gave an almost imperceptible smile.

"How do we get out?" asked Alex.

Greg looked at Alex and, unexpectedly, answered him in a calm, polite tone, obviously having decided that he couldn't get Alex on side by pressuring him, that wouldn't fly, but he had to find the right way of communicating with him.

"We split up," said Greg. "Me and Max take the bags with the loot and go out through the underground carpark. The stairs down to it are to the right of the door into the bank. They're sited perfectly. We go down into the carpark, get in the car where the driver will be waiting for us, and calmly roll out of the School's territory. You, Vickey and Leon go through the turnstiles – they don't block you going out. As I said, they're about 300 hundred feet from the bank and they're not guarded."

"The prep's impressive," said Alex, looking at Greg.

"Thank you," said Greg. "We tell everyone in the bank to stay on the ground and not to move for three minutes, otherwise a bomb will go off," he continued. "We'll leave a dummy bomb in the center of the room – Leon will make it. And three minutes later we'll all be safe. I'll give you the details later."

"Not bad," said Leon.

"There's a Plan B too," said Greg. "As you look like the kids from the Design School in terms of age and appearance, you can just blend in with them. By the time we do the robbery you'll have student identity cards too."

"How?" asked Vickey.

"The prep is going to take a few months," answered Greg. "We'll sign you up to some courses in that time, you'll get identity numbers, that will be enough."

Despite the huge differences, the chasm between all the people in the room, right here and right now they'd gained something that they all shared, something that linked the five of them. Hope had appeared.

"If something happens with the turnstiles, which I very much doubt, you can change out of your disguises in the park. I'll teach you how to do it in a couple of seconds. And you just calmly go to the café."

Greg could see how the situation was changing in his favor.

"They'll be looking for totally different people, and they won't start looking immediately," he continued. "And they'd never think that after a robbery the thieves would go to the next-door café for a cappuccino with cinnamon..."

"You're a genius, Greg!" smiled Max.

"I worked there for five years when I was trying to give up, bro," Greg replied to him. "I know every square inch there. When we're doing the prep, we'll have to be careful, we don't want to attract any attention. We have to check that nothing's been changed, that it's just as it was – if anything's changed, we'll just make adjustments."

Greg was very satisfied with the result of this first conversation.

"But that's not the main thing," he said.

"What is?" asked Vickey.

"It's almost as if this bank," Greg replied slowly, "has been specially designed for us to rob it."

Greg had worked out that phrase in advance. And he'd been waiting for the right moment to use it.

Max put his hand on Leon's shoulder.

"What do you think, bro?" he asked. The right answer, the answer that Leon was supposed to give, could be sensed in the question and the tone in which it was asked.

Leon looked at Max.

"I think it's a yes," he said. Then added mournfully: "What have I got to lose?!?"

"That's right," said Max, patting Leon on the shoulder. "One precise blow, and all the ladies in the world are yours, Fatty."

Max looked at Alex.

"What do you say, pal?" he asked Alex.

Alex, looking Max in the eye, tensed up his lips and then nodded several times.

"Vickey?" asked Max.

"Whatever Alex says," she answered quickly.

Greg was pleased with himself. He'd always been able to make deals with people. He left a pause before summing up:

"While we get to know each other, we'll check out the bank. We'll disguise ourselves, and we'll all go there two or three months before the day of the robbery. That way we can get used to the wigs and the makeup too. And we can really get a feel for the key site. It'll become our home. We'll be like little fish there. Unnoticed. Uncatchable."

July 2015 **Vickey**

The first time she saw Alex was when she went to his office for a business meeting. Alex, back then, was the editor-in-chief of the men's magazine, Esquire, and the company that Vickey was working for, the official distributor for the Swiss watch firm Patek Philippe, wanted to buy some ads.

It was by no means the first meeting of its kind in her life, you could even say it was routine. Vickey had never been a dedicated careerist, but she liked to work and knew her job well. The main thing, however, was that people liked her, and from childhood her beautiful face, framed by blonde locks, and her tender gaze, with those huge grey eyes, had delighted people and won her sympathy.

On that excellent September morning, opening the glass door into Alex's office in the recently renovated loft that the highly successful editorial team rented, Vickey wasn't nervous at all. She was a confident young professional. All the more so as in this deal she was playing the part of an eccentric buyer, and Alex was playing the part of a keen-to-please seller. But she should have been nervous!

It was a car crash. A minute earlier, everything had seemed under control: you've got plans for your life and the future, you have confidence in your strengths, you're used to trusting yourself. And then, in an instant, there's a flash, there's a scraping of metal, and you're no longer in possession of yourself, your body no longer listens to you, your heart is in the hands of another, and your life now depends on him.

"It's a great pleasure to finally meet you, Viktoria," said Alex, shaking the hand she held out to him. "I have to admit to being stunned – you're a beauty!"

His fingers touched her fingers, she could feel their warmth and strength, her palm fitted into his perfectly, she sensed that she didn't have the strength to pull it back out. She raised her eyes and met his gaze, her pupils dilated, a flash...

Sunlight flooded through the room. Entranced, she took in his faultlessly white shirt, two buttons casually undone. His shimmering, beautiful mane of blond hair, the charming wrinkles around his eyes, the way he smiled, his unbearably long eyelashes, and the amber of his eyes.

He offered her a coffee and made it himself. She took a sip, the taste was heavenly, and she tried to pay him a compliment.

"The secret's in the drop of Bailey's," smiled Alex.

Heavens, the way he smiled!

She felt her way to the sofa, sat on it, and smiled back at him, almost helplessly.

She heard his velvety voice... "We'd like to offer your company a sponsorship role in our special project. We're doing a piece about the history of how businesses developed in the 1990s and the early 2000s, a change in eras, as it were. We're going to interview the founder of Revolut, the banking app and other members of the IT establishment, as well as famous restaurateurs in London, and, of course, many more successful entrepreneurs. You can take part in the selection of those being interviewed. And, of course, we can put a photo session together for our subjects wearing 'your' watches."

"Sounds interesting," said Vickey, and it really was a stunning idea, perfect for the company's image.

"Then take a look at our campaign plan," continued Alex, sitting down with his notebook open next to her, slightly touching her shoulder. She leant forward to look at the screen. Their faces were very close, she could hear his breathing and sense the heat of his body. The minutes passed as they studied the document open in front of them.

She heard a voice in her head: "Run from him! Save yourself!" Instead, however, she summoned up all her strength of will, and said:

"I liked your project from the first time I heard about it. Your proposal matches all our needs. I think I can talk our management into signing a contract this Friday. Will that work for you?"

"Yes, that's perfect, but you know what would be even better?" Alex stared right at her, his eyes laughing. "If you'd agree to go on a date with me." He continued before she had a chance to react: "Will you?"

"Today or Friday?" she asked, at a loss, although her answer was already clear to both of them.

July 2016

Alex

Alex woke up early in the morning at Arthur's house in Chelsea, one of most expensive neighborhoods in London.

Arthur was the son of some major entrepreneurs who lived between three countries: Russia, Spain and Canada. The house in Chelsea was left entirely to

Arthur, and the high dark-green fence prevented any curious onlookers from seeing the insane parties that this thirty-year old, the only child of rich parents, would throw.

Chelsea. Home to the great and the good of London and beyond. The cream of Britain's capital and, indeed, the world.

Alex woke up in one of the countless bedrooms of this vast house - architecturally a tad dated but still breathtakingly expensive thanks to its location and the names of its neighbors.

A naked blonde was lying next to Alex. Alex wasn't surprised at the fact that a naked girl he didn't know was lying in bed with him. It wasn't a rarity.

The girl opened her eyes and looked at Alex.

"Hello!" said Alex.

"Hello!" the girl answered, absolutely calm.

"Who are you?" asked Alex.

"A prostitute," she answered quite simply.

"Got it," said Alex. "I ..." Alex started speaking without even knowing what he wanted to find out. His headache after the previous night's drinking bout was making its presence felt.

"I didn't go home because it was late and they said I could stay," the girl said quietly. "There weren't any spare beds, and you looked like the most fun," she smiled to him.

Alex chuckled.

"And the food was great here yesterday," she continued. Then she fell into thought, before continuing: "I think..."

Alex smiled. The pain in his head was getting worse. He tried to gather his strength, trying to recall how this girl ended up in his bed. In the meantime, the girl was still lying in the bed with him, and brazenly looking him over.

"Have you got a girlfriend, handsome?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Alex. "I think so."

The girl got up. It turned out she was just in panties, though she was entirely unembarrassed by Alex's presence.

"I can see your breasts," said Alex. "By the way, they're beautiful."

The girl didn't pay any attention to the compliment.

"You really don't remember anything?" she asked.

Alex felt a chill inside. He couldn't remember if he'd had any condoms with him.

"Did we have sex?" he asked, fear building up in his chest.

"No," said the girl. "You were smashed. Or running on autopilot," she said, laughing again.

"Yes," sighed Alex in relief.

"You tried to slap me on my ass," said the prostitute.

"I'm sorry," said Alex.

"It's ok," she replied. "I gave you a slap too."

"Really...", said Alex.

"Yes," said the girl. "As a rule, those who slap others, deep in their soul, dream of being slapped. I think you enjoyed it."

"I can't tell you anything about that," smiled Alex.

The girl looked at him with interest.

"You don't give a shit about anything, or that's just the impression that you like to give?" she asked, looking him over.

"I think I don't give a shit," he replied.

"You're not like any of my clients from Chelsea or Kensington," she said seriously. She pondered something, and then continued. "You know, once in Kensington, I got booked by a father and his son at the same time. They were totally out of their minds. There was nothing you could do that would astonish them. Kids who know nothing about life, by the age of seventeen they've seen the entire world, they don't want to study, they don't want to fuck, they don't want anything. The dads are doing business and have their secretaries, the forty-year-old moms who are always going to fitness and pumping themselves full of silicon until they look like Barbie dolls. And the kids just getting by on their own, they've got tired faces by the age of seventeen and hollow eyes – they smoke weed like they're cigarettes."

"Not bad," smirked Alex. He knew that world at least as well as the chatty prostitute.

"I stayed the night at a client's in Chelsea once, and had breakfast with the housekeeper in the kitchen," the girl continued. "She told me that the nanny was offended by the master of the house treating her badly, and as revenge, when they were away, she'd let the six-year-old kid do anything he wanted. She didn't give a damn. She didn't teach him anything, didn't make him clean up – didn't do anything."

"Where's the vengeance in that?" asked Alex.

"Well," said the prostitute. "He'll grow up to be rude, lazy, he won't be prepared to do anything, and his family will have it tough when he gets to seventeen when he doesn't want to study, doesn't want to go to university, doesn't want to work at daddy's business. She's making sure he doesn't give a fuck about anything, right?! It's a refined form of vengeance."

The prostitute fell silent and looked Alex over again, evaluating him.

"Her vocabulary's not bad for a prostitute," thought Alex.

"But you don't seem to be like the others from Chelsea."

"I'm not from Chelsea," said Alex.

The girl looked at Alex with genuine interest.

"Where're you from?" she asked.

"The suburbs..." Alex replied.

"I'm from Edinburgh," said the girl. "I studied at literature at St. Catherine's in Cambridge. In the third year I realized that I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life, but I didn't want to go back to my rainy town." She looked at Alex. "Are you interested?"

"Very," replied Alex.

The girl smiled.

Still dressed in just her panties, she went up to the table and poured herself a drink from an open bottle of Moët.

"Then came the standard story," she continued. "A girlfriend got me into the hostessing business, and there were presents, parties, and we were on our way. After that, it's hard to work for a pittance a month next to some sweaty Steve from somewhere out in sticks," she smiled.

"That's true," said Alex quietly.

"True," she said, "one summer I earned some money at the faculty. I was checking the first-year students' work and all that bullshit. I nearly went nuts. I asked myself: Is this it?!? For my whole fucking life? It was much easier to become an elite prostitute for a while."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Alex. "I also trade myself. It's just I trade my mind, rather than my body."

"You're funny." The girl laughed again. "To be honest, I'd become a porn star, like Sandy, from my hometown. She's just amazing, I'd fuck her at least once out of curiosity." She smiled, dreaming. "I'd definitely earn more." She took a sip from the champagne. "I'm saving up for an apartment. And it'd be interesting to be filmed in a porn movie." She fell into thought. "But I don't want some sweet neighbor living on the other side of the stairway to show my parents some nice shots of their only daughter swallowing the cock of some bushy-tailed Austrian guy. Their mentality is from the 1950s."

Alex laughed.

"It'd kill them," she continued. "Really – Mum would be swinging from the rafters." The girl fell silent. Alex got up from the bed and started getting dressed.

"Tell me about her," the prostitute asked unexpectedly.

"About whom?"

"About your girl."

"She's amazing," said Alex.

"And that's it?"

"Yes, that's it."

The girl poured another glass of champagne and brought it over to Alex. Alex took a few gulps and nodded his appreciation to the girl.

"Have you talked to her about that?" asked the prostitute.

"About what?"

"About you not being certain that you've got a girlfriend."

"Of course," answered Alex.

"And?"

Alex couldn't get used to this strange conversation with a person who, it seemed, was a complete stranger.

"She said that she wondered how long we could cause each other pain," he said. "That we love one another. But our life together is full of limits and deceptions. And it's all because of me."

The girl looked attentively at Alex.

"She says she knows that I'll leave soon. And she'll feel devastated," he continued. "But we want one another. What's all this about?"

"Sometimes people do stupid things. Especially when they really love one another," she said with sadness.

"She says: 'I feel like such an idiot. I want to run away and hide and cry,'" continued Alex. "Sometimes she asks: 'You know what that's like? Do you know?!?' I'm ashamed, and I don't know what to do, to be honest," said Alex. "I leave. But then she finds me again, and we go through all that again."

Alex wiped his hand across his face. This strange morning, the standard hangover, the prostitute cropping up out of the blue in his bed, a former student of a prestigious university no less – all this led to him being frank with a stranger.

"I'm really hurting," he said. "I don't know. Attachment is a trap, and when you try and get out of it you feel pain and you suffer losses. I suffered a lot of the time."

"Maybe it's all because of the London rhythm," she asked. "You know, I like London. Really. It's an incredible place. But this city is full of shit. Sometimes it seems like all the saints came together and shat on this place."

"I don't know. I don't think it's down to the city. It's down to us." He fell silent, and then added: "Fate can't fit into the puzzle the way it should."

"Fate isn't being difficult. It's just suffering from depression," the girl smiled. Alex felt a chill passing over his body.

They were silent for a while.

The girl got up again and poured them some champagne.

"I read some wise words that have helped calm me down so I can go on in life," she said, deep in thought.

"What were they?" asked Alex. He'd already got dressed and was waiting for the conversation to end so that he could say bye and go home.

"Some people are like our mirrors," said the girl. "They surround us and let us understand who we are. So every reflection helps me to come to terms with myself." She fell silent, then added, "It's important to understand that. Otherwise, you could be putting your neck in the noose. Maybe your girlfriend has been given to you from above for something? So that you'll understand something?!?"

"I don't know," said Alex. "There's too much dragging me back."

Alex looked at the girl with interest.

"Everybody's got a past," she continued. "The question is, how do you live with it. Do you put it aside, sometimes looking at it from a distance, as it were, in order to understand if you've improved. If you've become a better person..." She paused again, as if giving Alex time to think over her words. "Or do you carry that past on your back like a complete fuck-up?"

"What do you mean a fuck-up?" repeated Alex, and smiled.

"That's right," the girl said, stretching out the words.

Alex was silent for a while, and then said:

"Maybe you're right. Honestly, I haven't talked with anyone like this in a long time." He looked at her, engaged. "Thank you."

The girl, who had been dressed in nothing more than panties this whole time, started to get dressed.

"She doesn't want to be the first to break it off?" she asked.

"No, she doesn't."

"You're a clever boy, Alex," said the prostitute.

"I'm not so sure," he replied.

The girl looked at him attentively.

"Do you want me?" she asked suddenly.

Alex looked at her.

"Probably. But not today," he replied.

The girl bit her finger.

"If I give you my number, will you come to me?" asked the prostitute. "But for money this time?"

"No," Alex replied immediately.

He felt a chill again.

August 2016 **Vickey, Alex**

When their relationship began, Vickey kept track of how many times she and Alex split up and got back together. Then she lost count and stopped keeping track. She learned to let him go and wait in silence for him to come back. She spent long evenings imagining their next meeting.

Once he phoned her having been gone for a month and not having answered her messages in all that time. It was the end of August, the long-awaited cool of the night had finally enveloped dusty, hot London. She got the call just as she was coming out of the shower that she'd decided to take to wash away the weariness of the day that had passed. She answered the phone naked, standing on the tiled floor. The drops of water from her hair felt pleasant as they snaked down her skin.

"Come over," Alex said briefly. "There's a taxi waiting for you downstairs."

That was his style.

Her heart began to pound. She'd waited for that call for so long.

Quickly blow-drying her hair and adding a light touch of mascara to her eyelashes, she worked on automatic, pulling on her panties, but suddenly she changed her mind and decided not to put any underwear on at all. She'd go to Alex naked, in nothing more than a raincoat. High heels, red lipstick. That was it, she was ready.

Walking through the corridor, past the large mirror hanging on the wall, Vickey stopped and took a good look at her reflection. From a short distance away, an attractive young woman in a brown Burberry raincoat, casually tied up with a belt, was looking back at her. She had a confident look in her eye, and a mysterious smile. She was happy with the way she looked.

At the entrance to her building, a new, black Mercedes from a car service was waiting for her. Its driver, dressed in a straitlaced black suit and white shirt, was standing by it, waiting for his passenger. He greeted Vickey, opened the door for her, and then they were heading in the direction of the West End, along a route that Vickey knew so well – the Holloway Road, Islington, the mismatch of architecture, old and new, smart but noisy, and then down backstreets.

"It'll take about thirty-five to forty minutes to get there," the driver said when they pulled off. "Unfortunately, the traffic jams in this city are non-stop, but we'll do everything we can not to get caught up in them. What music would you like me to put on?"

Vickey smiled and answered for a jazz radio station. At the first notes of a saxophone she found herself immersed in her thoughts.

The car pulled up at Alex's building just as a neighbor was entering. He held the heavy wooden door open for Vickey, letting her in. Approaching the door to Alex's apartment, Vickey stopped, trying to regain control of her breathing, breathing in and out several times slowly and looking around.

Alex's apartment was in a beautiful, old building with high ceilings and a large, well-lit hall. The doors to three apartments looked out into the hall. "Spacious, light, elite apartments inhabited by successful, rich, respectable people," thought Vickey, and she pressed on the doorbell.

Alex didn't open the door immediately. Seeing Vickey at the threshold, he smiled and in silence, taking her by the belt of her raincoat, slowly pulled Vickey towards himself, locking onto her beautiful mouth for a long, hungry kiss.

The belt came undone in his hands and the raincoat opened slightly, revealing Vickey's breasts. Alex raised an eyebrow in surprise, but he didn't move, continuing to stand in the doorway, blocking her way into the apartment as he devoured the svelte, fragrant, freshness of her body with his gaze.

"I want you to give me a blowjob," Alex said suddenly, "right now."

"Here?" asked Vickey, slightly taken aback.

"Here," said Alex, in a tone that brooked no objections.

Blood poured into Vickey's cheeks, and all the appearances of calm that she'd managed to muster were gone in an instant. But, not daring to disobey, she slowly got down on her knees, automatically pulling the raincoat back together to provide some cover. The neighbors could come out at any moment, disturbed by the noise, or someone else could come into the lobby, they would all see her. She was gripped by shame and sexual excitement.

"No. I want to look at you," said Alex, pulling her raincoat open again.

Her hands shaking from her fluttering nerves, she undid the zip to her lover's jeans and saw Alex's swollen member – Alex's large, beautiful, desired cock. He wanted her, he wanted her again, nothing else was important.

Vickey bent over and kissed the cock's head, licking it up and down, again and again; Alex groaned, falling forward slightly, but just a little, so as not to leave the shadows of the doorway that provided him with safety.

Taking a deep breath into her lungs, Vickey sank her head on his cock, slowly passing her lips downwards around it. When she reached her limit, she began to slide just as slowly in the opposite direction.

Alex froze up, waiting. With one hand, Vickey gripped the base of his cock and continued to suck it, gradually building up the pace, with her other hand – with her fingers, her nails – she caressed the inside of his thighs, from the knees up to the balls. A sweet wave of tremors passed over Alex's body.

"Move your knees apart and caress yourself," he ordered. "Wider, move them wider."

Vickey put her right hand between her legs, and immediately felt how wet she was there, and hot – she was ready. She began to pass her fingers over her swollen clit, just as Alex took her head in his hands and started to push himself into her mouth, allowing her to concentrate on herself. His head was spinning, and the tension in his body, it seemed, was reaching its limit.

Suddenly, voices and the sound of a door slamming could be heard on the floor above. Alex shook his head, struggling to free himself of the sweet bliss that had overcome him. He helped Vickey to get up and enter the apartment as the voices approached down the staircase.

Shutting the door, Alex looked at Vickey.

"Well, hi," he said, giving his most charming smile.

Alex took Vickey right there, in the corridor of his apartment, from behind, pulling her buttocks apart with his hand and watching as his taught cock, swollen to the max, rammed in and out of her wet, tender pussy. He liked this depraved picture, and he even took out his phone to take a picture. Vickey didn't have the strength to protest at this move by Alex. And she didn't even want to.

"Send it to me too. As a keepsake," she asked, when they were finally lying in bed, having satisfied one another. But he never sent her anything, of course.

September 2016

Alex, Robert

"Nowadays they'd deprive her of her parental rights if they saw the bloody state, she'd leave my backside in," said Alex. "But the beatings weren't the worse thing – the daily humiliations and restrictions, the crushing of absolutely anything that a child might want was far worse."

They were meeting for the second time. Alex liked Robert. It was the first time he had talked so openly with another adult, a man twice his age, about himself, about his childhood, about his problems.

It even occurred to him that he dreamed of talking with his father like this all his life, complaining to him, asking him what to do. But his father had either always been at work, or he'd looked aside in shame when Alex came to him with tears in his eyes for help. Or he'd simply been asleep, and now he was dead.

"She was lecturing me the whole time. She thought that everything I did, the whole time, was wrong, I was just doing it to spite her. When she was lecturing me it was best to keep quiet, not to object, not to get in the way. But even then I'd be shouted at along the lines of 'Why are you keeping silent?! We're feeding you, clothing you, why're you such a stupid, lazy, ungrateful bastard?!' And then the belt would come into play for being 'stubborn and insolent.' To this day I sometimes shudder at the sound of a belt being whipped out of a pair of trousers."

Alex took a gulp of water and noticed that his hands were shaking. He again felt very sorry for himself. But nevertheless, he continued:

"In the 1990s, Mom suddenly got into some crank religious sect. She'd met some member of the group, and she started believing their theories, 100 percent, without even bothering to find out what representatives of the other, classic religions thought about it. And from then on she'd use all this new knowledge from her 'real friends' to provide cover for all her decisions and everything she did. And the way she saw it, I was just a really bad lot. If it wasn't for her memories of the twenty agonizing hours spent giving birth to me, I think she would've decided that I wasn't her son at all, that I was just the spawn of the devil.

"Basically, that was the way that she behaved with me. I was forbidden from doing anything: phoning my friends, bringing them home or going to visit them, I wasn't allowed to get bad grades at school, to lose things, to have any problems. I was brutally punished for the slightest misstep.

"When I grew up and became physically stronger than her, the beatings stopped, or, rather, as was the case with my father, she moved on to throwing heavy objects. She threw the iron, the frying pan, a big glass ball – you know, one of those souvenirs, with a model of a city and snow falling in it if you shake it about."

Robert nodded that he understood.

"Ours was of Paris. Once I bought the wrong cheese at the shop, it wasn't the one she'd asked for, and she threw Paris at me! In the name of all the values of some sect," he smiled sadly, "whilst cursing at the same time!"

Alex broke out into laughter, even surprising himself – he started laughing and couldn't stop. Barely able to breathe, he continued: "The ball hit me on the ear, smashed against the wall and broke into tiny shards. The pain was deafening, I thought I'd faint or throw up. She ordered me to pick up all the broken glass with my bare hands and she was only satisfied when she saw that they were covered in blood, and that my palms had been cut to ribbons. She thought that was the only way I could be 'cleansed.' Tell me, do you believe in God?"

"I'm a Buddhist," Robert answered simply. "Do you?"

"I'd like to believe, and I often think that it would probably make my life so much easier. But my mother made religion impossible for me for years into the future. So I became a philosopher. To be more precise, I graduated in philosophy at the London School of Economics, and became a journalist for the money."

Alex smiled bitterly.

"Ever since I escaped my home, I can't stand any rules or dogmas. Believers have to forgive, right? I don't know how I can forgive my mother. I hate her. Hate."

"Have you ever spoken to her about this?" asked Robert.

"Back then, no, of course," answered Alex. "And later ... What would be the point?!?"

Alex leaned back in his armchair.

"Another thing. She always compared me with my cousin, the A-grader. She always pointed to her as an example," said Alex. "She wanted me to get straight As, and then have a career, and become a big boss. She probably wanted me to achieve what she'd failed to."

Robert could see what an effort it was for Alex to get out every word.

"She'd beat me half to death for getting a B," said Alex. "I'd spend ages on the tube, riding round and round on the Circle Line. Hours on end. So as not to go home before my father got back. She didn't beat me so badly if he was around. Sometimes she beat me so badly that it seemed like she wanted to kill me."

"What did you shout out when she was beating you?"

Alex shut his eyes tight. He could see his drunken mother in front of him, again slashing with his father's belt.

Alex could feel that he'd tensed up into a ball. It was as if it was all happening to him again.

"I shouted 'Mom, don't! Please! Please, don't, Mom!'"

Robert looked at Alex intensely.

"I'd shout 'I won't do it again,' and she'd beat me, asking: 'What won't you do again?'"

Alex could feel the tears welling up in his eyes.

"I would like to love her," said Alex. "She's my mother, after all. She gave me life."

Alex lowered his head.

"One time she got up on a stool in order to reach up to a shelf in the corridor. Without being spotted, I poured some water on the floor around the stool. I wanted her to slip, fall and crack her head."

"And what happened?" asked the doctor.

"She didn't fall. She just got her feet wet," answered Alex. "And then she gave me a beating. She knew that I hated her. She probably hated herself too. She just didn't have the backbone to throw herself out of the window. Or to hang herself with that damned belt." He fell silent, and then added: "That's probably how it will all end."

Robert gave Alex a long hard look.

"I want you to do something right now, Alex," he said gently, but with confidence.

"Yes, of course," said Alex, without looking up.

"It's very simple," said Robert.

Alex looked at the doctor, his attention focused.

"I'd like you, Alex, to imagine your mother before you and say: 'I love you'."

Alex raised his gaze, as if looking straight through the doctor. He could see his mother in front of him. The woman whose womb he had emerged from into this world to see the light. Suddenly, he saw himself, tiny and in her arms. He couldn't have remembered that, he was just imagining that picture. The words flew from his lips of their own accord.

"I love you, mother," Alex almost whispered.

And in that moment, he got a lump in his throat. A stabbing lump with sharp metal corners that started to slice him to pieces from within.

Alex could physically, clearly feel those scorching, acidic incisions. He again felt that he was tiny and defenseless. A moment later tears were pouring from his eyes. He couldn't remember the last time he'd cried. But it didn't feel unfamiliar. He'd forgotten about the very existence of the doctor who was with him at that moment. The tears broke through from nowhere, pouring in waves from his eyes. His breathing became uneven, disrupted.

"I love you, mother," Alex said again. But louder this time. And the tears poured even harder. As if, within him, in his soul, the gates had opened – gates that had held back the streams of tears for so many years.

"I love you, mother!" Alex almost shouted through his tears.

Robert, narrowing his eyes, sat motionless in his chair and observed Alex.

Alex sat back in his armchair, covering his eyes with his hands. His shoulders and back merged into the armchair. He went entirely limp, nothing like the confident and gracious man that many of his acquaintances and colleagues knew.

Alex stopped crying just as unexpectedly and abruptly as he had begun. Without wiping his eyes dry, he looked up at Robert and spoke with confidence:

"I want her to die."

Alex himself was horrified by these words. The remains of his consciousness that hadn't been fogged over by emotions and memories whispered to him that he would be ashamed of these words. But now, in this moment, in his current state, he wasn't ashamed. He was saying what he thought.

"I want her to die, Doctor!" shouted Alex, looking Robert right in the eye.

Alex could barely remember how that meeting with the psychiatrist had ended. There were a few words after a long silence from Robert. Alex realized that the doctor had to calm him down before allowing him to leave his office into the hushed light of the street, where he would be met by a normal day in the city of London with its hustle and bustle. He could barely remember the words that he himself spoke. He only remembered that he thanked Robert. And in the doorway, he said: "Don't worry, Doctor. I'll be fine. I'll be back next time. Ask me to tell you about Rachel. I have to tell you that. I don't have the strength now."

May 2018 **Alex, Maxim**

Alex was alone at home. From the moment that they'd entered into the deal and begun prepping a big heist, that had happened rarely. Vicky had finally moved in with him. And at first, he'd been happy about that. Happy in his heart. Even on some sort of physiological level. He was uncomfortable in his own apartment. Even scared. But even more than by a physical fear, he was tortured by a spiritual fear. For the first time in his life he'd experienced loneliness. Not the sort of loneliness that he was proud of, like every misanthrope and nihilist, which is what he'd definitely been. He sensed it with his entire being. With his body, his soul, and sometimes he himself couldn't even understand it. He needed someone close to him to be around. Not the sort of person that would take care of him and answer his every beck and call. That wasn't what he found himself needing so suddenly. He needed someone that he, Alex, could take care of. Someone for whom Alex would be prepared to do absolutely anything needed.

Just before Vicky moved in with him, he'd gone through his old university notes. And there he'd found a parable. A short parable about fear. About a person

who was very afraid. Physically afraid. Afraid morally. A person who had lived almost all of his life in fear. And then, one day, that person got sick of that life. And he started to ask questions. Or, rather, a single question. How can I go on living?

He asked many people, but he couldn't find the answer. Many, almost all of them, as it turned out in their conversations, were afraid of something. And then, one day, that person, as is often the way in parables, met a wise man who had lived a long, difficult life. And the wise man said: "You need someone you can take care of. A person who will be dependent on you. Entirely. Like a child who is entirely dependent on his mother ... It could be a girl. Or a child. Or your old mother. Or father. But the essence is that by giving yourself in service to that person, you won't be scared any more. You just won't have the time for that. Because fear is the essence of an excessive love for yourself. A fear of being left without resources. A fear of being hurt. Psychologically, physically. A fear of being misunderstood. A fear that all those people, the people surrounding you, don't understand that you're special. You simply won't have time for all that chaff. You'll be busy protecting someone else. And when you're protecting someone else, every day, every hour, you'll stop being afraid. The fear will go. And in its place, there will be bravery. A bravery in your heart. Because nothing stays empty. It is always filled."

Vickey went off to her parents and promised to come back before midnight. The clock said it was about eight in the evening. Alex, slouching about the apartment, lay down on the sofa and started clicking through the channels on the cable television. He came across a handball match between the English and French teams and started watching with interest. He'd played handball when he was a kid for a couple of years and knew this thrilling sport well. Then his parents had moved, and Alex only got back into sport during his first year at university, when he'd got into wrestling.

Alex lazily followed the match. The clock was now saying about half past eight. There was a call on his mobile. Before, in his former life, Alex would have turned off the sound as soon as he landed on the sofa. Now, when, as well as his smartphone, he always had the plotter's phone close to hand, and Greg only allowed them to talk with one another on separate lines, he'd stopped doing that.

The call was on his usual iPhone. Alex moved the phone closer and was shocked to see the name "Max" flash up.

"Hello," Alex said into the phone. "Why're you phoning here?"

"Because I'm phoning my old friend Alex," Max answered on the other end of the line.

Alex immediately felt like he was back in that old life. Max was phoning him on his normal phone. Even though that hadn't happened that often in the period just before all this began. They'd seen each other less and less frequently. But it was still a link to that old life. Before the robbery. And before all those attempts to discover himself. And before Alex had put himself through so much, so much that only he knew about. He knew about it, but he wasn't sure if he wanted to remember it all, or forget it. Like a bad dream. Before all those, as he called them, experiments that he carried out on himself.

"Hello hello!" Alex let out joyfully.

"I'm downstairs," said Max. "Can I come in?"

"Of course," Alex quickly replied. "Why do you even ask?!?"

A few minutes later, Max came into Alex's apartment. They hugged like two old friends and went into the living room.

"Have you got anything to drink?" asked Max.

"Of course," Alex replied.

At first the conversation wouldn't get started. It was only after several portions of Red Label that Max really began to talk.

"You know, Al..." Max said. He hadn't called Alex "Al" in a long time – the name only Alex's closest friends had used in his childhood.

Max was silent for a while, twisting the beautiful whiskey glass in his hand and examining it, before continuing:

"You know, I haven't been round at yours in a million years."

"Yes," replied Alex. "I've been busy doing my stuff. You've been busy doing your stuff."

"Al," Max said, sadly. "You know what I'm talking about, right?"

Alex looked at Max and said:

"I understand, Max."

Still looking at Max, Alex added:

"But..."

"No, wait," Max said, interrupting him. "I haven't come here for explanations."

They looked at one another.

"I just came round to see an old childhood friend, Al," said Max.

Alex nodded several times in silence.

"You know I'm no fool, right, Al?" asked Max.

"What are you talking about, Max?" said Alex.

"Wait," said Max. "I'm saying that I know that I'm not the brightest kid on the block. But I'm also not the biggest idiot."

Alex shook his head.

"I don't have and couldn't have got the education that you have," said Max. "Let's be frank, our forefathers weren't cut from the same cloth."

Alex's stomach turned at the mention of his parents.

"I've followed the path that dear fate set out for me," continued Max.

Alex wanted to say something again, but Max stopped him with a gesture.

"I'm not complaining, bro. I'm just saying."

Alex was expecting Max to reproach him for the fact that they saw each other so rarely. For the fact that Alex hung out in totally different circles which Max couldn't get into because of his upbringing and his behavior. But Max didn't mention that. He didn't speak about that at all.

"Do you forgive me for having got you and Vickey mixed up in this deal?" Max suddenly asked.

Alex was struck dumb. He hadn't expected this.

"What are you talking about, Max?" he said. "It was my choice. And hers."

"Yes," said Max. "But Greg presented it so craftily. 'Just drugstores, we'll see, we'll give it a try'," he said, repeating Greg's words. "Fuck, now we've got an armed robbery on our slate."

"Max," said Alex, "you're not guilty of anything here. I took the decision."

They were silent for a while.

"I don't know why you agreed, Al. I mean, you've got it all. Fucking everything," said Max. He waved his arm around, indicating Alex's beautiful apartment. "It's fucking nuts, bro – just look at how you live," he said. "Ninety-nine out of a hundred people would sell their fucking souls to the devil to live like you do, for just a couple of years – for half a year! Your own apartment downtown, not just anywhere, but in Shoreditch. An honest job, famous people all around you, people who are on TV,

more girls than all the top rap stars put together have. And you go and risk everything.” Max looked at Alex with his eyes wide open. “What the fuck for, Al?”

Alex looked at Max long and hard. He badly wanted to tell his old friend from the same streets as him his whole story. Every last detail.

But he couldn’t. Alex understood that perfectly well. Max would have been shocked by Alex’s stories about his exploits and there was no way of knowing how he would react.

“I got mixed up, Max,” answered Alex. “I burnt out. For years I’ve been doing what I don’t want to do. Hanging out with people I don’t want to hang out with. I stopped understanding what I’m doing or who I am. I hate my work and try and do the bare minimum to get by. You understand? All these meetings with slippery businessmen who rip their partners off, rip their staff off, all those advertising articles full of lies, all that so-called research that’s just been paid for, all those blogger posts that have just been bought. All those revolting celebs. It’s all just beautifully packaged bullshit, Max. There’s just one goal. To get normal people to buy one shampoo rather than another, to buy Adidas instead of Nike. To eat a Mac instead of a Burger King or KFC, even though all that food is shit. That’s the shit I’m swimming in with my LSE degree that I’ve got hanging in my toilet. It’s just a non-stop fuckup, Max.”

Alex took a deep breath.

“And with Vickey...” Alex began, but then broke off.

He fell silent to get his breathe back.

“She loves you,” Max said quietly.

“I know,” said Alex. “I’ve done her wrong.”

They were silent for a while.

“Anyone else who had even a tenth of the love that you get from a girl like Vickey would feel like the happiest man on Planet Earth,” said Max.

“I know, Max. I know,” Alex sighed. “But it’s complicated.”

Alex slumped back in his chair and looked Max straight in the eye.

“So, I’m grateful to you,” Alex said quickly.

“What?” asked Max, unable to believe what he was hearing.

“Yes,” said Alex.

Max poured himself another shot of whiskey and downed it in one.

“Really, Max,” said Alex. “I just haven’t got any values left. None at all. I don’t get any joy out of life anymore. I’m just floating. I can’t remember the last time I was thrilled by anything. Get it?”

“No,” answered Max. “I don’t understand.”

“I stopped valuing everything that I had. That’s what it’s about, Max. I even stopped noticing what was going on around me.”

Alex looked Max right in the eye.

“Until this job came along,” he said.

“With everything that you’ve got?” Max asked, genuinely perplexed. “An apartment in the center of London, a fucking amazing job, the best hotties in the city and expensive liquor?”

“Yes, Max,” Alex answered.

“You’ve totally gone out of your mind, bro,” laughed Max.

“I was very unhappy,” said Alex.

“Down and Out in London and Paris, bro,” said Max. “That what it’s called. You remember when they made us read that at school? I can’t remember who wrote it.”

“Orwell,” said Alex.

"That's right." Max nodded in agreement. "But fuck Orwell. You're just fucking out of your mind, bro. That's the secret."

They both laughed. They both clearly felt better thanks to this conversation.

"And my relationship with Vickey has changed thanks to this job," continued Alex. "I've understood what she means to me."

"Well, all right, bro," said Max. "You'll get yourself a good wife and we'll earn some dough into the bargain."

"So, I knew what I was doing when I got into this," Alex concluded.

"And Vickey?" Max asked, serious now.

"She made her choice too," said Alex. "And another thing..." Alex left a short pause. "Right before we do the job, I'll explain to her that if something goes wrong she has to say that she had no idea what we were planning. She'll say that I told her we were making a documentary film, and I just asked her to keep an eye on the door for a couple of minutes. I was going to tell you and Leon the same thing. I was sure that you'd both agree, if it's a disaster, not to drop her in it. So that she could cut a deal if there's a problem."

"Of course, Al," Max said, a certain relief in his voice.

"And that's enough about all this," said Alex.

Alex looked at Max.

"We both know that there's nothing we can change now," said Alex. "So, let's just hope we get lucky."

Max smiled craftily.

"You know, Al, if it gets too risky, then I'll probably just whack Greg. And that'll be end of it."

Alex looked at Max attentively.

"But we all need this money," said Max. "Even you."

"Yes," replied Alex.

"Whatever we do in this life, we're not getting out of here alive," laughed Max. "So let's just get lucky," Max said, repeating his friend's words.

Max stuck out his lower lip. It was a clear sign that he was starting to get drunk. Max always got drunk fast, and Alex knew that well. It'd been like that since they were kids, when they first started trying beer and wine. And if Max got drunk, it was impossible to predict what he would do. He'd got into a lot of scrapes through being drunk, including fights with serious consequences, but every time his friends in the police force had got him out of trouble. The unwritten police code, which maintained that they'd never let one of their own take a fall, was always rock solid.

"You're a good guy," said Max.

"If only you knew what this good guy was doing a month ago," thought Alex, but he said nothing.

"I'm not pouring you anymore," said Alex.

"One more, Al, and we won't go to school tomorrow," laughed Max.

"No, no," said Alex, getting up and taking the bottle off the table. "I know you too well. You get too unpredictable; you turn into angry Hulk. You'll thank me tomorrow."

"Can I crash at yours?" asked Max.

"Of course," Alex answered.

Alex made them a coffee. Max gradually recovered.

"Remember," asked Max, "when you were doing repairs in this apartment and you left your stuff round at mine?"

"Yes, I remember that," answered Alex. "Why?"

"You left several boxes of books," said Max.

"Something like that," said Alex, trying to remember.

"Well," said Max, "I dug around in there, I knew you wouldn't mind, I was looking for something to read."

Max scratched the back of his head.

"Basically, I found this book in your box," said Max.

Max grimaced, trying to remember the name of the author or the name of the book.

"The author was Bores, or maybe Rose," said Max, frowning. "I liked the title; it was perfect for us: 'Everything or Nothing'."

"Borges," said Alex. "An Argentinian writer."

"He's famous, right?" asked Max.

"Very," answered Alex.

"You know I've never been much of a reader since we were kids," smiled Max. "Not like you, smartass."

"So, what happened in the story?" asked Alex.

Max finished his cup of coffee and sat back in his chair.

"I tried reading all his other stories and never got further than a few lines. I couldn't understand what he was writing about at all," Max began. "But that one... 'Everything or Nothing' ... That bitch really got to me."

"Tell me about it," said Alex.

"So, right," said Max, livening up, "the main character there is called Nobody, right."

"I read Borges a long time ago, I can't remember," said Alex.

"So, anyway," continued Max, "basically, this guy named Nobody. This guy was different from everyone else. Well, he just wasn't like the rest. He tried to tell a friend about it, but even his friend couldn't understand what he was on about. So, he decided to hide the fact that he wasn't like the rest."

Max was slowly sobering up. Alex could see how the Borges story had gripped his uneducated friend.

"And that guy named Nobody comes to a big city where no one knows him, a really big city, like London," continued Max, "and he becomes an actor. In a theater. He's going to play someone. I mean, he's going to be someone. Although he's no one, right?"

"Right, I get it," said Alex, observing Max with interest.

"He's playing different people," continued Max. "Kings, servants, heroes, traitors. You know, a normal actor in a theater. And he's absolutely loving it when he's up on the stage. When he's 'Someone', right?"

Alex nodded that he understood.

"But after the performance, he's really in a bad way," said Max. "He stops acting, he becomes Nobody, and he's in a bad way again. Because he's Nobody, he's not like everyone else, and he can't even share that with anyone in the world, because he's afraid, he doesn't know how people are going to react to him being so unusual."

It was almost as if Max had been transformed. He wasn't the half-drunk Max he had been ten minutes ago. He'd got carried away by the story that he himself was telling. He himself was fascinated by how Alex was going to react to his story.

"Then, after the performances, he starts going to bars and brothels. And there, for a pittance, he starts putting on shows. Like today's standup comedians, Louis CK, say, or Bill Burr. Just so that he isn't that Nobody who no one understands."

Max ruffled up his hair and continued:

"Over years and years in that big city, this Nobody bought a little theater in which he performed, and he made the theater famous. But one fine day, Nobody woke up and realized that he was sick of life in that city. That he was tired of being someone every day. Someone, but not himself. And he was almost sick at the sight of his own reflection in the mirror. He was tired. He was just tired, man."

Alex hadn't seen a fire burning in Max's eyes like this in years.

"He was tired of playing comedies and tragedies every day for somebody, but not for himself, right? And on that wonderful day, this Nobody sold his theater, he got some decent money for it. And he left that big city and went back to the little town he came from, like Bournemouth or Blackpool here in England."

Max stopped in order to get his breath back and looked at his friend with burning eyes.

"Just like here in England," noted Alex. "Thousands come here. Some stay and become a part of our city, and some go back."

"Yes," continued Max. "And this Nobody went back to his little town. To his old courtyard – it wasn't as big as he remembered it from his childhood. And there, so as not to annoy anyone, and so that they wouldn't ask too many questions, he performed only one role. Basically, the role of an old entrepreneur. And he lived there quietly until his death."

Max looked into Alex's eyes attentively.

"And this is the most interesting bit, bro," he said. "Either before his death, or just after, I didn't quite get that, he stood before God, right, and he says to him..."

Max put on a face of cunning.

"Bro, I learned the ending by heart. Like Samuel Jackson in Pulp Fiction. It's really interesting, Al," said Max conspiratorially. "This Nobody said to God: 'I was so many people in vain, I want to be just one – Myself.' And the Creator's eyes answered him from a storm: 'I'm not me either: I invented this world like you invented your creations, and one sign of my dream is that you are like me, in essence – Everything and Nothing'."

Max leaned back in his chair looked at Alex victoriously.

"What do you say, bro?"

"It's a great story, Max," said Alex, enraptured. "And that's some text you memorized!"

"Yes," Max offered, relishing it. He was clearly pleased with himself. He was pleased with their evening. He was pleased that he'd been able to spend it with his old childhood friend, there having been a chasm between them for so long. It was only a series of misfortunes that they'd suffered, a series of events that didn't appear to be linked, that had led to them sitting at the same table, drinking decent whiskey and shooting the breeze. Chatting just as if, in a few days' time, the most important job in their whole lives wasn't waiting for them. A job that in the most literal of senses would be a struggle not for life, but for death.

They were silent for a while, looking each other in the eye and laughing. In that moment, both of them, it seemed, sensed the warmth from their childhood, from back when they were scamps, almost identical, when ahead, in front of him, they had their whole lives. Lives ready to embrace them. Ready to meet two friends, two young Londoners. At the start of their journey through life. That's what they felt back then. And that's what, for an instant, they felt now, when the whiskey and Max's wonderful retelling of a small work by the great Borges slightly intoxicated their minds and feelings.

"So, Al," said Max, "one more and we won't go to school tomorrow?"

"Yes," replied Alex, "one more."

Alex got up and headed over to the shelf where the alcohol was kept. Going past Max, he gave him a pat on the shoulder.

Max suddenly laughed.

"Do you remember the nickname we had for Patterson in 9th grade?" he asked, laughing.

"No, I don't," replied Alex.

"Two faced anus!" laughed Max.

"That was it!" laughed Alex, clicking his fingers. "Do you remember the legend about him being able to swap his balls round in their sack?"

"Of course, I remember," laughed Max. "I was the one who came up with that story."

"No way!" laughed Alex. "I never knew that."

The friends stopped laughing.

"One more, Max," said Alex. "Then I'll make you a bed on the sofa."

"Thank you," said Max.

"If you snore, Vickey and I will chuck pillows at you," laughed Alex.

Later, when Vickey came back, Alex told her about what he'd been discussing with Max. They lay in bed, Vickey's head resting on his chest. Alex gently caressed her hair.

"He learned a whole chunk of it by heart – can you believe that?" said Alex. "Just imagine – Max quoting Borges."

"I loved Borges," said Vickey, deep in thought.

"I haven't read him in ages," said Alex. "I remember there was a phrase of his I liked. 'Mirrors and copulation are revolting, because they multiply the number of people.'"

Vickey turned over and looked at him.

"You don't want children?" she asked.

"You're going to be amazed," said Alex. "For the first time in my life I want a child." He fell silent, and then added: "In order to protect it."

October 2016

Alex, Robert

It was a meeting at which Robert spoke more than usual. It was as if he was gathering all their discussions into one.

"One of the most difficult aspects of raising children is attention," said Robert. "The attention that our parents didn't give us enough of."

"He said 'us'," noted Alex. "It wasn't a wonderful childhood that led him to be a psychiatrist."

"And then, in adult life, we compensate for that lack of attention that we got from our parents," he said. "We compensate for it with deliberate brutishness, the horrifyingly loud exhaust pipe on a motorcycle, we do that the whole time." He left a pause, looked at Alex, and added: "We say loudly: 'We're in this world. Here I am!'"

Alex very clearly imagined the picture that the doctor was painting for him.

"How else can we explain that people take part in television shows where they turn their sexual relations inside out for everyone to see?" continued Robert. "Or they stand there like figures on a chessboard in front of people who've been hyped up on television or on YouTube, so that the latter can work out their age and

specialization? How else can we explain their humiliating consent, an insane wish even, to take part in their own humiliation?!?"

"Difficult to argue with that," said Alex.

"Did you ever try to speak frankly with your mother? Later, when you'd already grown up?" asked Robert, unexpectedly changing the subject.

Alex waved him off.

"It's no use," said Alex. "She never admitted to her mistakes. At best she called me an ungrateful son," Alex smirked angrily. "When she would beat me when I was a kid, she'd tell my Dad that she just gave me a few slaps, can you believe that? That I was inventing stuff when I said she'd hit me in the face. She made me stand in the cold rain so that the redness would pass faster. Poor Dad. He knew she was lying. He'd try and talk me into being more obedient. And he'd look away. It was very humiliating."

Alex stopped his account in order to get his breath back.

"But I can remember the first time, when I'd already grown up, that I grabbed her arm and squeezed it so tight that I almost crushed it through to the bone. She was frightened," Alex said viciously. "She thought that I would start beating her. She got on her knees and begged for forgiveness."

"And what did you do?" asked Robert.

"I pushed her away from me and started getting my stuff together and I moved in with Grandma for good," answered Alex. He closed his eyes and shook his head in different directions. "She lay down in front of the door and begged me to talk to her. She said that in order to leave I'd have to step over my own mother."

"What did you do?" asked the doctor.

"I turned the key in the door, then kicked the door open over her, and left the apartment," Alex answered.

They were both silent for a while. Then Alex looked at Robert, a question in his eyes, as if he wanted to ask something. He didn't ask anything, however, and continued:

"Half a year ago we buried my father. He'd been sick for a year and a half before he died, prostate cancer. He left it too late before he went to the hospital, and because of his age and because he was overweight the doctors refused to operate on him. Chemicals and radiation helped for a bit, but the end came. He died a slow, painful death. I hired a nurse to be with him, and I often went to see him way out in Ilford, to help, although it was difficult for me to be anywhere near her."

Robert nodded with understanding.

"Mother, although she was only fifty-six, had already turned into a wretched old woman, she had diabetes and Parkinson's. Fate likes to have a joke – it rewarded her, a former prima ballerina, with the shakes from Parkinson's. She'd get annoyed when I appeared in their home, but she didn't really say anything to me, maybe because she was focusing on the inadequacy of the latest nurse, trying to terrorize her into the grave."

Alex drank some water from his glass.

"A leopard never changes its spots," Alex said, again angry. "She broke down at the burial. She drove me away from my own father's burial – can you imagine? She shouted at me, her whole body shaking, her voice becoming high-pitched, telling me that I was a worthless 'queer' and that I shouldn't dare to approach my father's coffin, and that I'd driven him into the grave with my horrific behavior. And I left ... And, you know, in a way she was right."

"In what way do you think she was right?" asked Robert, looking at Alex in surprise.

"In that, perhaps, I'm homosexual. Or bisexual." For the first time in his life, Alex expressed this idea out loud, an idea that had been with him for so many years. His voice quivered, and he immediately tried to turn it into a joke: "At the least, I really like the idea of marrying a man, because that wedding would definitely kill her off."

April 2018 **Greg, Maxim**

An inconspicuous grey Hyundai from a car rental firm was standing on "the Cally" – Caledonian Road, in the north of London. People walking by the car may have noticed two friends sitting inside, smoking cigarettes and chatting about something. In fact, Greg and Max were keeping an eye on the chemist's, which they'd chosen as their first target for a robbery. It was a very convenient spot. The tube station was a few hundred feet away. There were shops around, courtyards, a lot of different kinds of people. Getting away from the scene of the crime should have been easy.

Greg took his cigarette out of his mouth and stared at it.

"It really is a cool plan," he said. "It's almost perfect. But it all depends on how we work it all out."

"Of course," Max said quietly, "although you can never predict everything."

Greg nodded in agreement.

"How did Leon and Alex do when they were on a job?" asked Greg.

"They did well," answered Max. "Especially Alex. He gets straight into his act."

"Is he on drugs?" asked Greg.

"He has a smoke now and again," answered Max.

Greg finished his cigarette and threw it out the window.

"He seems to be a bit of a shirker," said Greg.

"Not really," answered Max. "He used to wrestle." Then he thought for a while, before adding: "On our robberies he'd change right before your eyes, sometimes it even seemed like the devil had got into him."

"That's not bad – it's what we need," said Greg, grinning evilly. "And Leon?"

"Leon's a bit of a coward, of course, but I'll deal with him. He shouldn't let us down," said Max.

"What about the girl?" asked Greg.

"What about her?" asked Max. "She's got the easiest role. I've known her for a long time. Everything will be fine with her – that's a certainty. Vickey only got involved because of Alex. She'd kill for him if she had to," said Max. "She really would just go and kill someone for him."

"Great chick," Greg said quietly.

"Cut it out," Max said all of a sudden, sharply. "Don't even look in her direction."

"What did I say, bro?!?" asked Greg, smiling.

"I heard what you said," Max answered quickly.

"What? You want to keep her for yourself?" smirked Greg.

Max turned round sharply to Greg.

"Greg!" Max snapped. "We've got history. We trust one another. We've been through enough shit together. But Alex is my childhood friend. Got it?!?"

"Ok," Greg offered amicably. "I was just kidding."

They were silent for a while.

"And just think about it," Max said, calmer now. "Why complicate things? We do the job, we take the bank, and any chick in the city you want will be in your bed."

"And not just the city, bro," laughed Greg. "Any chick on this wonderful island!"

Max wasn't sure that he'd convinced Greg to behave himself around Vickey. He decided to keep an eye on the situation, but not to say anything to Alex in order not to frighten him. The main thing for him, after all, was the robbery itself. What was really important, was that Alex, who he thought he knew well, shouldn't go and do something stupid because of jealousy for Vickey – something stupid that might put the job in danger.

Max took out a pack of Marlboro and lit another cigarette.

"Is Leon really a hotshot, like you say?" asked Greg.

"You can't even imagine what level this guy is at," answered Max. "For a joke, he once hacked into London's traffic light system."

"Wow," said Greg, and whistled.

"He got out of the system quickly, though," said Max. "He was worried that the cops would get on to him."

"He won't shit himself in the middle of the play?" asked Greg.

"There's always a chance, but I'll be close by, and he's always held it together well so far," answered Max.

"He's never tried knocking a bank over, though," said Greg.

"That's true too," said Max. "But we don't have any choice. Firstly, we have to work on the camera system. Secondly, we have to work out how they block the doors, if they've got that kind of system. There are some other technical issues. And only Leon can work all that out. As I said, it all depends on the state he's in when we start to work. You know how it is – it's stressful as hell, and some can't take it."

"That's obvious," said Greg. "But don't get too worked up about that stuff. So that they don't freak out too early."

"All right," said Max. "Anyway, we'll find out on the training jobs."

Greg raised his eyebrows and smiled cynically.

"And if we don't find out?" he asked.

Max reached for the cigarette packet. He took one out and lit it.

"I'd be calmer about the whole thing if it was you or me taking out the guard, rather than Alex," Max said after a few moments' silence.

"I'd be calmer too," said Greg. "But I have to take the girls at the cash desks out first, and you have to take out the bank's boss."

"Yes," said Max.

"Your Alex is going to have to handle it," said Greg.

Max looked at Greg.

"You know what we'll have to do if Alex can't handle the guard?" asked Greg, and looked at Max.

"Yes," Max answered dryly.

Several girls on bicycles rode by. Greg and Max followed their svelte figures with hungry eyes.

"How old are we, Max?" asked Greg.

His question didn't require an answer.

"The fact that we're not in the slammer is pure luck," said Greg.

Max remained silent. He knew that Greg was right.

"Hoods a hundred times sharper than us have already done two or three stretches," continued Greg. "Some chance bullshit can crop up on a job and nobody has the time to see it coming."

Max again nodded in silence.

"And I know a lot of those hoods personally," said Greg. "I learned our difficult trade from some of them."

"Yes. Can't argue with that," Max said quietly.

"How much longer are we going to be lucky for?" asked Greg. "A year, two? How many?"

Max listened to his friend closely.

"Then what?" asked Greg. "Spend the rest of our lives driving a shitty cab for a grand a month? Slave away for the Man? For someone who's leased the cab and rents it out for a hundred quid a day?"

Max looked off somewhere into the distance in silence.

"Or work as a security guard for twelve hundred a month?" continued Greg. "Aching your ass off from standing around all day?"

"That's not an option," Max said quietly.

"So, we haven't got any choice, Max," said Greg. "We have to look after one another. Right?"

"And the guys have to understand before we do the big job, that for this kind of money they're going to have to give a thousand percent," said Greg in a kind of hollow tone.

Greg stared off to some fixed point in the distance and concluded:

"And if we have to shoot, then we have to shoot."

Max didn't say anything in reply. He realized that Greg was right. That this could be his and Greg's last chance to live a normal life. To live like a person who wouldn't have to suck up to the boss of some security guard company or the head of some taxi park. To do whatever you wanted to do. To eat delicious food, drink delicious drinks, buy food at the upmarket shops like Waitrose, and not in some dive like Iceland. To sleep in a good bed, and not on a foldout sofa bought for peanuts on a secondhand website. And, of course, women. They wanted, as Greg put it, beautiful, long-legged, stacked chicks.

Max also wanted vengeance for the life that he'd lived since his very birth. For all that dirt, for having to pretend, for having to suck up to the bosses, for that continual fear, for being seen as a second-class person. For all of that, he wanted revenge. And without money, Max couldn't imagine how he could achieve that.

Max remembered how he'd worked as a security guard on the door of a sumptuous restaurant in Mayfair, where you could even see Hollywood stars like Brad Pitt or Tom Hardy, where a glass of fine wine could cost you in the region of a hundred pounds, a place where beautifully dressed, well-groomed people who never even noticed him walked in and out. They would come in their Mercs and BMWs, or maybe even Bentleys and Maseratis. They would only notice the cloakroom attendant when he was handing them their expensive coat, or the doorman when he was opening the door for them. They'd walk past the guard as if he was a piece of furniture. That was life.

It's like that all over the world. The poor serve the rich. And those people from the rich neighborhoods, Chelsea, Kensington, Hampstead, or the elite houses in central London were never rude, they wouldn't push you aside, they'd always give you a good tip, a twenty note for the waitress when they were eating a hundred-pound breakfast for two, or a tenner for having opened the door, or another tenner to the guy taking their coat, but in their eyes, you could see their attitude

towards you. Or, rather, the blank in their eyes told you they didn't have any regard for you at all.

"Have you worked out how much money we'll need for the first jobs?"

Greg's question brought Max back to reality.

"I've already made a list of what we've got to buy," answered Max. "I'll give it to you, so we can get a fresh set of eyes on it."

"Where're we going to get the money to start this thing up?" asked Greg. "I'm broke right now."

"Alex put a grand in the pot," answered Max. "He's the richest of us. That should be enough to get started, and then we can earn some more on the prep jobs."

"It should be a really easy job," said Greg. "In and out."

"We did well with the chemists," said Max. "Almost no risk there at all. The main thing is that the getaway routes should be easy."

"Yes," Greg answered, pensive. "Dive into the tube, and you're gone. Disappeared. But now there's a security camera poking out of every hole."

"The times are changing," said Max.

"And petrol stations in the center of the city?" asked Greg. "On Edgware Road, say. And getting away is easy."

"No way," said Max. "Firstly, the cops could roll up by chance. Secondly, most people pay with cards at gas stations. Not much in the way of greens."

"Fucking progress!" laughed Greg. "Bank cards. I remember the days when a guy would pull out a billfold of cash as thick as a book."

"Yes," laughed Max, "those were the days."

They were silent for a while.

"So, a chemist's, then?" asked Greg.

"Yes," answered Max, "we could do two or three before the cops work out we're knocking them over."

"Then we'll have to test Leon's pyrotechnical capabilities on some lonely ATM down some back alley," added Greg.

Max nodded with understanding.

"And Alex getting into action, nothing too hard, maybe even at the drugstore. We have to get him training a gun on a girl at a drugstore at least once, to see how he handles it."

"Yes, there are options," said Max. "The main thing is that we need Alex to slowly get a feel for it. A lot depends on him."

"Yes, and that cutie pie will see what a superhero Alex is when he's doing something for real," said Greg.

Max turned round sharply to Greg. His fingers clamped onto Greg's wrist hard.

"Greg!" Max snapped. "I'm not kidding!"

"Come off it." Greg tried to free his hand, but couldn't manage it.

"You said it yourself – he's our only chance!" said Max, looking him in the eye. "I'm not going to let you shit on him over the girl."

Greg looked at Max and listened.

"So strap your cock to your thigh," Max said angrily. "You decide, left or right. Just fucking stick to doing the job. The job, and nothing else."

Max looked at Greg angrily.

"You let me down and I'll get you from beyond the grave," continued Max, "I've still got some pals down at the cop shop."

"All right, bro," Greg said quietly, freeing his hand. "All right. I got it."

Max let Greg's wrist go, but continued looking at him angrily.

"All right," said Greg. "No more jokes."

They were quiet for a while.

"You think I don't like Vickey too?!?" Max asked angrily.

Greg was silent. He didn't want to make things any worse with Max.

"She's an absolute star," Max said with a sigh. "I've never seen a better-looking chick in my life."

Greg nodded in agreement.

"But she's his girl, bro," Max said, sighing and then taking a deep breath. "Or something like that."

"All right, all right," Greg said angrily. "Just as long as your guys don't let us down. I don't want Fatty, say, spraining his leg at the wrong time. Shit happens..." Greg gave Max a look that could have turned his soul inside out. Max understood what Greg was talking about.

Max very precisely noted the sensation he was experiencing. He understood, after all, that, if he had to, Greg would shoot Leon. Without even thinking about it. If Leon, the fat clunker, as Greg called him, sprained his leg or something like that and couldn't run away from the crime scene, then Greg would put a bullet in his dome so that Leon wouldn't be able to talk and rat Greg out. Max had never had any illusions about Greg. They'd never spoken about it, but in his soul Max believed that Greg had already stepped over the line, that he'd already shot people. A feeling of revulsion and disgust overcame Max. That disgust had him grinding his teeth for another couple of hours. It was as if he'd sold Leon down the river. As if he'd driven a rusty steamroller right over the guy who was almost like a brother to him. Left him to be torn to pieces by wolves like Greg, all for the illusive dream of wreaking vengeance on this life. To get what he'd been barred from getting since birth. Max remembered that moment. And quietly swore to himself that if he got out of all of this alive, he'd never go down this slippery path again. He'd split up with Greg for good and would never put Leon at risk ever again. Leon really did mean that much to him.

October 2016

Alex. Diary

"A lot of people are looking for some kind of Absolute. Truth. A paradigm. Something that will lead you through life. A lot of people find that paradigm in their family. As a rule, from their fathers. And even if those models for behavior are mistaken, even if they lead people to disappointment, to pain, then even then people don't want to let their convictions go – convictions that have been in their families for generations. They'll find a host of reasons to whitewash the foundations that they stand on, that their fathers stood on, and their grandfathers and great-grandfathers before them. To the very end they'll be stripping the old, dried out paint from the old foundations, but the paint just won't come off.

I don't know why that happens.

But only loneliness is absolute. Everything else is an illusion. Parents, friends, girlfriends. You think that there's a circle of security around you. But you're only deluding yourself. You start to work that out when Uncle Dennis suddenly dies, and Mom starts crying, and Dad smokes a little more than usual, standing at the window in the cramped kitchen. Or when you're going through hard times and it turns out that half your friends aren't friends at all. Or when you see your girlfriend kissing your friend.

Sometimes you meet interesting people and there are thrilling moments. But if something good does crop up, it doesn't last long. Everything always ends in loneliness. The trick to life is that sometimes it feels like you're not alone. But you have to remember that it's just a trick.

I remember experiencing a moving sadness at the words of Alain Delon. "Even when I lived with a woman and loved her I experienced loneliness. I've always had that feeling. The roots of that eternal loneliness undoubtedly lie in my childhood. I was only four years old when I realized that you can be abandoned by those you love the most."

Yes. At some point in your existence, you find that you just want to reject everything. But you mustn't do that. Better to see it through to the end.

You ask yourself, who is to blame? Who or what is to blame for my view of life? Who is responsible for my pain? For my lack of belief?

My parents? The world? Or poor old Uncle Dennis, who the cemetery worms are already sampling?

And then you begin experiencing an emptiness. A pleasant emptiness. Has an emptiness within you ever caused you any pain?

You listen carefully to that new feeling within yourself. Like a pregnant woman placing her hand on her stomach to feel the movements of her child, or placing her husband's hand, if she has one.

At first you think that that emptiness is temporary, that it will pass, that the world will be in color again, and not in black and white like it is now. But then you suddenly sense a physical pain. As if from a burn. It's as if you're little again, and you're crying, and everything is burning within you."

October 2017

Alex

Alex went to the gay club BoyS in Soho on a Friday at just past midnight. He hadn't planned on coming here. The big party at the advertiser's off Oxford Street, which he, as editor of his publication, couldn't miss, hadn't been far away from the club.

At events like this there were rivers of the champagne that he needed to keep a smile on his face. Alex did all the handshaking and hugging and shoulder-patting needed and then, at the first opportunity, slipped away unnoticed from the mob of inebriated colleagues and customers who were singing karaoke, taking off their black blue jackets, pressing their sweaty, salty faces up against one another.

Alex found himself out in the street breathing in fresh air. He wasn't stone cold sober, but he wasn't drunk. He didn't have any plans for the weekend, and nobody was waiting for him. He went to BoyS on that day because it was close by, and because he had nowhere else to go. But also because going to a gay club was out of the ordinary, special. The mere idea of stepping into a gay club roused his consciousness. Doing something out of the ordinary. He wasn't going to the gay club because he was gay, he was going because the mere act of doing so shook himself up on the inside. Or that's what he told himself, at least.

Despite it being prime time on a Friday night, there weren't many people in the bar. There were several guys on their own at the long bar. They sipped their drinks and looked at the dancers on the stage. There were tables in the corner of the large room. Couples were sitting at them. At one of the tables, Alex noticed a guy sitting

on his own. Alex sat at the bar and ordered a Chivas. He was in an unfamiliar environment, and he liked that.

Having sat there for five minutes and realized that the guy that he was looking at was on his own, Alex got up and headed over to him.

"Can I sit here?" asked Alex, coming up to the guy.

The guy looked at Alex and then nodded in the direction of an empty chair.

"Yes, of course," he replied simply, and carried on sipping his cocktail in silence.

Alex sat in the chair next to him.

He felt a little stupid. What should he do now? Get up and go? Or sit for a while and exchange a few pleasantries? He risked it:

"I'm Alex, this is my first time here," he said, and then found himself at something of a loss.

"Bob," the guy answered melancholically. "First time?"

"Yes," nodded Alex.

"Then you should check out the dark rooms," said Bob, either wanting to get rid of this uninvited guest, or not meaning anything by it at all.

"What're they?" asked Alex.

"There," said the guy, pointing at a door a few yards away from them. "It's a dark space where guys can get some privacy."

"Thanks, but I'm not gay," Alex said for some reason.

"Take a look anyway," the guy answered calmly. "Entry's free."

Alex drained his Chivas in one gulp, got up, went to the door, opened it, and went in. As soon as he'd closed the door behind him, he found himself in total darkness. At first it was even scary. Intuitively, he started to move forward with small steps, reaching out with his hands to try to find some support. He could faintly hear some unfamiliar sounds.

About half a minute must have passed like that. His eyes started getting accustomed to the darkness. He noticed that some little violet lamps were glimmering on the ceiling. Alex's fingers touched a wall and he tried to feel his way along it. A few steps on he thought he must be going in a circle, but then he worked out that he was moving through a labyrinth. Touching the wall, he took about another fifteen steps and then heard a quiet groan.

It was a man groaning. His first instinct was to make a run for it, but he immediately stopped himself. The black darkness shackled his movements. Over the quiet groaning of the man, Alex began to make out the sound of breathing. And then, already getting used to the darkness, and with the aid of the glimmering violet lamps, his eyes made out two men copulating.

They were right in front of Alex. Alex took a step back in shock, his hand still touching the invisible wall. He couldn't make out their faces, but he could clearly see two male figures in front of him.

One of the men stood with his face to the wall. The second stood behind, slowly pushing in and out of him. Alex couldn't tell if they could see him or not. And if they could, was he allowed to be there?

The man standing behind continued slowly moving in and out of his partner. Alex's heart was throbbing at a furious pace. He stood there, unable to take his eyes off what he was seeing. He surprised himself by taking a step forward. And now he saw the eyes of the guy standing up against the wall.

The guy looked at Alex. He looked, but didn't say anything, slowly moving to the rhythm of his partner.

Alex stood next to him, almost right up against him.

Maintaining the rhythm, without missing a beat, the second guy pushed in and out of his partner. And then Alex felt the hand of the first guy on his penis. Alex's erection, which up until that point had been strong, reached an unimaginable intensity. The guy at the wall moved in his partner's rhythm, groaning and caressing Alex's cock through his trousers.

Suddenly, Alex sensed fear. How would the second guy react? What were the rules here? What was allowed, and what wasn't? He was suddenly afraid of the situation that he'd forced himself into. Specifically forced himself into. After all, he wasn't sexually attracted to men. He'd created this situation almost artificially, if he could put it that way. What was happening to him? And the erection. He could feel how excited he was.

Thoughts whirled through Alex's head, providing no answers, no colors, just a grey dust that whirled and whirled, making everything evermore incomprehensible.

Arousal and fear merged in his head. It was what he wanted. This is what he'd come for. For new experiences. So why did he want to run away so badly?

Just as unexpectedly as he'd touched him, the man pulled his hand away.

Alex quietly took a step back. He thought he could make out the guy's eyes, and see that they were entirely empty, expressing nothing. Neither regret that Alex had moved back, nor a request that he remain.

Alex heard a question in his mind: "What kind of game is this?" He freed himself of his whirling thoughts when he realized that he was retreating back through the labyrinth in the direction of the door, towards the light, to the way out of the dark room, and then out of the bar.

May 2018

Maxim, Greg, Alex, Vickey, Leon

It was the second time they'd met up. In a pub by Parliament Hill Fields. There were a lot of people around relaxing, and the five colleagues didn't really stand out from the crowds. They sat at a table with a bench on either side. Leon bought everyone a beer in a paper cup and several packets of sunflower seeds to chew on. They looked like a bunch of friends who'd got together to hang out over the weekend.

Greg said that they should never meet up in the same place twice. There was nothing to stop some miserable old granny with nothing better to do phoning up the local police station, and then some overly zealous young lieutenant would start asking questions, and remembering faces. Anything could happen as a result of idiotic chance occurrences like that. Greg had been telling Max the truth when he told Max that an ideally planned robbery could go off the rails because of some entirely random events. You had to be very careful.

"So, in August we do the bank," Greg began.

The group noticeably perked up.

"But first we do the chemist's on the Cally Road," said Greg.

"Yes," nodded Max.

"The roles should be close to the ones on the main job," said Greg.

He looked at Vickey.

“Vickey,” Greg said, “your role is just the same as in the main job.”

Vickey nodded that she understood.

“As soon as we go in, you stick the “CLOSED. SERVICE BREAK. 15 MINUTES” sign up and stay out in the street,” said Greg. “You stand there with a wad of paper as if you’re doing a survey. It looks a bit stupid,” smiled Greg, “but that’s enough to stop any chumps wanting to get into the drugstore¹ while we’re getting down to business.”

“Got it,” said Vickey.

“At the end of the day, said Greg, “it’s entirely possible. A 15-minute service break at a drugstore. For a stock take, a delivery of goods or some bullshit like that. The cunning bit is that 15 minutes for a service break is a totally reasonable amount of time, but on the other hand, nobody’s going to stand around for 15 minutes waiting.”

Max nodded in agreement. He knew that Greg had a lot of experience in robberies and he understood a lot about people’s behavior.

“We wait for the right moment,” said Greg, “so there’s no one in the chemist’s. Vickey walks around in front of the entrance with her phone turned off, so it doesn’t ring at the wrong moment, she’s pretending that she’s talking on it, and all the time she’s checking through the window to see if there are any customers left.”

Leon smiled, remembering that he’d used the same trick in the past to check out a girl he’d liked without giving himself away.

“But if some guys pop out of nowhere, we just call it off and split up,” Greg continued, as always in his calm tone. “And it doesn’t matter where they come from. Maybe they were stocktaking inside or they got past Vickey – that could happen too. If a couple of chicks turn up that won’t make any difference.”

Alex didn’t like the sound of the expression “a couple of chicks,” but he kept quiet.

“In any case, you all wait for my command,” continued Greg. “There’s only one no-no – kids.”

Alex looked at Greg attentively.

“If there are kids in the chemist’s we don’t go in,” said Greg. “And you remember, Vickey: no matter what, don’t let anyone into the chemist’s, and if someone comes up with a kid then do whatever it takes, lie down in front of them. Kids are sacred.”

Max again nodded his agreement to Greg. He knew his partner’s principles where it concerned kids and he respected them.

“Agreed,” said Alex, as if speaking for all of them.

“Right, so Vickey’s at the chemist’s,” continued Greg. “Alex comes up and joins her as if she’s met a good friend. A totally normal scene – normal questions, how’s it going, a hug. A bit further off at the bus stop, Max and Leon are having a chat. I’m also speaking on the phone about ten yards off.”

Max finished off his cup of beer, put it on the corner of the table and got himself another one. Greg noticed that, and also noticed that Alex hadn't touched his cup once.

"Having made certain that there's no one in the chemist's and that none of the people walking by are heading in," Greg said as all this was happening, "Alex says goodbye to Vickey and enters. That's the sign. Leon follows him in, and then Max and me."

Taking a big sip of beer, Greg continued:

"After we've gone in, Alex goes up to the chemist, reads off a list of medicines we've prepared in advance, the girl goes off to get them, and that's where a question pops up: Is there another chemist in there?" said Greg. "If there isn't, then it's an easy job. When the chemist comes back to the till we've already got a barrel trained on her. I've got the sights on her and I ask her to open the till and hand over the money. In the meantime, Max's standing right there and he puts a second gun right up against Alex's head. Leon drops to the ground and starts squealing like a pig," continues Greg. "Basically, she won't have a choice. She'll hand over our dough like a good little girl."

Max nodded again.

"Then we all leave and head off in different directions according to the plan we work out. We'll talk about that later," said Greg. "I'll leave last, having asked the chemist to lie down on the ground and count to a hundred."

"And if there are two chemists?" asked Alex.

"If there are two," said Greg, "then it's all the same, only Max holds you by the collar with one hand and aims the gun at the second one."

"Got it," said Alex.

"The main thing on this job is getting the chemist to do what we want," said Greg. "Right from the get-go. Burn her up with your eyes. And you, Alex, and you, Leon – shout at her to hand over the money and not risk their lives, you say you've got kids, well, this isn't your first time doing this. And that'll work. It's always worked," Greg concluded.

Leon could feel how he was sweating all over. From his bald spot to the soles of his feet. He wanted to jump up from the bench and run away. Wherever the road would take him. He was very worried. But he'd been just as worried a year ago when, using almost the same technique, he'd robbed a chemist's with Max. And back then, just as he was doing now, he calmed himself down by imagining that he was playing the passive role of a customer screaming in panic, using that panic to put pressure on the chemist. He just tried to keep the idea that he was part of an organized criminal gang out of his mind.

"Tell them about the liquid bandage and the make-up," Max said to Greg.

"Of course," Greg answered him. "We put liquid bandages on our hands in advance so that we don't leave fingerprints. And the main thing is the make-up."

Vickey looked at Greg with interest. She couldn't imagine that this crass, slovenly person could understand anything about make-up.

“And we’ll have so much make-up on that our own mothers wouldn’t recognize us,” Greg assured them all. “I’ll explain what you’ll have to do and how. Vickey will be the best at doing it.”

Greg really had thought through all the details. Bearing in mind that nowadays there are cameras almost everywhere you had to be unrecognizable, but natural at the same time. The best thing for that was make-up.

“The men will have beards,” said Greg. “Nobody’s surprised by beards nowadays. A kid walking down the street, twenty years of age, and he’ll have a beard.”

“Hipsters,” said Vickey.

“Who gives a shit what they’re called. It suits us fine,” answered Greg.

Vickey was sent to a café with internet in the center of town. She prepared by putting on big grey glasses and a roomy hooded top so that it was impossible to see what her figure looked like underneath. Long, baggy jeans covered trainers on thick heels which made Vickey looker taller than she actually was.

Vickey laughed when Greg explained the plan for purchasing the make-up in scrupulous detail, but Greg insisted that every tiny point in his instructions be followed down to the letter. “Some really serious robberies have been solved because of some really smalltime nonsense,” he said, “you wouldn’t believe it. Professional thieves have been caught for tiny fuckups. And you’re not pro thieves,” he said spikily. “So, remember guys: there are no minor details on this job.”

Through an online store, Vickey ordered a sizeable package of make-up. She clicked for it to be delivered by a courier. At Greg’s insistence, she was to meet the courier at a metro stop. “There’s a lot of people there, artificial lighting. Even if the cops work out we’re using make-up, and even if they find our courier, he won’t be able to identify anyone,” he said. Naturally, Vickey paid in cash.

They bought glue-on moustaches, beards and wigs for all the participants in the coming robbery. All of the make-up that Vickey bought looked entirely natural on them.

“I hope this is the best investment you’ve ever made,” Max said to Alex when he talked the latter into paying for the first purchases.

“I hope so too,” Alex answered dryly.

To ensure total security, Greg bought them all cheap mobiles at Walthamstow Market and put burner sim-cards in them. From that point on they were only to contact each other using them. He insisted that they turn their main mobiles off whenever they met up, so that their built-in geolocations wouldn’t give them away. “We don’t want to get caught out like some loser who burgled some crap and then got busted because of a phone call from his mother,” he told the guys.

As a joke, Alex even suggested that they come up with cover names for whenever they had to refer to one another. “Like Mr Yellow and Mr Blue in Reservoir Dogs,” he said, smiling.

But only Vickey smiled back in response. The others hadn't seen Tarantino's films, it seemed.

May 2017 **Vickey. Diary**

"Alex loved a quote from Kurt Cobain, I don't remember it perfectly, but it was along the lines of "I get overcome by this fucking sorrow, sad, little, sensitive human fish. From the age of seven I hated everyone just because people think that you can get on with everyone and sympathize with them – it's that easy."

Alex graduated from the philosophy faculty of LSE. The faculty of dreamers.

If only Alex was like one of the famous bloggers or journalists, professionals who really know how to make a living. A person who isn't searching – he already knows. And he uses his knowledge like a tool to earn for himself and his family. Alex is talented too, after all. He struggled too, he worked to earn money. And he could put all his effort into something big and that would bring in a lot of money. And I'd be by his side. And I'd put up with his constantly changing moods. And it's not the money that's important to me, I couldn't give a damn about money. I'd live with him whatever the conditions. I want him to be a success. I want him to be in demand and happy.

"I can probably do a great deal. It's just I don't want that. I already have to fit in the whole time as it is." That's what he says about himself. It's the problem of a fucked-up, wise dude who doesn't want to accept the world the way it is. Of course, it's easier to smoke grass and drink a bottle of Beaujolais, sitting in your apartment in Shoreditch, which he inherited from his grandma. He can see perfectly well that the way he's living, somehow, isn't quite right, but there's nothing he can do. He can only describe the situation and laugh at himself. It would be all right if he didn't want anything. He could work as an editor in some small London publication. He'd get home at five every evening, and I'd be waiting for him. But no, he's hungry – hungry to achieve something. But what?

Once he was heading a big PR project. A classmate from LSE had asked him to do it. He managed it wonderfully. He earned a load of money. He asked me what he should do with the money. I'd seen that he'd got involved in the project because he didn't want to let his university friend down. To be more precise, he wanted to help him. Having taken on the job, he started meeting people he didn't like, all those greedy, grabbing liars who unavoidably crop up at the scent of money. He put up with them for the sake of his old friend. But definitely not for the money. He finished that project by gritting his teeth. "I can't bear to see them," he told me.

He headed several magazines. But he always left because he couldn't get on with the teams. He hated the "glossy articles", demanded real journalism that would help people. In the unavoidable conflicts that ensued between him and the teams, the shareholders always chose the latter.

He hides himself away. Because he hasn't achieved what he wanted. And he wanted to achieve a lot. He wanted to help people. Make them better.

He's a romantic. He always believed that literature can and should change people. "How could Steinbeck's 'The Grapes of Wrath' not change someone for the better?! Faulkner, Henry Miller, Hemingway.

He couldn't adapt to fit in. I think that he's never been responsible for anyone. Not for a wife. Not for children. Not for his parents. He wasn't put up against the wall like people who come to London in search of a better life are. Like those who have to find a crumbling apartment to rent in an old block of council flats and then hand over a third or half their pay for it.

He just got stuck in a kind of vacuum. And now he abandons people because his conscience is tortured by the fact that he doesn't meet the expectations of people who mean a lot to him, so he just leaves. He dumps everything and everyone. And leaves. And then he starts it all over again. Everything from scratch. And again it doesn't work out.

He spent two years writing an adaptation that they put on in one of London's top theaters. The director asked him to come up on stage after their production's premiere. He was applauded. He was hugged by the actors. But when the champagne bubbles had all popped, it turned out that the royalties that playwrights get couldn't provide him with the kind of life he was aiming for. You had to write a lot. You had to run a conveyor belt, was the popular expression. You had to work fast, and a lot. As if you were churning out soap opera episodes. He'd never been able to do that. And nobody knew the names of playwrights, no one would recognize them out in the street. He started writing a new play for the same theater, but then he abandoned it. The same happened with a big musical that he and an old friend from university had come up with.

One night, before disappearing yet again, he phoned me, drunk, and I think he quoted his beloved Cobain. I don't remember it exactly: "Sometimes I feel like the spawn of hell. I've let the devil in, and I can't drive him out.

I really feel sorry for him. And for myself."

May 2016

Alex

Johnny appeared in Alex's life unexpectedly and all of a sudden. At the London Film Festival, Alex made the acquaintance of an attractive couple. Bruce and Harriet turned out to be very sweet, well-educated people.

Bruce, seeing Alex, who was making his way through the crowd with a plate of snacks and a glass of champagne, pointed to a seat at their table, indicating that it was free.

Bruce continued talking to Harriet. "You know what Tarantino said when someone told him he hadn't made anything better than Pulp Fiction?"

Harriet shook her head.

"He said that no one else has either," Alex quipped, butting into their conversation. "Sorry for interrupting."

"No problem at all." Bruce gave a very welcoming smile. "I'm Bruce, and this is my wife, Harriet."

They had a pleasant chat over the entire evening and right at the end of the conversation Bruce talked about their son, who was a budding scriptwriter, studying film at Sussex University.

"He's started writing scripts and having some success, or at least we think he is. He writes well," Anton said enthusiastically. "You seem to know literature well."

"Guilty," smiled Alex.

Finding out that Alex was also the editor-in-chief of their favorite magazine, the caring parents perked up and asked if he could meet their son, Jonathan. Maybe give him some advice.

Alex gave them his phone number and email address, agreeing to help and hoping that Jonathan would never phone him.

But Jonathan phoned the next day, introducing himself as “Johnny.” The zeal of a true youngster could be heard in his voice.

“My parents said you might be able to give me a friendly push into the art of scriptwriting and I have complete command of the tube,” he joked. “Tell me where to go and I’ll be right round. I sent you my play last night by email.”

It was a wonderful, fresh Sunday morning and he didn’t have to go anywhere, so he didn’t resist the insistence of a young man pursuing his elusive, not entirely clear dream – a dream that appealed to Alex.

He could even feel the role of teacher awakening within him with a yawn, he wanted to talk, to teach, to express his understanding of art as a whole, and to do that he needed a listener. All the more so, as he’d already read Johnny’s play.

Alex dictated his address with a glimmer of pride: “Flat 4, 26 Hugh Street, Shoreditch.” He loved his neighborhood, Shoreditch, with its local charm – the old London and the new. Too hipstery, trendy and transient for some, for Alex it retained the authenticity of a neighborhood dating back centuries.

Alex took a shower, put on his worn-out Diesel jeans and pulled on his favorite t-shirt and Zara jumper. And the doorbell was already ringing.

Jonathan turned out to be a slim twenty-year-old lad with a ginger mop of disobedient hair that stuck out every which way, giving his fine, tender face an extremely punkish look. Alex smiled – Johnny’s haircut reminded him of how he’d spent his whole childhood fighting with just the same kind of hair, and he invited him in.

Johnny took a look round. The small living room linked on to an open kitchen. There weren’t many books, but among them he immediately noticed Nietzsche, Cortázar, Borges, Updike, Amis and many more. A huge yellow sofa. In front of it stood a refined table made of expensive plastic piled up with thick, colorful magazines.

Johnny’s eyes betrayed the admiration of youngsters who romanticize strangers according to exterior signs: a beautiful, stylish apartment in Shoreditch, where you could imagine people with bohemian occupations meeting up, unusual furniture, Alex, who was a hero of his, of course – the whole family would read every page of the magazine he edited every month. And, of course, adult life, where everything was very grownup.

“You managed to read it,” a little embarrassed, said Johnny and handed Alex the wad of pages. “But please, be honest! Better the bitter truth, than sweet lies.”

His cheeks girlishly blushed, which suited his fine white skin. He sat on the edge of the couch.

“The truth and nothing but! But remember, my opinion is just one of many possible reactions,” Alex began and looked at his young guest. Seeing clear indications of extreme concern on his face – like all gingers, he blushed in patches that began to flush around his face – he stopped at the shelf with the alcohol on it, took two whiskey glasses, and poured them a couple of fingers of Laphroaig each. Then he took a frosted bottle of Pellegrino from the fridge.

“Nobody’s got the right to refuse a simple morning whiskey and soda in my house,” Alex said with mock severity as he offered Johnny a glass.

Johnny raised it to his lips, took a big gulp and winced as the Scottish single malt burned his mouth and throat.

Alex liked observing Johnny. There was something attractive and alluring about this supple boy, but Alex couldn't understand what for the life of him. He continued:

"Johnny, the theme you're dealing with here is serious and timely. And the style you write in is really good! But the main character isn't realistic, so he's not interesting."

"Ouch," exhaled Johnny, taking another sip of his drink, a small one this time, as he remembered the consequences.

"I'll explain what I mean. You, like many authors starting out, gave the main character all the traits, thoughts and desires that you have: youthful idealism, philosophizing about the nature of his existence, pacifism, love for a beautiful woman, and a shared love at that!" Alex pronounced each word with the slightest of smiles so that he wouldn't sound like a teacher reeling off a lecture. "So far, it's not bad at all."

Johnny listened to Alex's every word attentively, but the alcohol was starting to make itself felt: he settled in a little more comfortably on the couch, crossing his legs and, already very much at home, pressing one of the pillows up against his stomach.

"And your lead character, who grew up loved and cared for, takes the old rifle that he inherited from his great-grandfather and shoots half the teaching staff at his faculty. It's totally unclear why he does that," said Alex, finishing his thought.

"What do you mean, why?" Johnny objected heatedly. "For love, of course!" He took an impressive gulp of whiskey.

Alex went up to Johnny and gently took the glass from his hand, barely touching his fingers with his own hand. He put the alcoholic drinks on the coffee table next to the couch and added some soda. Alex sensed that he was unusually excited as well, not by the conversation, though, but by a desire that had unexpectedly overcome him. The desire to touch this young man, to sense the tenderness of his skin, to experience the scent of this young, pure body. He shook his head as if trying to drive out these thoughts and sat down at the opposite end of the couch.

"The woman he loves is driven out of the institute; she goes back home to the North. Leaving him to fight the injustices of this cruel world alone. The character's drama centers on his broken heart!" said Johnny, looking at Alex.

"Tell me, have you ever had your heart broken?" Alex smiled, slightly moving forward, closer. A lock of hair that fell across Johnny's brow wouldn't give him any peace. He was fighting the temptation to push it back behind his ear, putting it next to that pulsing vein on his slender neck. "Could you kill over that? Are you capable of killing someone?"

Johnny frowned, but he didn't recoil from him as Alex had feared. On the contrary, he turned square to him with his entire body and looked at Alex with perfectly clear eyes.

A hellish battle between good and evil was taking place in Alex's head. He unbearably wanted to hug Johnny, to console him, to tell him that life was a little bit more complicated than he thought. But, at the same time, he was mortally afraid of reaching out and touching him. The proximity of another man's body scared him. He was afraid of himself, of his reaction. He was afraid of Johnny, of his innocence. He'd never embraced a man. Even hugging his father wasn't what you did in his family. What was happening to him? Why was his heart beating so frantically, and why were his palms sweating? He'd never wanted a man, so why was Johnny inspiring this

desire to console him, to hug him to his chest, to caress him? Again that desire to sin, to cross the boundary of the permitted.

"If I understood correctly," Johnny said finally, "the questions were rhetorical?"

Alex nodded. Johnny reached out for his glass, but stopped, looking at Alex with a question in his eye. But Alex again nodded his consent and took a sip from his own glass.

"Yes, I'm young and inexperienced in life," stated Johnny, "but you can't cheat time. What can be done, then?"

"You mustn't stop striving for knowledge," Alex suddenly answered in an entirely serious tone. "Don't be afraid to live: experiments, adventures, self-analysis and a lot of time in libraries reading different works. That's actually why I didn't become a scriptwriter."

"You don't like libraries?" Johnny asked in surprise.

"No, not at all, I love them, it's just I think I'm afraid of living," Alex replied mournfully.

Johnny shook his head distrustfully. In Alex he saw an inhabitant of Mount Olympus, a rock star or whatever other idol was in fashion nowadays among youngsters. He was clearly in awed admiration of him and couldn't believe that his new idol wasn't perfect.

"But there's one practical trick, a device!" Alex said suddenly in a completely different tone. "As an author, you have to take an interest in what your reader or viewer is feeling right now. You have to guide his attention. At every point in the play you have to ask yourself: Does he believe me? Is he interested in reading my thoughts on these key issues in life, in the universe and in absolutely everything else? Everyone knows that the answer is 42."

Johnny got the joke about 42, a reference to his favorite book from his childhood, "The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy." He laughed. And in laughing, he imperceptibly moved closer to Alex. They were now sitting right next to one another.

And Alex wanted to reach out and put his arm around Johnny's shoulder. But not in a brotherly way, he wanted to lock him in his embrace and move his face towards his lips, to feel the warmth of his body. He felt a familiar languor in the base of his stomach at these thoughts, he recognized it and understood that he wanted Johnny in the way that he would want the kind of sweet young woman, the kind he'd always had no trouble finding. Alex sensed that he definitely didn't want sex with Johnny, but he really wanted to hug him close.

He didn't immediately realize that Johnny wasn't laughing anymore, and was now looking into his eyes as if hypnotized. Eyeball to eyeball. Johnny was silent, waiting. Their faces were very close, too close. "What do I know about him," Alex thought. "Who is he?" His gaze fell on Johnny's lips, they were open slightly, they drew him in. He heard the uneven breathing coming from Johnny's chest. He slowly, very slowly, began to move his head to that tender mouth.

Suddenly, right next to him, the sharp tone of a phone ringing could be heard – Johnny's mobile in the back pocket of his Levi's. Alex turned his head aside, as if looking for something important. Johnny, slowly, as if in a film, pulled out his iPhone and looked at the display to see who was ringing, and then looked back at Alex, almost apologizing:

"It's Mom. She's driving today, I have to answer."

Turning away slightly from Alex, Johnny answered the call:

"Mum? Everything ok?" A woman's voice could be heard, she was crying.

But Alex wasn't listening to what was coming from the telephone, he couldn't listen, the stream of his own thoughts had swallowed him up. "Was he waiting for me to kiss him? Did he want that in the same way as me? Or did I imagine it?"

Hanging up, Johnny turned to Alex, looking at him with a gaze that was sobering up fast.

"I knew it – she's scraped someone else's car at the carpark, she's a terrible driver," he said, getting up from the sofa. "No one was hurt, but I have to go – she's even worse at handling the police and the insurance company. Yes, you know my Mum – a theater lover with her head in the clouds."

At the door, Johnny turned round and looked at Alex who'd come up to see him off.

"A massive thank you!" said Johnny, reaching his hand out to him. "Sorry we had to break off. I hope you'll find time for us to do this again, and that Mum'll take a taxi the next time we meet up!" Johnny quipped, beaming a smile.

"Of course," answered Alex, shaking Johnny's outstretched hand and closing the door behind him.

His heart continued to thump insanely in his chest. His fingers shaking, he blocked the twenty-year old's number on his phone.

November 2013

Alex, Diana

Alex would often make acquaintances on the tube.

The London metropolitan. He loved and hated it at the same time. It was the quintessence of London. A vast quantity of Londoners and incomers forever in a hurry, and forever waiting.

Alex loved to observe people on the tube. You can encounter all manner of types here, from young millionaire "start-uppers" even to Meryl Streep, to the city's colorful range of madmen and women. Men and women of all ages and professions.

But most of all, Alex loved the tube during the day. That was when no one was in a hurry. He loved to observe the people on the tube and sometimes make their acquaintanceship. It didn't bother him at all if the girls would refuse to talk to him. But often his charms would work wonders.

Diana. She looked very striking. Simple, and striking. Just what Alex liked. He sat down next to her in the carriage on the circle line, introduced himself and suggested they go for a glass of wine.

She was surprisingly straightforward about agreeing. Diana said that she was meeting some friends and that she'd be getting there half an hour early. They got out at Oxford Circus, then took a table at a stylish, quiet cafe.

"Can you suggest a good wine?" Alex asked a passing waitress, a flashy, fairly short brunette.

The waitress thought for a second, and then blurted out "Malbec Finca La Linda!", a named she'd memorized in training.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's quite a spicy Argentinian," said Alex.

"Yes," smiled the waitress. "It's a wonderful, rich wine."

"That should go perfectly with an early Italian supper," Alex smiled to Diana, and then added to the waitress, "that would be perfect, thank you."

"You have wonderful manners," said Diana when the waitress had gone off to get the wine.

"I'm trying to get on your good side," said Alex.

"Being perfectly honest, just as my forebears brought me up to be," she said, smiling coquettishly, "I have to tell you that if you want to sleep with me, and I think you do, you haven't got a chance..."

Alex wanted to say something, but Diana finished her statement.

"...I'm gay."

"I'm having a lucky day," smiled Alex.

"You're canceling the order for the expensive wine?" asked Diana, laughing.

"No – not for anything in the world," parried Alex.

"But we can be friends," she added cunningly, "and sometimes share toys with one another."

They both sensed and were pleased by the frankness and relaxed nature of their conversation between two educated people. Soon they both had the impression that they'd known each other for hundreds of years.

They were already finishing the wine when Diana's iPhone rang.

"Come over," she said into the phone. "We're at the place on the corner, you remember."

Diana hung up. "My girlfriend and her friend Steve are coming, I'll introduce you."

"Diana, as I haven't got a chance of any sex today, give me a keepsake to remember our lunch by," said Alex. "It doesn't matter what. Something for the memories."

She thought for a second. Her cheeks were rosy from the wine which had put her in a playful mood.

"All right," she laughed craftily.

Alex, devouring her with his eyes, made himself a little more comfortable on the restaurant's couch.

"In my previous life, when I was 19, I was going out with a man, a professor at Imperial, where I was studying." She took a gulp of wine. "Not immediately, but a little after we'd started our relationship, he started asking me to tell him, while we were having sex, about how we would fuck with other people. In detail. You understand?"

"I think so," said Alex.

"It really turned us on," said Diana. "He taught me to remember or to fantasize out loud. Soon we started talking about group sex. I would imagine out loud how I would give a blowjob to another man while my beloved was fucking me from behind. Or how I would caress a girl's body, her breasts, her stomach, her clit, while she was sucking a man. And I really liked that picture in particular – it got to the stage where I couldn't come without imagining it. I had to try sex with a girl."

Alex listened to Diana spellbound, he liked the way she very simply and clearly shared her most intimate secrets with him.

"You immediately realized that you would choose girls?" asked Alex.

"After the first kiss, yes. You couldn't compare it with any kiss with a man. Men are always conquerors, they always try and occupy another's territory as fast as they can, but this girl endlessly gave up the tenderness and sweetness of her mouth, if you'll forgive my literary flourish." She smiled and concluded: "And it was unforgettable."

Alex looked at Diana as if imagining her tale as a picture.

"That girl, my first love," continued Diana, "said something that I'll remember for the rest of my life. 'Going into this river, you'll be wet forever after.'"

Diana was silent for a while, immersing herself in her memories. Then, shaking her thick crop of curly hair cut short and looking straight at Alex, she asked:

“Do you like your keepsake?”

“Very much so,” answered Alex. “I’m overawed. Really. Thank you.”

“You didn’t just want to fuck me, handsome,” said Diana, narrowing her eyes craftily.

“What else did I want?” asked Alex.

Diana looked at him for a while, and then said:

“You collect people.”

A girl and a very young guy came up to the table. The girl was dressed in a very simple, boyish way, without any frills. The boy, on the other hand, neatly dressed in tender tones with his hair combed back into a ponytail, reminded him of a girl.

“Alex, meet my friends,” said Diana. “Sarah and I work together, but we’ve got a day off we’ve been waiting a long time for. Hugh works at our hospital as a nurse, he’s a first-year student at Imperial College, where Sarah and I studied – he’s a great guy, and we’ve taken charge of him.”

Diana and Alex really did become friends. Meeting up a couple of times a month and, over a bottle of wine, telling each other the latest news from their lives became a tradition for them. They once even slept with one another, almost accidentally, when the evening simply wouldn’t end with a single bottle.

Diana looked incredibly beautiful and supple that night, and she knew perfectly well what she wanted. In that, she was very different from a lot of women and Alex loved it. Along with her slightly boyish image, short haircut and small breasts. He wanted to do it all again in the morning. But Diana, as soon as she woke up, said in a strict tone that sex would ruin their friendship, which she valued greatly.

Alex didn’t insist. Diana wasn’t just a body that he wanted, to Alex she meant more to him than that, she was a soulmate. With Diana he could be himself. And even more importantly for him, with Diana he no longer felt lonely. Irredeemably alone.

December 2016

Alex, Robert

They had already been talking for about an hour. Alex was opening up to Robert. He couldn’t say when, precisely, but he had begun to trust his psychiatrist. The doctor focused his attention with his directness, his professionalism, his understanding of the details.

Alex never spoke to anyone about himself. Shut off to the outside world, shut off in his relationships with those close to him, for whatever reason. Alex never spoke about himself, didn’t try to really find out what was happening within himself. It sounded strange coming from Robert when he said that Alex had a superficial view of himself. It was a bold remark. Robert understood that he could lose his client. And Alex understood that too. But he stayed on, because he valued the psychiatrist’s honesty and professionalism.

“Trying to get a deep understanding of life, you, in my opinion, haven’t tried to go deep within yourself. And the sexual experimentation, again, in my view, has acted as a sort of screen. Screening you off from yourself,” said Robert, looking attentively at Alex, waiting for an answer.

“Possibly,” answered Alex.

"Sex, to a large extent, is built on fantasies," continued Robert, "and that tells us a lot, psychologically: a person's preferences often tell us about his character."

"Yes," said Alex, "often the scenes in bed in my life were a continuation of scenes from my dreams."

"You mean that you turned your sexual dreams into reality?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," answered Alex.

"Did you dream of naked men?" asked Robert.

"Yes," Alex answered.

"And you had sexual contacts with them?"

"Yes," answered Alex. "In my dreams I had sex with them. But it wasn't sex in the literal sense of the word. There was no penetration, as there was with women." He thought about it, and then added "It was more like a game. We might masturbate one another. But it wasn't the kind of dream where you really have sex with a slim, even skinny young girl of about twenty-five with delicate, sharp shoulders, tight skin, smooth arms, beautiful breasts and soft, young lips."

Robert was silent, expecting Alex to continue.

"These dreams were totally different. And in my life I'd never wanted a man," said Alex. "And that was a relief to me after those dreams."

"You didn't want to regard yourself as a homosexual?" asked Robert. "Or bisexual?"

"Definitely not a homosexual," answered Alex. "A bisexual..." He thought for a moment. "Maybe, partially, if such a thing exists."

"In life, everything that you want exists," said Robert gently.

"You see, in all my experiments it was as if I was forcing myself into that state. A state of desire," said Alex. "I wanted to know how far I could go, although I was scared by that too. My experiments were turning points of a sort in my life – a life that I couldn't understand. It's like disarming a bomb. You don't know how the next journey into yourself will end."

Robert continued absorbing each and every one of Alex's words.

"These are turning points, after which the dynamics change in your relations with people, you see?" continued Alex. "It's like a game with death. Nothing happens without leaving a trace. Really, what I write, what I say, what I do – I don't do it to seem clever. Or pretentious. Why the hell would I do that. Really."

"I can believe that," Robert said sincerely.

They were silent for a time.

"Has it ever occurred to you, Alex, that you're doing this to run away from something?" asked Robert.

"Run away from what?" asked Alex.

"From the wounds that your mother inflicted on you," said Robert. "From your fear of those who beat you and humiliated you in your childhood?"

"Perhaps," said Alex.

"Or, perhaps, it's the wound that has stayed with you since you split up with Maria, your first love, at her not having reached orgasm, and not liking sex at all when you loved her, wanted her and did everything you could to be close to her?"

"Perhaps," Alex said sorrowfully. "But..."

Alex fell silent. Robert waited patiently.

"But all this wasn't because of the dreams," continued Alex. "I was embarrassed about the dreams, but not for long. I forgot them fairly quickly."

Alex fell silent, as if thinking about whether to say the following sentence or not.

"Once I dreamed that I was fucking my own mother," he said quickly.

Alex fell silent and looked up at the doctor.

"Every other man has been through that, and the others may have too," Robert said calmly. "As a rule, that is how you free yourself of the Oedipus complex. You probably know what that is."

"Yes," said Alex. "But I've never been attracted to my mother."

"Maybe when you were little, but you don't remember," said the doctor, "when you were about seven or eight?"

"I remember that I lay with my head on my mother's chest," said Alex after a pause, "and I put my hand near my head, over her chest. I found it interesting, there were interesting sensations. Touching a female breast." Alex closed his eyes, trying to remember himself as a child. "That's all that I remember. But it wasn't an attraction for my mother."

"All right," the doctor said calmly, "we'll come back to this. But now there's something I want to ask you to do. Tell me, please, are there things in your life that you haven't told anyone about? Something that's not a big secret, it's just an impression that you have. And you haven't told anyone about it, even those that are closest to you."

"Yes," Alex replied immediately.

"Go ahead."

"We once drank a lot of horseradish vodka at the Chelsea Arts Club."

"I know it," said Robert.

"When I was walking home alone that night through London," said Alex, "on the road from Chelsea, I walked passed a little hut that blocked off the garbage cans, in a courtyard there. It was in the summer. It was warm and quiet."

"I spotted two tramps who were having sex," Alex continued. "A man and a woman. Like all tramps they were obviously very dirty. In the kind of clothing that tramps wear. They hadn't heard me approaching. I stood there, rooted to the spot." Alex took a deep breath. "I couldn't make out their faces or how old they were. The lighting from the yellow lamps was really bad." Alex was clearly nervous as he recalled this episode from his life. "He'd pushed her shirt up over her face. And he was kissing her stomach. Licking it, grabbing at it with his lips." Alex looked at Robert. "You can imagine it, right, they're both dirty ... And he's licking her stomach."

Robert nodded in silence.

"You could tell that they were both really enjoying it. They were both groaning," Alex continued. "I can still picture them very clearly. That freedom. Freedom from conventions. Free love." He looked at Robert. "And I don't give a damn if they were high or not."

Alex fell silent. Then he looked at Robert and continued.

"At that moment, I remembered the scene from the film *American Beauty*, when the characters are watching a video of a plastic bag from a supermarket dancing in the wind. I remembered the words of the young guy in the film. My memory is good, thanks to my profession. Astonishing words. I remember them well." Alex looked somewhere off into the distance, beyond the office that the meeting was taking place in. "There's this electricity in the air, you can almost hear it. And this bag was just dancing with me. Like a little kid begging me to play with it."

Tears appeared in Alex's eyes. He could see his father and mother. And himself. He was little. Yes. That happy day. It was some kind of kid's celebration at Wembley Stadium and his dad had been given tickets at work. It was the beginning of spring. He could remember the day clearly. He was wearing a blue coat with big violet

squares. There were a lot of happy faces around. He was walking and holding his father and mother's hands.

Alex couldn't hold back the floods of tears.

"Like a little kid begging me to play with him," he said quietly through the tears.

May 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon

Everything was going very precisely according to Greg's plan. All of the participants in the first robbery had their makeup on, and they'd liberally covered their hands in liquid plaster – a special spray that forms a waterproof film on your hands that can be bought in any chemist's.

Alex and Vickey had been standing a few yards away from the chemist's on Caledonian Road for about five minutes. They were hugging, showing each other different things on their iPhones, laughing from time to time.

Alex kept his eyes peeled the whole time. He kept glancing in the direction of the chemist's window, counting the number of people going in and out. There was a moment where he wanted to go in, but a couple guys suddenly came round the corner. Following the instructions, he stayed where he was, waiting for them to pass. He was very nervous, but you wouldn't know it to look at him. His heart was pounding with a terrifying force, and the nerves were tensing up his chest, hampering his breathing.

A little off to the left of Alex and Vickey, Max and Leon stood at a bus stop. They didn't arouse any suspicions in any way either. Two friends, one slightly older, one slightly younger, waiting for a tram or a bus.

Max wasn't even nervous, almost. Having been through a lot in the police force before being kicked out, he'd gradually lost the sense of fear he'd started out with. There was no way he could bridge the gap between how he wanted to live and what he could sensibly achieve without taking extraordinary risks. And now he was standing opposite his younger cousin and cheering him up as best he could. And Leon needed all the cheering up he could get because he could barely stand on his two feet.

And finally, to the right of Alex and Vickey, stood Greg, keeping an eye on them all without standing out. For him, this was work. Simple work. That had to be done. He didn't have total belief in this team. But he didn't have any other choice. It was only with them that he could carry out his plan for the robbing of the bank – a plan that he'd been nurturing for so long.

He couldn't share this plan with professionals. That was out of the question. They could just kill him. If one of the serious players found about the plan, Greg would have had to settle for one of the minor roles, or he would simply be disappeared. Even if the plan worked, he could be rubbed out to cut down on the number of witnesses. Greg wasn't a big deal in the world of thieves, so no one would be looking out for him. He didn't have any illusions about that.

Max and his kids who'd already tried some small-time thieveries were another matter. If they were successful, Greg planned to give them some precise tips about what to do in the future so that they wouldn't get picked up, and Max would make sure that nobody bought a new BMW 6 series with cash out of the blue. The main thing was that if they were successful nobody would be out looking for them. Anyone but these five. The cops could get all the stool pigeons together at a stool

pigeon symposium, as Greg told the guys, but no one would ever suspect them. Because this five almost didn't exist.

A couple of oldsters came out of the chemist's. They shut the door behind them and started to walk off. Alex realized that the moment had come. There wasn't a single customer in the chemist's. On top of that, over the last twenty minutes he hadn't seen a second pharmacist working inside.

Alex squeezed Vickey's hand, cutting her short in the middle of what she was saying, and even surprised himself with the speed that he entered the chemist's, leaving Vickey at the door. Vickey quickly took a sign saying "Service Break" and stuck it on the door with scotch tape that she'd prepared in advance. Then she took a file of questionnaires out of her bag and turned her back to the door.

The pharmacist, a young, curly-haired, ginger girl, stood at the counter behind a glass screen facing in the direction of the entrance. She seemed to be busy putting cash in the till. Alex smiled to her from behind his glued-on beard, pulled out his shopping list, and started to read from it.

"Can I have some Theraflu, some vitamin C and some strong drops for a cold," said Alex, trying to speak through his nose to give the impression that he was ill.

"Of course," said the girl.

Without looking round at Alex, she turned her back to him and started opening up some narrow cupboards, looking for the medicines Alex had requested.

The door opened behind Alex and Leon, followed by Max, entered.

The door slammed behind them and then immediately opened again. Greg walked in.

Alex stood frozen to the spot, unable to turn his head. He realized that he could barely feel his legs. He suddenly remembered that Max, with his help, had already robbed several chemists in the east of London. But back then it had just been the two of them. But now he'd got Vickey involved, which he seriously regretted, and, most importantly, Greg was with them now.

Alex had mixed feelings about him – a cocktail of revulsion and fear. Not because he was a thief. Max was no saint either, but Alex had grown up with him and trusted him. He didn't know Greg at all. And what he'd managed to find out in the first month of being acquainted really scared Alex.

Alex turned his head and looked at Leon. Beads of sweat could clearly be seen on his forehead and he was shaking. Alex was trying to conceal the state he was in, but Leon was clearly having problems. All that he wanted was to be a long way from here, and never have to come back.

The pharmacist turned round, some tablets in her hand, and immediately saw the pistol aimed at her through the glass.

"Look at me, darling," Greg said in a brutal voice.

Leon dropped to the ground and started screaming:

"Don't shoot! Please! Don't shoot! I've got children! Please!"

"Shut up!" growled Greg.

Leon fell silent.

Right at that moment, Alex felt the barrel of a gun on his neck. Max had demonstrated what would happen, and back then in his apartment, it hadn't been that scary. But now, Alex really did go limp, and not just because that was part of the plan. He raised his hands, although he'd been forbidden from doing that, because it might attract the attention of passersby out in the street.

"Put your hands down," ordered Max, and Alex immediately obeyed him.

"Listen, darling," Greg said to the pharmacist, looking her straight in the eye, "speak quietly, don't shout, and I promise you this will be over really fast."

"All right," the girl said, forcing herself to speak. "Yes." Her gaze was fixed on the barrel of the gun, and she was afraid of making the slightest move.

"Now you're going to carefully put the medicine on the table, then you're going to open the till and calmly give me all the cash," said Greg.

"Yes," she said again, her voice still quivering. "Yes."

"What's your name, ginger?" asked Greg, still aiming at her face.

"Liz," she replied.

"You've got a button there near the till, Liz," said Greg. "It's called the security button. Right?"

The girl quickly nodded.

"So, Liz," said Greg, "if you accidentally press that, I shoot you in your beautiful head. And then I'll have to shoot these two guys in the head." He nodded in the direction of the other "customers", Leon and Alex. Greg left a pause, and then finished: "Got it, Liz? And because of you, their sweet kids will never see their daddies again, right?"

The girl again nodded quickly.

"Right," said Greg, "go over to the till."

Her legs shaking, she went over to the till and pressed a big white button on it. With a characteristic "kerching!" the till's lower draw sprang open. Trying not to look at Greg, she started taking the money out of the till.

"Put all the money in a plastic bag, Liz," Greg said slowly but firmly.

Her hands shaking, the pharmacist followed his order.

"Is everything all right, Liz?" he asked, still pointing the gun at her head.

"Yes, yes," she repeated.

The pharmacist obediently followed Greg's orders. She stuffed all the money into the plastic bag that she'd taken from a pile next to the till. She pushed it through the gap in the glass that separated staff from customers.

Before Greg had managed to take the plastic bag, a young man in a white coat appeared behind the girl's back. He must have been the second pharmacist – he'd been back in the storeroom and hadn't heard what was going on in the front over the last few minutes.

"Liz!" the guy said, before freezing on the spot at the sight of the gun in Greg's hand aimed at his colleague.

"Don't move!" shouted Max, training his gun on the guy.

"I, I..." the guy stuttered.

"Shut it!" shouted Max.

The guy raised his hands. He'd frozen in horror.

"On the floor!" commanded Max. "On the floor, I said!"

The guy, trembling from fear, slowly lowered himself down onto his knees, then lay on the floor, his head facing down.

"Now you, Liz," said Max. "Slowly, no fuss, on the floor, next to your pal!" said Max.

The girl, ever so slowly, afraid of making a careless movement, got down on her knees, and then lay down next to the guy in the white coat.

"Let's go," Greg said dryly.

Leon was the first to leave. His arms and legs were shaking. He was shivering from fear. Vickey noticed, but didn't know what to do. Alex and Max appeared in the doorway. Max instantly sized up the situation and realized that Leon would need help

getting away. Max gripped him by the elbow, squeezed it tight, and led him off down the street, taking a quick glance at Alex as he did so. Alex gave a barely perceptible nod to Max, took Vickey by the hand and stayed behind to wait for Greg.

Greg was finishing up the job in the drugstore.

"Listen, kids," Greg said to the two employees lying on the floor. "I've remembered you. If you get up early, I'll come to each of your homes."

Greg left a short pause and then continued:

"Lie there and count to three hundred. Then get up and call the police. Is that clear?!" he shouted unexpectedly.

Frightened voices could be heard coming from the floor: "Yes, yes."

"All right!" said Greg. "And tell the cops that the robbers had strange accents. They'll ask what kind of accents they were, sweeties, and you say that you couldn't tell because you were scared to death."

The girl and the guy lay on the floor, terrified of moving.

"You got that?" Greg asked angrily.

"Yes, yes," they both rushed to answer – they really were scared to death.

"Say it, bitch – what accents did the robbers have?!?" shouted Greg.

"I couldn't tell!" quickly answered the girl, squeezing her eyes shut tight.

"Don't let me down, Liz," Greg said quietly. "I don't want to have to kill you."

Greg turned round and headed for the door.

Seeing through the glass that Greg was coming out, Alex and Vickey started to walk away from the chemist's.

Sticking close to the plan, all of the participants in the robbery headed away from the crime scene. They all knew their routes, where they would take off their disguises, and where they were supposed to meet up.

January 2017 **Alex, Robert**

"Last time, when I said that I might be bisexual," Alex began, almost as soon as the door to the office had closed, "I was being totally serious. I'm terrified at the thought, I don't understand myself. I genuinely love women, I love loving them. All those beautiful bodies, their scents, their tastes. But I have this burning interest in men that I don't get with women. It's the thought of the male body, so different from a woman's body, unfamiliar, but known down to the tiniest of details, it's an itch in my head that never leaves me, day or night. I like looking at men in the gym or in bars, I like it when a handsome guy shakes my hand and smiles, I like it when, playing some sport, my opponent's hot body accidentally touches mine. I like gay porn. But does that mean that I'm gay?"

Robert answered with a question:

"You're afraid that you might be homosexual?"

"I don't know," replied Alex. "I guess so, it scares me."

"Why? What or who are you afraid of, Alex?" Robert continued with his questions.

"I guess I'm afraid of it turning out that my life has been a lie, and that for all of my thirty-four years I've completely misunderstood myself," he said sadly. "Although maybe it's all normal?" Alex tussled his hair. "David Fincher once said that after thirty-five there's no truth left. Just various degrees of lying."

"Alex," Robert said in his beautiful, low voice, "people who were lucky enough in a good – in psychological terms - family, as a rule, gain an understanding of their sexuality when they're adolescents, but even with them that's not always the case. A lot of people only gain an understanding of their desires as adults, and that happens, as a rule, during very stressful periods in their lives. Some people, like you, find it too hard to free themselves of a despotic mother who's been absorbed into your brain like vinegar into a sponge, along with all of her dubious conceptions of life and manipulative behavior. Of course, it's difficult for you to work it out. Don't be too hard on yourself."

Robert paused for a while and then continued.

"Psychology is a fairly young field. The psychology of human sexual relations, in comparison, is still a babe in arms. Freud tried to influence sexual self-identification with the aid of electricity and surgical intervention, and his followers tried to cure Alan Turing of homosexuality using hormones. Fifty years later, the scientific community finally established that representatives of sexual minorities aren't people that have been gripped by horrifying mental illnesses, or victims of fashion or perverted upbringings. They established that people are born with a certain system of desires that allows them to love beings of the opposite sex and their own sex, and they may be subject to various sexual deviations. So, I'm afraid, Alex, that the only real way, in my view, to find out who you are is to allow yourself to experiment."

Robert fell silent. Alex also kept the silence, thinking about what had been said.

"Have you got a girlfriend?" asked Robert.

"Yes, Vickey, she's wonderful, but I can't understand how she can love me after all the shit I've done," said Alex. "I've cheated on her. Many times. And I know that she knows and that it hurts her, she's torn up by jealousy and the damage to her confidence inside. But she doesn't say anything. I've never admitted that I love her, just kept it to touching names for her. If you could've seen her eyes when I said that I would send her off to get an abortion if I got her pregnant. There were oceans of tears that hadn't been cried, not from the hurt I'd done to her, but from the pity she felt for me. Pity. Despite everything, she loves me. She'll come whenever I call."

"You think you're not worthy of that kind of love?" asked Robert.

"Unworthy? That's a very precise definition, Doctor!" said Alex. "I'm not worthy of her love – that's the perfect way of putting it! I do her too much damage by trying to work myself out, and she forgives me. But can I forgive myself?"

"The only real way to find something out," repeated Robert, "is to allow yourself to try."

"*Viam supervadet vadens*," said Alex, deep in thought. "The walker will master any road."

"Correct," said Robert.

They were silent for a while.

"You wanted to tell me about Rachel," said Robert.

Alex glanced at the doctor.

"Yes," he said. "I wanted to know if I've fallen all the way. Can I get any lower in disgrace."

Robert waited to be sure that Alex had finished before speaking.

"I'm listening, Alex."

The blinds, as usual, were drawn. Robert looked at Alex, interested. Robert always divided his clients into those with whom he worked purely for the money, and those who raised his interest with something more than financial remuneration. Robert found Alex fascinating. He'd very rarely met Alex's type. He combined so

many mutually contradictory elements that he couldn't fail to raise the interest of a practicing and thinking psychiatrist like Robert.

"We worked together. I was the editor-in-chief. Rachel was running a glossy insert," said Alex.

"Describe her," said Robert.

"Tall, slender, she looked totally unapproachable."

"Beautiful?"

"Yes. Very. And she had an ideal figure."

"All right."

"Yes," said Alex. "She had a short haircut. It looked very stylish."

"How did she dress?" asked Robert.

"Well, that's a whole subject in itself," grinned Alex. "Rachel was dressed incredibly. And she looked incredible."

Alex made himself a little more comfortable in his seat.

"There was a photograph in a beautiful frame on her table," he continued. "She was with her husband in the photograph. They'd got married ten years earlier, when they were eighteen. They didn't have any children. Twenty-eight years old, a happy girl. She said she was thinking of having children. Every Monday a courier brought a big bouquet of flowers from her husband. The girls were all incredibly envious."

Robert noted something down in pad.

"I don't remember how I worked out that her family life wasn't happy," continued Alex. "I'm a writer, so I have to notice things that other people don't notice."

Alex sat back in his armchair, and it seemed to Robert that he was relaxing.

"One day we were sent to a meeting together," continued Alex. "After we'd finished up, we took a cab home. We were sitting very close to one another. Our hands were almost touching. I don't remember what led me to ask her. Perhaps I had a slight hangover so I didn't care. I asked her why she hid the fact that her family life was coming apart. At first, she looked at me as if she couldn't understand what I was talking about. Then she tried to say that someone was inventing stories about her. Then she asked who'd told me. It all looked very sad, or very stupid. I said that I could just see it. I could just see."

"And she started crying. Right there. In the taxi. We were driving around Regent's Park. I asked the driver to stop. We got out and sat on a bench. I phoned the office and said that we were in a café working on the strategy for a new PR campaign and that there was no point in us coming back to the office, it would be a waste of time. Rachel was grateful for me having got us off work for the day. I asked her if she'd like to go to a bar nearby. She looked at me and said: 'Let's go to yours.' Very simple, very clear. She didn't have any doubts about me accepting. Firstly, she'd noticed that I love adventures, and, secondly, she really was stunning. And she knew it."

"When I came, I realized that I hadn't sensed her orgasm. I asked her. I told you that this is a very painful issue for me. This is a very difficult subject for me."

"I remember," Robert said quietly.

"She looked into my eyes and whispered: 'I've never had an orgasm'," said Alex. "It was if I'd been whacked over the head with a massive bottle. Again? I remember that question cropping up in my head. At first I wanted to get her out of my apartment. But something stopped me. Her words. 'I'm tired of pretending. I'm probably to blame for everything. I want to change. I don't want to be cold'."

Alex took in a deep breath. He seemed to be nodding to himself. To his thoughts that should now be offered up to the doctor.

"She really let rip," said Alex. "And she let rip in every way imaginable." He again fell deep into thought for a few more moments. "At first, we just fucked. But I very quickly realized that that was only making me worse. I was just scratching at the old wounds from my first love, when Maria couldn't orgasm and she came to dislike the whole idea of sex."

Alex ran his hand through his hair, tussling it.

"Rachel sensed that and, apparently not wanting to break off our relations, suggested that we go further. She suggested we go to swinger's clubs. I'd somehow missed out on all of that, so I was interested."

"Did you feel sorry for Rachel?" asked Robert.

"No," Alex answered quickly. "She had her own life. We all go our own way. We both understood that we were only going to be in the same carriage of the same train for a time."

"She found it interesting to be with you, no doubt?" suggested Robert.

"Possibly," answered Alex. "But the main thing is that she didn't want to be alone."

"Like you?" asked the doctor.

"Maybe," answered Alex.

"Did you match her intellectual level?" Robert suggested.

"Perhaps," said Alex. "You know, going to a swingers' club with a very attractive girl is a special kind of pleasure. It's like going into a Porsche dealership with someone else's credit card, with no limit on the amount you're allowed to spend. The most attractive couples came over to get acquainted," Alex smiled. "Suddenly, at your feet, you've got the most beautiful, sweet, well-groomed girls in London. Rich, wonderful, sexy, clever. The most incredible couples find out that they get bored in bed. And they start looking. The swingers' club is there as the best solution to refresh their relationship."

"Which of you found the swingers' clubs?" asked Robert.

"London is packed with swingers' clubs. You don't need any special connections," answered Alex. "But one of my clients has a private swingers' club in his own mansion on Bishop's Avenue, in the north of London – it's one of the most expensive streets in the world. It's on a totally different level. It's really refined there, no random people, a very delicate crowd. Wonderful cuisine, extremely polite service, beautiful people."

"Famous people too?" asked the doctor.

"Well, yes," answered Alex. "Musicians, football players, TV stars. But everyone signs non-disclosure agreements. And anyway, all that passes. He's famous today, hyped up, and everyone's forgotten him tomorrow. It's just noise."

"But Rachel, no doubt, liked being in that crowd?" asked the doctor.

"I think so," answered Alex. "It flattered her. But she got used to it pretty fast," smiled Alex.

"And you like having these beautiful girls without even having to lift a finger?" asked Robert.

"I haven't really thought about it," answered Alex. "It's always been like that. I got something from girls. And gave something. Never really thought about it."

"So, the swingers' clubs," said Robert, returning them to the subject of Rachel.

"Yes," said Alex. "It was really great at first. But it got pretty boring pretty quickly. Our hearts were thumping for the first few times when we drove up to that

house on Bishop's Avenue, but after a couple of months those meetings stopped getting your imagination going."

"Then what happened?" asked Robert. "Why do you highlight Rachel in your long list of lovers?"

Alex looked at the doctor long and hard.

"She asked me to beat her," said Alex, looking the doctor right in the eye.

Alex got the impression that Robert was ready for such a twist in the narrative. The doctor didn't even raise an eyebrow.

"How did it happen the first time?" asked Robert.

"We were in my apartment. We were both fairly drunk," said Alex. "I told her that we should think about a beautiful end to our relationship. That I was hurting. It was just hurting me to be with her."

"How did she respond?"

"Rachel said that she'd understood everything from the very start. And that she would only ask one thing of me," said Alex, and then fell silent.

Robert patiently waited for the story to be continued.

Alex took another deep breath.

"That I hit her," he said. "In the face."

"Did she explain why she wanted that?" asked the doctor.

"I didn't ask," answered Alex. "But my guess is that she wanted to fall all the way to the bottom. So that there was nowhere lower to go. So that it couldn't be any more painful. She wasn't worried about us splitting up. Rachel, with my help, wanted to come back to life, to get back in the game as card players put it once they've lost all their money and return to the table with money that they've borrowed. That was the way it seemed to me, at least. I think that she wanted to fall right to the bottom so that from that point onwards the road would only lead upwards. Rachel had tried a lot of things and she didn't see any other way out. She said that her husband had taken her to the top psychiatrists who'd tried to provide her with the real essence of female nature, the joy of intimacy and orgasms. But nothing had worked. And so she'd reached this unusual decision."

"Did you hit her?" asked Robert.

"Yes," answered Alex. "Not very hard at first. But she demanded more. And I got a taste for it. I hit her. Really swung at her. At a certain point I caught myself thinking that I was taking my anger out on Rachel, the anger of my first love, my love for Maria."

"Did you start to like beating Rachel?"

"Yes," answered Alex. "But only her. I started to play her game. But with my own sack of grievances over my shoulder."

"Was that the end of it?" asked the doctor.

"No," Alex answered quickly. "Rachel had another request. A final request. She promised it was."

"What was it?" asked Robert.

"By then we were no longer working in the firm where we'd met," said Alex. "You couldn't do what we were doing and make it to work every day on time," Alex laughed.

"Quite," said Robert.

Alex was silent for a while.

"Our life seems insane ... for normal people," said Alex. "But who wants to rot among that lot for your whole life?" he sighed mournfully, looking Robert in the eye.

Robert looked at Alex, his attention focused, and said:

"Let's get back to Rachel's final request."

"I had some savings that we'd burned through. And Rachel would sometimes put some money in the pot too, although I never asked her to do that. I think she was running through the money that she was getting from her ex-husband. I don't know what deal they made when they split up. She said that he'd remarried, but that he wrote to her the whole time. Normal letters. Written by hand. Can you imagine? He sent them by post."

It seemed to Robert that Alex was delaying the moment when he would have to talk about the girl's last request and that he didn't want Alex to change his mind about telling the whole story.

"All right, what was her final request?" the doctor asked calmly.

"She suggested that we go to a certain establishment in London, find a lonely guy or two ... and ..." Alex fell into thought for a moment.

"And?" continued Robert.

Robert waited patiently.

"She wanted to feel that she was a slut," Alex said quietly.

There was a pause.

"She wanted you to sell her like a prostitute?" asked Robert.

"Yes," Alex answered briefly. "I already told you my suspicions as to why she needed to do that."

They were silent for a while.

"We went to the Donovan Bar at Brown's Hotel in Mayfair... The most expensive property on London's Monopoly board, it helped, but not much," Alex smiled sadly. "It's not every day that you do someone a favor like this."

Alex slumped back in his armchair.

"We sat there for several hours," he continued, "drinking expensive champagne the whole time, I think it was Veuve Clicquot. She spoke to me the whole time. Saying goodbye. Because we'd decided not to see each other again. She was thanking me."

"For what?"

"For being with her at a time when she needed me. I don't know."

"Do you think that you gave her freedom?"

"That's a bit too black and white," said Alex. "Who am I to give someone freedom? Or to take their freedom? I was just in a certain place at a certain time."

"But Rachel wouldn't have behaved as she did with you with just anyone."

"Probably, Doctor," said Alex. "I tried to avoid any categorical thoughts. I went through too much of that categorical approach as a child thanks to my mother. I'm afraid of stating anything for certain."

"All right, Rachel said goodbye and thanked you," said Robert, in order to get Alex back to his story.

"Rachel got drunk and chose herself a man," continued Alex, "who would pay for all the champagne that we'd drunk and for a night with her. Or rather, for one sexual act. That's what she decided."

"She chose?" Robert specified.

"Yes," said Alex, "of course. She looks like a star. Even the guys who were in the bar with their girlfriends were checking her out."

Alex pursed his lips and shook his head.

"Even for me, with my whole way of life, this was too much," he said. "But I'd given my word to see it through and I couldn't leave her on her own. She chose a man just before closing, at about 2 in the morning."

"How much did the lucky man pay?" asked Robert.

"I can't say. It's not my mystery," answered Alex.

"How did you feel about it?"

"I felt very strange," said Alex. "I didn't feel sickened by her, or sorry for her. I did what she asked and that was it, although I'd have preferred not to do it, not to have drunk that wretched Clicquot, and not to have been in Brown's that night at all."

He fell silent, and then continued.

"I always felt like an outcast. From my childhood. Mom made a good job of that," Alex said with bitterness in his voice. "And I felt like an outcast that night as well."

Alex closed his eyes again, shaking his head from side to side. Then he opened his eyes and looked at the doctor, focused.

"What did I feel, Doctor, at that moment?" he asked, repeating Robert's question. "I didn't feel anything. I'd only known Rachel for a month or two. Our relations were strange. I repeat: even for me. I wasn't planning on digging around in her brain. We were just traveling our own road. And then our paths crossed for a certain amount of time. So, I wasn't planning on saving her. And she didn't ask. Who am I to save someone? And who's going to save me?"

Alex fell silent.

"I hope that I helped her in some way, at least," continued Alex.

He was silent, and then concluded:

"Keanu Reeves said that sorrow changes its form, but it never ends."

May 2018 **Leon, Greg**

The next robbery was supposed to be far easier. Greg chose a little chemist's on the high street in Kentish Town. It was a really convenient spot. There were always a lot of people walking up and down the high street, which worked in the thieves' favor. There were innumerable cafes close by, and Greg wanted to use one to change out of their disguises.. And most importantly, close by was Kentish Town tube station, which Greg planned to use for the getaway of part of the team.

You had to give Greg some credit, he wasn't your average thief. His head was in the right place, as they say. He saw the overall picture, and the other members of the team could see that. Maybe if he hadn't become a thief, he could have been a great entrepreneur or a corporate strategist. He had a keen sense of human nature and even with Alex, who came from a completely different world, Greg had managed to establish some sort of relationship.

On that grey day in May, Greg and Leon were "prepping the site", which is to say they were checking out the details. Greg had also decided to use this stroll to get a better understanding of Leon and, in the process, get some information on Alex that he could use to meet his own ends.

The two of them slowly walked down the street on the opposite side from the chemist's. The plan for the robbery was identical to the previous job. Greg, however, had made changes to their getaway routes so that, as he put it, the guys would gain some important skills.

"Leon, can I ask you a question?" Greg asked gently, when they'd already discussed all the details for the coming job and slowly walked a little further on from the chemist's they were planning on hitting.

Leon was surprised by the way the question had been put – he wasn't used to people showing him such courtesy.

"Yes, of course," Leon answered quickly.

"Why are you doing this job – what's in it for you?" asked Greg.

Leon didn't answer. He walked on in silence, looking directly ahead. Leon couldn't really even explain to himself what was in it for him. He wanted money, of course. He really wanted it. But that wasn't the real reason.

"Mother," Leon suddenly blurted out, as much to his own surprise as Greg's.

"Mother?" asked Greg.

Leon walked on a little further in silence, nodding to himself barely perceptibly.

"Probably Mother," Leon said again.

Greg waited for a while before asking another question.

"Can you explain?"

Again, Leon experienced another entirely new feeling. Somebody older and more experienced than him was interested in his inner world. Yes, sometimes his chats with Alex had touched upon subjects that concerned him personally and his parents, but somewhere deep inside Leon had sensed that these discussions weighed down heavily on Alex.

"I was twelve years old when my father died," said Leon.

"From what?" asked Greg.

"A car hit him," said Leon. "It was an accident."

Greg remained silent, waiting.

"He was driving with a friend, they were going fishing in our old Rover," said Leon. "Mother was always telling him that he should sell the car because it broke down the whole time, but Father didn't want to, he loved that old wreck. He spent the whole time fixing it."

"I'm sorry," Greg muttered unexpectedly. He meant it sincerely.

Leon barely waved his hand.

"They had the hood up, and his friend was standing there with him," continued Leon. "There was a thick morning mist. And a car drove into them. It'd lost its grip on the turning, and the mist was really thick."

They walked on a little further in silence.

"And then Mother started drinking," said Leon. "She'd never touched spirits before that, but now..."

"Yes," muttered Greg, barely audible. He was barely in control of himself. If Max could have seen him right now he would have thought that this was some kind of joke. His entire aggressive, rough manner and way of speaking had evaporated, and now it was just a normal guy walking alongside Leon, a normal person rather than a cynical thief.

"She's been in a really bad way ever since," said Leon. "Really bad."

"That's understandable," Greg said quietly.

"Yes, understandable," Leon echoed him.

"I feel really sorry for her," said Leon. "I really love her."

"Of course," said Greg. "She's your mother, after all."

"Yes," Leon muttered. "So, there's your answer as to what's in it for me," said Leon. "I want to buy her a new apartment. A new, clean one. A new one, you see? Absolutely new. So that nothing will remind her of her old life. And I want to get her a helper. A woman with rights over her. So that she'll stop her drinking. So that she'll take her out in the fresh air for walks. Every day. Come rain, sunshine or snow. She deserves a good life. I love her, after all."

Greg was silent, thinking about what Leon had said. They walked on like that in silence for a couple of minutes.

"You know when the first time I stole was?" Greg asked suddenly.

Greg's question didn't really require an answer from Leon.

"Dad was digging around for some money for a hair of the dog after a heavy night. He was shouting that he was in a bad way," Greg continued. "I was thirteen, maybe fourteen." Greg was silent for a while and then continued. "I felt sorry for him, so I brought him my piggy bank. Dad had given it to me. A brown bear with a slot between the ears that you could put the coins in. I was saving up for a bicycle. You could only get the money out if you broke the bear."

Greg sighed deeply.

Leon was scared of even making a sound. He walked on in silence, waiting to hear what Greg would say next.

"Dad broke my bear," Greg said. "He took all the money and said he'd give me a new, even more beautiful bear the next day, and that he'd pay me the money back. He said that he'd even give me a little bit more. He said I'd earn a little on the deal for doing a good deed."

Greg was silent for a while.

"But he didn't give me anything the next day, or the day after," he said. "And then he just forgot about the whole thing. When I asked him where I should get the money from, his answer was simple: 'steal it.' And so I stole it. From him, a couple of months later."

Greg gave Leon a long, heavy look.

"So, each of us has our own story, bro."

They reached a McDonald's. They were supposed to split up there and dive down into the metro, but they stopped a little off to the side of the crossing to finish their discussion.

"All right," said Greg, changing the subject abruptly, "tell me, why do you think Alex is doing this? Unlike us, he's got everything going for him..." Greg left a pause. The words "unlike us", Greg thought, should bring him and Leon closer together.

Leon sighed. He really didn't have an answer to the question. Alex, for him, was someone from a different planet. Someone with a different education, a different way of carrying himself. He had different friends, thoughts, a totally different way of life. And, of course, if it wasn't for Max, who by chance was a childhood friend of Alex's, Leon would never have met him.

"I don't know," answered Leon.

"Come on," Greg said angrily.

"Really," Leon replied.

"You're friends," said Greg, looking at Leon craftily.

Leon thought about it.

"It seems like he doesn't value life at all," said Leon. "I like him a lot, but I don't understand him at all. He's different. Totally different."

At this very moment, a tall man of about 30 or 35 years of age, in good shape, walked up on Greg's right-hand side. He looked from side to side and, seeing that there were no cars approaching, stepped out onto the zebra crossing, planning on running over even though the light was red. Greg quickly grabbed his wrist with his right hand. The man looked round sharply at Greg, his eyes widening at this rudeness. Physically, he looked far stronger than Greg. The man pulled his arm back sharply and spoke angrily.

"What're you doing?!?"

"Calm down, pal!" Greg hissed quietly, but very convincingly.

People recognize Greg's type. People like him stand out, and it's not easy to fake their behavior. You have to live a certain kind of life, go through certain hardships and hang out with certain people in order to talk and act that way.

The confidence in Greg's eyes and his gangster talk cooled the young man down.

"But I..."

Greg quickly silenced him. "Shut your fucking mouth!" Greg ordered through gritted teeth.

The young man stood there, unsure what to do.

Greg dug into him with a wolfish look in his eyes.

Leon was struck dumb at seeing how Greg, in the blink of an eye, had turned from a kind companion back into a hardcore rogue.

"What if some kid sees you crossing on a red light?" asked Greg.

"So what?" asked the young man, looking round, as if seeking back up among the strangers surrounding him.

"What if, tomorrow, that kid tries running across on a red light?" Greg hissed. "Like you. When he's on his own. Without his parents."

"And?" asked the young man, quieter now, dumbfounded.

"It'll be a fucking fucked up situation," Greg seethed angrily, moving close up to the man. "Dude, what'll happen, God forbid, if a car hits him – who'll be to blame?"

The man was silent, only wishing for one thing – for this aggressive citizen to disappear from his life just as suddenly as he'd appeared.

"It's his parents who'll be to blame?" asked Greg. "Or, fuck it, some fucking halfwit in an expensive suit who crossed the road on a red light and by doing that taught their kid that that's all right? What do you think?"

The light turned green, and the pedestrians started to cross the street.

"I'm sorry," the man said quietly.

Scared of looking Greg in the eye, the man dropped his gaze to the floor and waited for it all to end.

Greg looked at him. In his eyes there was contempt for the young man.

The man awkwardly shifted his weight from one leg to the other for a few moments, and then quickly walked on.

Leon caught himself justifying Greg's behavior towards the young man in the expensive suit. Their conversation of just a few minutes before had revealed a new Greg to Leon – a human Greg, and Leon recognized that he was no longer as afraid of him as he had been.

Leon watched the figure of the young man quickly receding into the distance and heard Greg hissing.

"Piece of shit!"

Leon looked at Greg. In front of him stood the animal Greg. A thief who, for reasons that Leon couldn't understand, clearly loved children. A thief who Leon didn't know at all. A thief who was going to change Leon's life and the lives of his friends. Leon didn't know how, but he definitely knew those changes were now unavoidable.

February 2017
Alex, Diana

"Your Vickey is an absolutely charming creation, unique, I'd say. There are few people in this world who experience unconditional love," Diana said to Alex, when they went out, just the two of them, to smoke some grass in the kitchen and have a chat. "She's the only person on Planet Earth who's prepared to love you the way you are. Why don't you, poor Hamlet, marry her immediately?"

About twenty people had gathered at Alex's apartment to celebrate the filing of the latest issue. For the most part they were colleagues, along with two or three friends who weren't linked to his work. The small living room was packed with people. Leaving Vickey in the room as hostess, he'd taken Diana to the kitchen where it was quieter. He was worked up and somehow needed to calm down.

"I've started going to a therapist," Alex said in place of an answer.

Wrapping herself up in a blanket, Diana climbed up onto the windowsill and pushed her feet out through the open window.

"Careful!" Alex shrieked.

Diana glanced at him sideways, laughing.

"And this is my friend – a guy who doesn't give a fuck, a representative of the creative classes – telling me, a heart surgeon, an elite rhythmic gymnast and a fatalist at heart."

"Seriously, though," insisted Alex. "Climb down. I'm scared for you! Or you'll get a cold."

"As my Dad says," Diana continued cheerfully, although she pulled her feet back, "being scared is pointless. I was brought up to believe that death, illness and loss are unavoidable, so why waste your time on fearing that they'll happen?"

"You were lucky with your father," said Alex, taking his first toke. The stress of the day was finally easing off, his shoulders were beginning to relax.

"Yes, Dad, Mom, surgery and meditation – they're my main teachers. That must be why it's so easy for me to be happy. I worked out an incredible thing long ago," said Diana. "I was happy as a child, I'm very happy now, I've got used to being happy!" said Diana, deep in thought. "And I'd be happy if you got on board this train of happiness with 'eyes wide open.' Trust me – there's more than enough room on this train." She took the joint from Alex's hand. "So, my mysterious friend, running headlong from your happiness, what did your clever therapist tell you?"

"He said, in fact, that, unlike you, I was very unlucky with my parents," answered Alex. He took another toke and continued. "I don't want a family, Diana, I don't want one. I'm scared because I don't know what love is. I don't trust life. I'm always fighting myself, and I think that I'm always losing in that battle. I read something recently and it really struck a chord – Mickey Rourke said that if he undoes just one button all hell will start bursting out of him. It's the same with me. If I just relax slightly, a whole load of horse manure will start oozing out of me, if you'll forgive the expression."

Diana smiled mournfully.

"As for love..." Alex continued. "That must be what Vickey feels for me ... Who knows? Do I love her? Do I love anyone?"

"Hang on! What about me?" asked Diana, clearly not wanting the conversation to slip into a minor key.

"You – yes. A lot," Alex answered sincerely, though he went on in a craftier tone. "I'm definitely not planning on marrying you, though, but that's just because of the dramatic mismatch in our life plans."

"Be careful, or you'll lose your treasure: she'll leave, or I'll take her," Diana said in an unexpectedly serious tone. "I really like Vickey."

"Sometimes I wish for just that to happen," Alex answered her calmly.

"You're not scared of losing her?" Diana asked seriously.

"I'm scared. Of course I'm scared of losing her." Alex stubbed out the joint. "But, you know, I'm even more scared of not finding out the truth about myself. Of not being able to free myself of my mother, of not being able to throw off everything she 'gave' me. I can't be with Vickey now, I just can't. I don't know if I'll ever be able to be with her in the way that she dreams of. I've never had a normal family. I don't believe that I can ever be normal."

"It's hard for me to give you any advice, my dear, beloved friend," said Diana.

"I'm realizing more and more that I've got mixed up," said Alex. "Tell me: how do you understand that you're lying to yourself? Or telling the truth? How can you understand that?"

"I don't know," said Diana. "Maybe it's a simple question that requires a simple answer?"

"I'm not sure," said Alex. "There are too many things surrounding us that, when you push, give way."

"What do you mean?" asked Diana. "Give me an example, at least."

"The best example is sex," said Alex, thinking for a moment. "Sex is a kind of power. You either give yourself over to your partner, or you take power over them. Or it's a dance. But that happens rarely. Almost never. If it happens, that means you've really got lucky."

Diana looked at Alex, fascinated.

"I think you and I only danced once," said Alex. "But maybe I'm mistaken. We were both incredibly drunk, after all."

Alex forced a sorry smile out of himself.

Diana didn't answer, still looking at him.

"Sex intrigues," continued Alex, no longer smiling. "Wherever I am, Diana, I show open palms – here I am, no weapons. But, at the end of the day, you have to take a position. I don't know. It's hard for me to put my thoughts on that into words. It's sex, after all. It might sound funny, but sex is something that you can't touch. It's an ephemeral thing."

"You're one of the few who's made a fundamental study of that ephemeral thing," said Diana.

"When you play with sex for a long time, you devalue it," said Alex. "But the trick is in the meaning of learning about yourself. You have to know the question. And then look for your answer to that question. Your answer. Sex is just one of the unknowns. One of the unknown, indeterminates in this vast equation that's called 'life', Diana. Which is called 'freedom.' True freedom."

"And love?" asked Diana.

"And love, of course," he replied.

Diana was silent for a while. Alex's mood had overcome her.

"Do you love Vickey?" she asked very seriously, going back to the beginning of their conversation.

"I think so," answered Alex. "And that's exactly why I don't want to ruin her life."

Diana looked at Alex for a long time.

"But you've already ruined it."

August 2017

Vickey

It all turned out to be unexpectedly simple. She felt great with Diana, and Diana, it seemed, felt great with her. They immediately started living together, staying in Diana's cozy apartment.

They found it easy to pretend to everyone else that they were just friends. Without having to hide, they could walk out in the streets, sit in restaurants, go to the cinema, and then spend the night in each other's arms, whispering sweet nothings.

Vickey didn't tell her parents that she was now living with a girl, afraid of their condemnation. They wouldn't understand, they hadn't brought her up that way. She didn't tell anyone, in fact, afraid of scaring off that fragile sense of happiness, love and care, that she felt for this girl.

Diana behaved in a totally different way. Fairly quickly, she introduced Vickey to her friends, colleagues and wonderful family – a real North London intelligentsia family, the members of which had been surgeons for generations.

Diana's mother Sophie in particular adored her – a joyful and incredibly wise woman, a urologic surgeon. A woman who allowed her children to grow up with absolute freedom as to who they should be with and who they should sleep with.

Diana's only brother, a brilliant brain surgeon, was also gay and had been in a monogamous relationship with his partner, a Phillippino colleague from work, for a long time. But her mother, it seemed, wasn't worried about all this – something that would have concerned many parents.

"The main thing is that you should be happy! You can always adopt me some grandchildren," she would say, laughing. "But remember this: I dream of an international family! I've only got two requests. My multitude of grandchildren should be children of many different nations, and they should all be surgeons in terms of their profession."

"Diana is so lucky," Vickey thought, with a touch of envy, recalling the supper they had had the night before with Diana's family. Diana's father, a terrible grumbler but renowned heart surgeon, had demonstrated his new hobby, juggling, whilst assuring them that Alzheimer's was always on the march and that you had to learn something new every day in order to fight off senility and insanity until scientists came up with the right medicines. "The Tangerine Horror" was the name that later, laughing, they would come up with for this evening – Diana's father had juggled with tangerines, and every now and again they would fly out of his hands across the room, taking unexpected trajectories to the giggles and non-stop teasing of all the members of his family.

"She doesn't have to live another person's life to suit someone else's opinion of her. I'd like to learn how to do that too. I've got a lot like that to learn from her."

Vickey smiled dreamily, remembering Diana and what had happened after the supper when they got home. Her neck, which she'd carefully bound with a red silk scarf from Kenzo, still keenly sensed Diana's kisses, her shoulders ached slightly at the tender bites, her lips a touch swollen, still tender.

A metallic voice sounded over the loudspeaker system, announcing the next station. "Another two stops to Islington," Vickey noted to herself on automatic, as her thoughts returned to Diana.

"I didn't think that could happen. Of course, I'd seen lesbian love scenes in films. The Americans do that brilliantly. In America, in Hollywood – they're the only people

in the world who can make a film where you get the impression that you're in bed with that handsome guy, or with that brunette, like in the film Atomic Blonde, where the incredible Charlize Theron fucks that dark-skinned Spanish girl. But our sex with Diana is unlike anything I've ever tried or seen before. Did I ever even suspect that I'm capable of wanting a woman, her caresses, her love, quite like this?"

Vickey recalled that at the very beginning of their relationship she had been amazed by the fact that she was having sex with a woman. She tried to listen to herself, to understand what was happening to her, to understand what she felt when Diana's skillful lips touched on her most intimate places and that hot wave of shame and hunger for ecstasy rolled over her from head to toe. In those moments, she almost entirely forgot about Alex.

Alex – her first real, eternal love, the only man to have broken her heart.

"It's so ironic that you introduced me to the best woman on the planet, but I still can't stop loving you," thought Vickey with sorrow. She quickly shook her head and drove those thoughts away. "I love being with Diana. It's really calm, and isn't that what's important?"

"I've even started being afraid of myself. Being ashamed of myself. A lot of what I saw around myself seemed to be a sham, after all. I wanted to stand up to it all. I thought I was better than everyone else. I didn't need what brought them joy.

"But life goes on. Tik-tok, tik-tok. Every minute. But where is that needed happiness? Where is the proof of my uniqueness?"

"I was looking for my safe harbor. I needed a place where I was ok. Always ok. And all of that was concentrated in one person. In him. I felt that I'd found it. But in going to Alex, I ran into a brick wall. There was only one door in that wall. A revolving door. Like the ones you find at an entrance to a mall or a business center. A big revolving door that you go into. If security doesn't let you in, you turn full circle in that door and again find yourself out in the street. You were inside for just a short time. A really short time. And again you're out in the street. Back where it's cold. Cold for your body and for your soul. That door in his wall was sex.

"So. Rejected, tired, I've crossed what is a new boundary for me. I've found my soulmate, a person I'm calm with, she shines when sees me.

"I have to work out what kind of game I'm in now. What the rules are. Because now, everything in my life is going to be different."

Diana had turned out to be extraordinary! Vickey wanted to see her again as soon as she could. To run to meet her, to embrace her, to whirl around with her, cheek to cheek, body to body, looking into her eyes, breathing in her scent, her very essence, recalling everything that had happened that night, to blush a touch, to laugh. To simply be with her.

"My first woman. That's what men usually say, after all..."

May 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Leon, Vickey

It all went exactly as it had the first time. Through the window it was early May in all its splendor. It was a Bank Holiday weekend and a festive mood had already enveloped the city. People were sauntering around the streets and chilling out, putting the worries of the working week behind them.

It was about three in the afternoon. "The quiet time," as Greg put it, and the till should be packed with cash from the morning's takings. The cash would be collected

in the evening, so there shouldn't be any surprises. They were in their disguises with a thick layer of liquid plaster on their hands.

Just like the first time, Alex, choosing his moment, slipped into the chemist's when there were no customers inside, read some labels, and the chemist behind the counter, a middle-aged woman with a neat face, turned her back to him as she started looking for some medicines.

Then Max and Leon entered. Vickey stuck a "Technical Break" sign up on the door with double-sided sticky tape.

Greg went in last. Just at that moment, a second chemist came out through a door behind the counter, but neither Max nor Greg missed a beat.

It all went down almost exactly like it had the first time. Greg's authoritative orders, given with the barrel of a gun pointing at the women, did their work. Greg immediately got control of the staff, and Max's sharp shouting as he held the barrel of his gun to Leon's temple, and Alex's shrieks, deprived them of any wish to run for it or hit the alarm button.

Alex stood behind Greg's back, placing himself between Greg and the door out. Max stood to the side of Greg so that the chemists could see his gun barrel up against Leon's head. It all happened fast and Greg and his colleagues were completely in control.

But then things took an unexpected turn. Outside in the street, three youngsters approached Vickey – two guys and a girl. By their behavior you could easily tell they were in good spirits, not to say slightly drunk. They were moving fast, heading straight for Vickey, who was shaking with fear.

"We're having a technical break," Vickey said, blocking their way to the door. Her heart was thumping hellishly, and she could barely control her breathing. After the first robbery had gone so smoothly, the appearance of these tipsy youngsters, who had no desire to listen to her, was completely unexpected and almost entirely paralyzed her.

"Come off it, beautiful," said one of the young men gently as he confidently moved Vickey away from the door. "We're just going to be a second, we've got to sort our heads out."

The youngsters laughed.

"You can't!" Vickey tried to shout out after them, but the first young guy was already opening the door to the chemist's and stepping in.

"Calm down, we just need some aspirin for cash," one of them said drunkenly, waving her away like an annoying fly. "You can put the money in the till later, darling."

Vickey clumsily tried to get herself in between them and the door, but the second guy, who was propping his girlfriend up on his shoulder, pushed Vickey away from the door into the chemist's with his free hand, and they followed their friend inside.

The youngsters noisily entered, saw what was going on and froze. Alex was standing closest to them.

They hadn't discussed or planned for this scenario. A mass of options passed through Alex's mind in a fraction of a second. He was scared that the young man would rush back out and into Vickey, and that might end very badly. Something could happen to Vickey. In an instant, he turned into a tightly coiled spring. Fast, even surprising himself, he grabbed the first guy by the lapel of his jacket and dragged him over to the wall.

The guy, not really able to take in what was going on, tried to resist, but because he was more than a little drunk and due to the element of surprise, he didn't really

put up much of a fight. Alex's physical memory worked in a flash. Like it had when he'd trained as a wrestler. He dragged the guy over to the wall, skillfully tripped him and threw him to the floor.

The guy hit his head and back on the wall, slumping to the floor, his eyes wide open, staring at Alex, who had frozen in place.

In that same second, in a single leap, Max reached the couple and with a sharp movement of the pistol's butt he cracked the second guy over the head, knocking him out. The girl, as if she'd been released from a stupor, tried to shout out, but Max immediately cracked her in the jaw with a left hook. She slumped down to the floor next to her boyfriend.

For the whole time, Greg had been standing in place, as if welded to the floor, his pistol still trained on the chemist, everything about him letting her know that he was in no mood for jokes. While Max took out the couple, moving the barrel of his gun from one chemist to the next, he spoke loudly and clearly.

"Don't move!"

When all three uninvited guests were on the floor, Greg spoke to one of the chemists.

"Give me three bandages! And you," he continued, turning to the second chemist, "put the money in a bag! Fast!"

The guy Alex had smashed up against the wall, croaked out a plea.

"We won't tell anyone. Let us go, please. Please," he repeated. The sham, drunken bravado of a few moments earlier had disappeared without a trace.

"Shut it!" Greg barked at him. "Or I'll do you in."

The first woman, her hands shaking, took out several packages of bandages, putting them on the counter.

Greg, glanced for a second at Alex.

"Put those assholes on their stomachs and tie their hands behind their backs. And you, Fatty," he said, turning to Leon, "help him."

Leon grabbed the bandages and with Alex, one by one, turned the three newcomers over onto their stomachs and tied their hands up tight behind their backs.

The couple, after Max's blows, barely gave any signs of life, but the first guy who Alex had smashed up against the wall, helped them as best he could. He got up on his knees, then lay on his front and put his wrists together behind his back.

"Shut him up, Fatty," ordered Greg.

Leon clumped some bandages together and stuffed them in the guy's mouth. The couple were lying semi-unconscious as it was, so they didn't need any help in keeping quiet.

The second chemist put the bag with the money on the counter.

"Everything's under control," Greg said to his team and then, unexpectedly, started laughing evilly. "Everything's just wonderful, kids."

He looked to the door. Vickey had her back up against it, just as they'd planned.

"Let's go," he commanded.

Max grabbed Leon by the elbow, and they were the first to leave the chemist's.

"Lie on the floor," Greg said to the chemists, and they followed his orders in silence.

Alex opened the door out into the street, grabbed Vickey, and they headed off along the routes that Greg had previously planned.

Greg came out a few seconds later.

Vickey's whole body was shaking. Alex, following Greg's orders, pretended that he was telling Vickey a funny story. In fact, he almost had to carry Vickey in one arm because her legs could barely move from the stress.

Reaching the nearest courtyard, they turned into it and headed to a hut containing rubbish bins. There, they turned their double-sided coats inside out, Alex took off his beard and moustache, put on a baseball cap with a big, rapper's peak, and Vickey took off her dark wig, pulling the hood of her coat over her head.

It all seemed to have gone well, despite the problem that had cropped up out of nowhere in the form of the trio of drunks. But instead of jubilation, Alex was overcome by fear. A fear that hadn't been there after the first successful robbery. His head was pounding with words that Greg had spoken only recently: "Professional thieves have been caught for tiny fuckups." Alex kept speaking to Vickey quietly, trying to calm her down. But the fear inside him was taking up more and more space. He could sense that clearly. And that made him all the more fearful.

March 2017

Vickey, Alex

Alex wasn't Vickey's first lover, of course, but he was definitely her first love. Bold, cool, masterful. As a man, he dominated, and as a woman, she was subservient. That was what she needed, she liked it, she saw a truth and a sense in that.

In bed, he took and she gave. She was his. When his hand lay on her neck, tightening and lightly obstructing her breathing, when he entered her without asking, just pulling her skirt up in the middle of the kitchen, when he roughly, mercilessly fucked her in the mouth, in the ass, everywhere – in those moments she wanted to die from the joy overwhelming her. She wanted to submit to his wishes and whims. She was desperate to be possessed by him.

One time she came to him in a terrible mood. News had come from home that her parents were splitting up. True, every day as an adolescent she'd prayed that her parents, who were forever arguing, would split up – how she'd dreamt of that! But taking that step at sixty was a doubtful adventure. And now, of course, she was the medium in all those unpleasant conversations about divorce. What would you expect of an older generation that had never gotten used to the idea of turning to lawyers and psychiatrists. First her mother had called in tears, and then her father had called in hysterics. But Vickey didn't have the strength to call off her date with Alex.

Alex immediately worked out her mood, taking her for a walk on Primrose Hill, feeding her with hot donuts and even taking her for a ride on a bicycle, seating her on the handlebars and kissing her tenderly from time to time on the top of the head. The latter had the desired effect, she started smiling and quickly forgot about the fact that her father had taken a lover younger than his daughter. They also spoke about Alex and her love for him.

She felt an incredible feeling of gratitude for the romance that he'd given her that day. She needed romance in order to feel that her relationship would be different, that they wouldn't repeat the mistakes of her parents. Hope springs eternal, after all. She looked at Alex and said out loud what she'd never been able to say before:

"I want to belong to you tonight, the whole of me, with nothing left. Your will, your desires. I want to fulfill all of your fantasies. I want that more than anything before!"

"All of my fantasies?" asked Alex. "Even those we've never spoken about?"

Vickey nodded.

"Are you sure, my sweet?" Alex asked again. "I'm a little bit scared of shocking you."

Vickey looked into his shameless amber eyes with confidence and answered him.

"I'm sure. I'm ready. I know it's what I want. I want to experience everything you've experienced."

"Alright then," said Alex, musing. "I think I know what we could do."

Alex phoned someone, and then in the evening he drove her out of town. Some friends of his were putting on a kinky party where the guests would take part in roleplay, dividing up into masters and slaves – a fairly typical BDSM theme. But for Vickey this was something new. The party took place in a small, secluded boutique hotel with big glass walls instead of windows offering an endless view of the silent forest. The hotel, located in the stockbroker belt to the south of London, had been entirely booked out for the event, all the rooms had been taken by the participants, and strangers were barred from entry.

Vickey and Alex arrived at about six in the evening and it was still light. They moved into a sumptuous luxury apartment with a terrace on the second floor of the building. Looking at the room, Vickey realized that the hotel was on a par with the five-star Claridge's in the very heart of London, albeit somewhat smaller.

They took a shower and started getting ready for the coming evening. Vickey's slave costume was very simple – a choker, a g-string and Louboutin high heels. Alex wore purple trousers of fine wool, leather boots and a cowboy-biker's shirt. It all looked like a masquerade, a game.

There was a knock at the door. A bellboy – a young, tanned guy of about twenty, brought cards and asked that they write down their full names. Alex handed the bellboy a piece of paper with their bank details and the bellboy disappeared.

Vickey remembered everything about that evening, down to the tiniest of details.

"At any point you can change your mind, my dear," Alex told her before they left their room. "The road back is empty if you're heading into the city in the evening – we can be home in an hour or two," he smiled.

Vickey nodded quickly. A thought flashed through her head: "But I promised to fulfill all your wishes." What superseded her promise, however, was the temptation of seeing it all with her own eyes. She wanted to play this game, even if it was only to be once – a game that she'd only seen on the screen of her laptop. And now it was all literally within her reach.

At first, it was incredibly hard to go, semi-naked, into the room where all the other guests were. It was so scary, that she thought that she would wet herself, but there was something incredibly enticing about giving freedom to her body, her beautiful, young, sexual body. They could all look at her and be envious.

Standing for a few minutes at the entrance, getting used to her internal shaking, Vickey looked around the hotel's main hall where the party had begun: five or six tables, a long bar with a smiling bartender, a small stage next to it. The electric lighting had been turned off, there were candelabras with wax candles standing or hanging everywhere. A pleasant semi-darkness. Ceremonial and mysterious.

Vickey noticed that many of the guests were watching her, delighted by her beauty. Alex, it seemed, also noticed their gazes, and he smiled with satisfaction.

They chose a place at the bar and ordered champagne. "I wonder who pays for all this, and how?" she thought.

A grand piano could be heard playing in the room. All of the tables were occupied, but you couldn't really see the guests. A dark-skinned man in a light-toned suit came up to the bar not far from Alex and Vickey, accompanied by a woman in an open brocade bodice and a lacework skirt, a slit revealing her very long legs.

Vickey had never seen such long, slender legs. On the floor next to these stunning legs, were two naked slave-men in light hip bonds. When the entire group had sat down, their new neighbors looked at Alex and Vickey.

The man in the suit had a skinny frame and neatly tonsured goatee. He nodded to Alex as if to an old friend. Then, with a long, shameless look he sized Vickey up from head to toe. Turning to the lady, he whispered something to her. The woman let out a ringing laugh, revealing a row of ideal teeth. She shook the man's hand, which he was holding out to her, rewarding Alex with a well-disposed smile from afar.

"Do you know him?" asked Vickey, referring to the man with the beard.

"Yes, slightly. He's a fairly well-known sex-master in this group," Alex answered calmly, adding that "they tell legends about him, they say he knows the secrets of Ancient Chinese sex, and the Manchurian dynasty, according to Bertolucci, understood a thing or two about sex. They say he can fuck a woman for days on end and that he's cured a lot of women of frigidity. But maybe that's all talk, of course," he smiled.

Vickey wanted to ask how Alex knew all this. How had they ended up at this hotel? Is he a regular at these parties? But she refrained from asking, instead inquiring who else he knew there.

Alex looked long and hard at the woman with the beautiful legs, thought about something for a while, and said "Yes, I know the Mistress next to him, Merciless Valeria. She's one of the cruelest mistresses in this crowd. If you really like pain and humiliation, you won't find a better tormenter."

Vickey sensed that Alex's answers were literally being drowned out by yet more questions bubbling up inside her. But now a host of about thirty years of age was coming out onto the stage, tall and statuesque, dressed in a grey tunic. The confidence with which he held himself on stage indicated that he was a hired actor. The evening had begun.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he declaimed in his powerful voice. "Thank you for having been kind enough to set aside your affairs in London and for having come to our home, bringing your slaves with you. According to the rules of this house, all of the slaves brought here are to be put up for auction. You, ladies and gentlemen, for a certain fee, can buy yourself a new male or female slave for the evening. You may also observe your former property at work, because at the stroke of midnight, he or she will again become your property. You cannot interfere, however, unless the temporary master or mistress gives you that right."

Vickey drained her glass in one gulp. And ordered another. She was going to be sold? Would Alex let that happen? She remembered that Alex had written down her phone number, which was linked to her bank card.

"Let us begin! Send your slaves up onto the stage, please!" the host called out.

In a panic, she looked at Alex. He leaned over to her and whispered:

"Go on, kid, don't be a scaredy cat. You'll enjoy it – you insisted that we spend the evening the way I want!" He smiled one of his most charming smiles.

Alex helped her up from her seat and even accompanied her to the stage. Vickey's legs were shaking, giving out from beneath her. She made it up onto the

platform, however, and joined the other eight people, all naked, standing there: four women and four men. They were given numbers. Vicky got number 3.

The auction began.

"Our first lot is a man," the host proclaimed, perfectly articulating his words. "29 years old, penis – 7 and a half inches, a submissive, male and female tolerant."

A young man with beautiful wavy hair and a large nose moved forward. He was well-formed, like a Greek statue of a warrior. And he looked just as deep in thought, though lost would perhaps be a more fitting word. He didn't smile, but stood there with his shoulders spread wide, as if about to do battle.

"The starting price for this lot is a thousand pounds!" The host left a pause, and then added "Going once!"

There had been silence in the auditorium, but now there was whispering. A woman raised her hand at one of the tables and her voice could be heard calling out:

"Two thousand!"

In the semi-darkness, Vicky couldn't make out the owner of that commanding voice, but from the intonation, it was clear that this wasn't a woman who was used to denying herself in any way.

"Two thousand – going once!" repeated the auctioneer.

"Three thousand!" came a no less imperious woman's voice from behind the bar.

"Three thousand going once!" the host repeated again.

"Valeria! Why?" asked the first woman, addressing herself to the woman with the stunning legs. "He said that the man's a sub – you've never been interested in pathetic creatures like that."

"Because, my dear," answered Valeria, "today's my birthday. And for my 45th I want to give myself an unusual present – a virgin. At least in terms of BDSM."

"Three thousand – going twice!" continued the auctioneer.

"I'm sorry, Valeria," came the voice from the auditorium again. "I can't let you have him, I've had my eye on this one for too long. Three and a half!"

"Excuse me, auctioneer!" the man with the goatee beard called out. "Do the rules forbid slaves being bought as presents? I'd like to give a gift to my girlfriend."

"It's not forbidden," the host answered. "What's your bid, Sir?"

"Five thousand!" said the man, getting up and walking to the stage.

"Five thousand going once!" repeated the host. "Five thousand going twice! Five thousand going three times! The slave goes to Master Eugene." The host thought for a moment, and then corrected himself: "Or, to be more precise, to his companion, Mistress Valeria."

Vicky was amazed by the fact that no one present appeared to think that there was anything strange about what was going on. At a loss, she looked from side to side. She caught the eye of her neighbor, a playful brunette with a doll-like nose.

"Where do they all know each other from?" Vicky whispered quietly. The question seemed to be plaguing her.

"Your first time?" whispered the brunette.

Vicky nodded.

"This isn't the first time for many of the people here," the girl explained. "BDSM is an entire culture, it has incredible masters, customers who are hungry for this kind of satisfaction, its own rules of behavior and rituals. Don't be scared – the people here, for the most part, are experienced and on top of that they're well off."

The man with the goatee beckoned over the guy with the big nose who had been standing in silence this whole time. The slave went over to him, got down on his

knees, kissed his hand, and said that he was ready to serve and obey him. Eugene, also in silence, pointed him in the direction of Mistress Valeria. The guy hobbled over to her on his knees.

The astonishment on Vickey's face was so evident that her neighbor again lent over to her to whisper something in her ear.

"According to the rules of this house, you must declare your agreement out loud. If you're not prepared to do that, you'll be driven out of the house in shame, and your master will be shamed too. Basically, if you really are interested in this subject, then you're in the right place! I wouldn't risk refusing. And you get the money from the sale." She repeated: "Don't be scared."

Vickey desperately wanted to catch Alex's eye, but in the semi-darkness she couldn't make out the expression on his face. She liked the feeling of pain when Alex sometimes slapped her butt, the feeling of hot wax on her skin, or ice on her nipples, which enhanced the force of her orgasm. But BDSM? With another man?

The second lot was announced – it was one of Valeria's slaves.

"33 years old, penis – 6 inches, masochist, male-female tolerant," the auctioneer proclaimed, presenting a muscle-bound man. "And the starting price is one thousand pounds!"

A low, male voice rang out in the room: "I'll take him! Two? Three?"

"Sir, your bid is three thousand pounds?" the auctioneer asked very politely, but loudly.

Getting up from his chair, a heavysset man confirmed his bid which no one challenged. Valeria's muscle-bound slave, his sinews rippling, disappeared off into the depths of the room.

"And our third lot, ladies and gentlemen! A woman, 30 years of age, a C-cup, submissive, male tolerant!"

Vickey didn't immediately realize that the auctioneer was pitching her, but her neighbor gently pushed her forward, and she moved to the edge of the stage. Blood rushed to her head, pouring into her cheeks, neck and ears, pulsing furiously in her temples.

"The starting price is two thousand pounds! Two thousand pounds going once!"

"Three thousand," came an unfamiliar voice.

Another male voice immediately chipped in: "Four!"

Vickey couldn't tell who these voices belonged too. She couldn't take it all in. Alex was silent – he's silent, so that means that this is what he wants?

"We have a bid of four thousand pounds!" the auctioneer called out.

Valeria's voice came unexpectedly. She appeared to be addressing Eugene. "You've lost out, handsome! Have you changed your mind about taking the blonde to serve you?"

"No, no, I'm just giving the other gentlemen a little time to amuse themselves and tickle their repressed desires," answered Eugene, going back up to the stage and catching Vickey's eye.

"Four thousand going twice!" the auctioneer shouted out.

"Five!" said Eugene. "Those grey eyes pleading for mercy are worth at least five!"

"Five thousand going once!"

"Seven!" came a voice from the room, but it was immediately cut off by Eugene bidding ten. That was the final bid.

Ten thousand pounds – an incredible sum. But Vickey couldn't think about that. When the sound of the auctioneer's wooden hammer came, Vickey tried to take a step but sensed that she was fainting.

Eugene's hand gripped her, stopping her falling from the stage. Opening her eyes, she saw a caring, bearded face looming over her, speaking to her.

"Well, well, my dear, what are you worried about? You will get your freedom back very soon."

Then she saw the face of her beloved. He bent over her, offering her a glass of water. Alex helped Vickey back to her feet. He kissed the top of her head and whispered: "I really want to see this. I want to see another man fucking you."

Vickey looked into Alex's eyes and saw that he was absolutely determined. He really did want this. Vickey wanted what he wanted, she wanted to understand him, to get closer to him. She obediently got down on her knees in front of Eugene.

"I agree."

Eugene raised her up from her knees and led her off to his room.

The master's room differed from their luxury suite. It was done out in black tones and instead of their vast bed, Eugene had a space covered in black leather with iron chains and elastic ribbons hanging down from the ceiling. She entered and stood in the center of the room.

"Alex, you can go there," Eugene said to Alex as she entered the room, indicating an old, upholstered armchair in the corner of the room, opposite the missing bed. "There's a table there with various drinks which you can help yourself too. Have a good evening!" added Eugene ceremonially, turning to Vickey.

Without approaching her, he looked her over for a minute, and then filled two glasses with a sparkling wine.

"I don't think that a little champagne would do you any harm right now!" he said to Vickey, offering her the glass. "And remember: You must obey your master, but you can stop all this at any time by using a stop-word – choose one."

Vickey chose the word "xenophobia" – that was a stop-word for her in real life and it was the first thing that came to mind.

Eugene moved around the room without making a sound. His movements were smooth and delicate, as if in a dance. Vickey liked his face, the way he held himself. She thought for a second that he looked like Johnny Depp in Jeremy Levin's "Don Juan DeMarco", one of her favorite adaptations.

She relaxed a little and even smiled as she took a sip of champagne. Master Eugene carefully took the glass from her hands and placed it on a glass table covered with a variety of vibrators, whips, high-voltage prods and metal hooks. Vickey followed him with her gaze, the blood beginning to course through her veins again from a new wave of anxiety. She didn't feel horror or revulsion – this was a very different, complex sensation that she couldn't give a name to: curiosity, anticipation, excitement?

The Master moved right up close to her and ordered her to get up from her knees. Vickey looked at Alex who was leaning forward, his eyes digging into her – he nodded his consent. Vickey looked back at the Master and immediately received a ringing slap across the cheek. It didn't hurt, but it was entirely unexpected. The right side of her face turned crimson red.

"That is for your tardiness," said Eugene. The warmth had gone, but nevertheless he wasn't aggressive in any way. "Remember: Now I am your only master. You must obey me."

Her cheek burning, Vickey carried out his orders and got back down on her knees. The Master unbuttoned his trousers and, without hurrying, pulled out his belt. He folded it in two and gently passed it over Vickey's back, from her butt, pressed up against the soles of her feet, to the top of her head. Vickey felt a flush of goosebumps rolling across the entirety of her skin.

"Suck it," he ordered.

Vickey helped to free the Master's cock through his zipper, her hands moving uncertainly. It was large, beautiful, and already aroused. "Like Alex's, but the skin's darker," she thought, immediately receiving a second slap across the cheek.

"I told you that I don't like to have to repeat myself," she heard the Master say in a strict voice. This time the Master hit her a little harder, and her other cheek became as crimson red as the first.

Vickey moved her lips up close to the Master's cock, and very carefully touched its head with her tongue.

The Master again passed the folded belt across her back. She understood that she was to continue. She took the head in her lips and began to suck. Her cheeks burned, her head was spinning, with every movement she took the Master's cock deeper and deeper into her mouth until she reached the limit. Afraid that she might gag, Vickey stopped.

The Master tenderly caressed her face, her cheek, her shoulders and they relaxed as they sensed the warmth and weight of his hands. He carefully took Vickey's chin in his hand, slightly raised her face, and at that instant pushed his cock deeper into her throat.

The cock slipped easily into her mouth, going deep. Like a well-oiled piston, it moved back and forth, blocking her breathing. Spit dripped down Vickey's cheeks and chin. But Vickey felt incredibly aroused at this. Her string knickers were wet, the movements of her hands and head grew more confident and precise. She liked sucking cock. It filled her with a feeling of power. She liked the Master's cock. She was starting to get into the game.

"Now lick my balls," ordered Master Eugene.

Vickey stopped, but felt a pang of regret. She thought about Alex, about him sitting silently in the corner, watching her give another man a blowjob. What was he feeling? Jealousy? Was he aroused? She desperately wanted to look at her beloved. But, not daring to disobey the Master again, she began assiduously licking her new owner's balls.

After a minute, Eugene wound up Vickey's blond curls in his fist and pulled upwards sharply, forcing Vickey up from her knees. Confidently holding her by the hair, he led her to the leather wall, pushing Vickey's forehead up against it and attaching broad, hard leather bracelets to her hands and feet. Her heart started to thump frenziedly. Vickey's legs were a step apart, her hands tied together and raised over her head. The Master pulled on the ropes, the handcuffs pulled Vickey upwards by just a few inches, and now she had to stand on tiptoe to keep her footing.

"So, my dear friend, tell me," came the Master's voice from behind her, addressing Alex, "has your slave been serving you well, or has she been behaving like a slut in need of education?"

Vickey couldn't see Alex, but he could see her. Before answering he finally straightened up, rested back in his chair, and spoke in an entirely calm voice.

"I think, Master, that your education and teaching would do no harm, even to a good slave."

"Then we'll begin!" said Eugene.

Vickey heard the Master walking up to the glass table to take the belt that he'd left there. The sound of it rang out right next to her ear. Her entire body flinched as she tried to slip away from it.

But the Master had already pulled the belt to the side and back. With a swift motion he tore her string panties off her. Vickey felt the tender touch of firm leather against her buttocks. She flinched again, as if from a blow, although none came this time. Very gently, the Master began to pass the belt, folded in half, between her legs, touching her swollen clit, the rosy aperture of her anus, ever faster. Vickey could sense her arousal building up fast, and instinctively she curved her spine to meet the belt.

"Cunning!" said Master Eugene, and immediately her buttocks were burned by the hot wave of a blow. "You have to earn satisfaction first. Isn't that so, dear Alex?"

Hearing the question, Alex discovered that the glass in his left hand was already empty, it had been for some time, and he was rubbing his erection through the fine fabric of his trousers. He nodded to Eugene. He put the glass down, unbuttoned his trousers, and took his cock in his hand, moving his fingers up and down it, his gaze returning to Vickey – he didn't want to miss a single moment, a single orgasm.

This time the Master picked a large black vibrator up from the table. He pressed its head tight up against Vickey's clit, strapping its handle to her thigh with the belt.

"Don't you dare come without my permission!" he ordered, turning on the device.

Powerful waves of vibration started to enter Vickey's body. Resisting the unavoidable was impossible.

Vickey sensed a single ringing, pulsing point multiplying into thousands, and now she was ascending the stairway of gratification, higher, higher; another fifteen seconds and a groan broke free from her lungs, her body was shaken by a powerful orgasm, and she slumped, hanging from the handcuffs.

Through the shroud of fireworks exploding in her head, she heard Alex's heavy breathing as his hand slipped around his dick ever faster. And Master Eugene's words...

"You have again disobeyed. Nobody in this room permitted you to come."

The Master approached her and unfastened the handcuffs. Vickey literally fell down onto all fours at his feet. He ordered her not to move and again picked up the belt. This time he hit her in all of her softest spots – the blows were precise, one after another, covering her thighs and buttocks in a fine network, making them burn with fire, approaching the area between her legs, still wet from the preceding orgasm.

Vickey shrieked at every blow searing her flesh, but the pain only further aroused her. She felt the belt hitting her clit, and thought that the pain was now unbearable. She shouted out. Suddenly there was a powerful internal push, then another, and another.

The Master entered her from behind, leaving her on her knees. His huge penis slipped deep into her vagina, moving fast, each stroke of friction bringing Vickey closer to orgasm.

He fucked Vickey for a long, very long time. She tried to shout out that she couldn't take any more. He took her by the hair and pulled her head back towards him. The Master looked into her eyes, sneering, but he didn't stop moving backwards and forwards. He spat into Vickey's open mouth.

“Now you can.”

A bright flash of light. For a time, the world around Vickey stopped existing. She couldn't remember anything – neither Alex, nor this new man, nor how she'd got here. Her body was pierced by billions of electric shocks forcing her entire being to dissolve in waves of ecstasy enveloping her body, surging under her skin, into her muscles, her blood and her brain. The cock shunted in and out. She screamed, and through her scream she heard Alex groaning loudly, coming at the same time as her.

“Yes, yes,” he intoned.

The Master was also coming, sending streaks of white sperm across Vickey's hair, shoulder and buttocks. Lots of sperm, like drops of hot wax burning her skin. He left Vickey lying on the floor. He walked over to the unfinished glasses of champagne. He took one for himself and offered the other one to Vickey, asking Alex to join them. He spoke in his entirely calm voice.

“Unfortunately, it will be midnight soon, and by the rules of this house I will have to return this wonderful salve to its true master. The temptation to break the rules and keep her until morning is great. Too great! We have, after all, only begun to study the outer limits of permissible pain and ecstasy. But I value my reputation too highly to allow myself this weakness. So, let us raise a glass to this wonderful time spent together! And my financial gratitude, in keeping with the rules of the house and the auction, will be transferred to your account.”

The three of them clinked their glasses, the sound ringing out over Vickey's head.

“In wonderful moments like this, my young friends, I always recall the words of Jim Morrison,” the Master said in his magical voice. “I'm interested in everything linked to rebellion, disorder, chaos and, in particular, to activities that look nonsensical. I think that this is the route to freedom.”

The Master touched Alex's shoulder, he smiled his former, warm goodbye to Vickey in parting, and walked out of the room, leaving the two of them alone.

May 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon

This time they met at the McDonald's by Tottenham Court Road tube station, a magnet for all the tourists shopping on the high street and a stone's throw from Soho. Walking up to the glass door, Alex recalled how, with his parents, he'd come here before going shopping for a Christmas present on Oxford Street. He remembered swarms of shoppers, happy, excited, a queue snaking out into the street, a basketful of nationalities, ethnicities, educations and classes. A cosmopolitan melting pot in line for identical burgers. Even Alex's mother had consented to “join the people” in the company of her “dubious” family. Alex could remember the day spent with his parents very clearly, in detail – the three of them spent few days together.

Even on an average weekday, the McDonald's was busy and getting lost amongst them wouldn't have been hard, even if you were stark naked.

The only thing that made the team of would-be bank robbers stand out was the miserable expressions on their faces.

Greg understood that they'd reached a difficult point. The second robbery hadn't been without incident. The guys were doubting both themselves and their

prospects for the main job. Greg was ready for this. They were already sitting at a table – Greg walked up and gave each of them a pat on the shoulder in turn.

“Hi, my heroes,” he said with a smile on his face.

Greg sat down on a free chair and took one of the cheeseburgers that hadn’t been touched.

“Guys,” he said “I’ll start with the fact that, despite the unexpected guests, we did well, and as the soccer commentators would put it, we worked as a well-oiled team, damn it! Really,” Greg continued, “Vickey, having let those guys in, you stayed in position. Brilliant! And you, Alex, nearly killed that guy! Respect!” laughed Greg.

The guys started to exchange glances.

Alex smiled, looking at Vickey.

“Everything’s cool, guys,” said Greg, trying to speak in an approving voice, pumping the air like a cheerleader talking to a team that had just messed up in the first round. “The training exercise went perfectly. That’s why we’re having these prep jobs – so that we can work through all the different scenarios that might come at us before the main job. We’ve got luck on our side!”

The guys didn’t really approve of his words, but they forced them to focus their attention.

“I think we’re finished with the jobs at the chemist’s, we don’t want the cops working out that these are planned hits. It’s time for Leon to prove to us that he’s a specialist!” Greg gave Leon, who was sitting next to him, a friendly tap on the shoulder.

Leon gave a weak smile in response, shaking even harder than he had before.

“Calm down, guys, it’s all sorted!” Greg assured them. “Max and I have been doing some brainstorming: the bank machines are out in the street, do anything around them and the cops are there immediately. And there’s no way we can get money out of them,” Greg continued as if everything was fine and dandy. “So, we’ve decided to move the action to the locker rooms at the railway station. A little explosion there will stir up a lot of action, of course, but there’s no way they’ll be able to catch us. A walk in the park. Leon will get the explosives ready, and we’ll divide up the rest of the roles.”

Max nodded in agreement.

“At Liverpool Street Station there’s an automated locker room for hand luggage,” said Greg. “And we’re going to dynamite it! They’re a little bigger than safety deposit boxes at a bank, of course, but we have to find out how Leon’s going to work. Is that right, bro?”

“That’s right,” Leon forced out of himself. Max had prepared him in advance, of course, telling him everything the day before, but ever since he hadn’t been able to stop shaking. Having thought long and hard about it, though, he’d given his consent to the plan.

As they went through the plan, the team’s mood started to get onto the wavelength that Greg needed. All of the participants listened to him attentively, and in their eyes he could see approval for his plan. It really would be easier to test the micro-explosions at the railway station. It wasn’t even a real crime, just a bit of light hooliganism.

“How will I give the signal to Leon if there’s no mobile connection there?” asked Vickey at some point in the discussion.

“We could use little radios, the kind security use in night clubs,” Leon echoed in answer, reacting to the question with information from one of his hobbies. “They

cost peanuts, they're reliable, the signal can't be tracked because the professionals think these things are just toys, not really technology."

"Leon – we've got a genius here!" said Greg with satisfaction. "You've thought everything through."

Greg beamed a huge smile. The guys were clearly cheering up, and he was really pleased with himself.

It seemed to Leon that he was calming down. Greg had really hit his mark.

"Leon will stand by the door into the locker room, hiding behind the door, and he'll hit the button. The explosion might be heard, it might not, there's no telling, but Leon has promised that he'll try and keep the noise down!" said Greg.

Greg gave poor Leon another friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Then Leon and Vickey leave, leaving the doors to the lockers and the cases stuffed with some heavy crap behind, all of it untouched. That's a signal to us three to get a move on. I'll take a look at the result in the morning. Everything'll be fine!" said Greg, finishing his speech and tucking in to his cheeseburger.

"So, guys, we're agreed?" asked Max.

"I think so," Vickey answered, having taken a cautious look at Alex.

"When's Day X, then?" asked Alex.

"I don't think we should waste any time," Max answered him. "Next Sunday."

"Will four days be enough time to get ready?" Vickey asked reasonably.

"We'll order the radios on the internet, they should deliver them by the day after tomorrow," Max began. "Leon says he can put the matrixes together for the explosives in three days, we've already got the disguises. Basically, this isn't a tricky job, it's more like a bit of fun than a real crime," he concluded, trying to soothe their nerves.

Greg, having finished off his burger, looked round at them all in silence, satisfied. They all seemed to have calmed down and were back on the case. He'd managed to avoid a panic and keep them together. Greg, as always, had wrapped these runny-nosed kids around his finger without any trouble. He took a noisy gulp of coke and went on talking, satisfied.

"So, I think we've answered all our questions! Let's have a little fun and put on a fireworks show for the cops!"

November 2016

Vickey. Diary

"I called an ambulance out last night. I was in a bad way. Bad and alone.

'Don't fall in love with me.' Maybe that phrase is a spell? If someone says that to you, you'll definitely fall in love? I focused so hard on not breaking down into tears in his arms at the airport in Prague that I can't even remember what he said to me when we were saying goodbye. I just remember the kiss, that slow, sweet kiss. When I hugged him I thought that he wanted to cry.

He was in a bad way, after all. He's like an open book to me. And I can see. I can see he feels terrible. God, why's he such a fool? What does he need to be happy?

I read some stupid writer once: When you leave and it's cold at the station, that cold won't touch you, because it's not your cold.

I only felt the cold air of Heathrow Airport in London a few days later. But that cold airport wasn't seeing me off, it was greeting me when I flew home from Prague. And now that's my cold."

April 2017

Alex

The secret life of London: sumptuous nightclubs with any drug your heart might desire, former special forces operatives working face control on the door, underground casinos with marble columns right in the center of the city, illegal bookie's taking bets but posing as legal consultancies, private parties in old mansion houses with elegant copulation.

In London, amidst the world's gilded youth, it's not hard to find your way into an orgy. If you have copious amounts of money, it's akin to ordering a table in a good restaurant. There's only one requirement – you either had to be from the gilded youth, or you had to be friends with them. You had to be from that golden circle.

In London, everything, or almost everything, is down to who you know. As in any big city, of which there are about ten to fifteen in the world, you can make your way up, earn a fortune, a position in society and all the joys that brings with it, but, as a rule, it's a far from easy path to travel.

Alex knew people who'd worked their way up the career ladder, from head of a department in a bank, to vice-president of a corporation, specialists in IT who'd given their whole lives over to their work. They had slaved away seven days a week, twelve to fourteen hours a day, answering to every beck and call of the upper management, with that upper management doing the same for the rank higher, and they, in turn... The boss wants you to go to the football on your day off? Of course! I'll be there! Don't start without me. The boss wants you to go to the theater? Just try saying no! It would be a pleasure! Thank you! What a stroke of luck! And then, come Monday morning, you're back working from eight to eight, doing the work of two, three, maybe more, keeping an eye on your colleague who'd love to replace you. And if you're a woman, there will be rumors ... she's sleeping her way to the top, of course!

But for the gilded youth there were different rules. The heirs to oil or industrial fortunes. They stood out in the crowd. Or, rather, they never stood in the crowd. They never hurried, speaking calmly and slowly. That was, no doubt, their distinguishing characteristic.

They never hurried. If, heaven forbid, a problem would crop up along the way, there would always be acquaintances or acquaintances of their parents, or even acquaintances of acquaintances who could resolve such difficulties.

You just had to call a pal, and the issue would be solved. Your every request would be listened to in earnest, and the answer, most likely, would be "no problem." That meant that everything would be sorted out. That meant that you wouldn't have to stand in line or be subject to the greedy whims of petty officials and functionaries.

Representatives of the gilded youth never had to look for apartments to rent, they never had to cut a deal with a stinking, drunken owner of a trashy one-roomer, or convince said owner that he'd have to wait another couple of days for his grand and change for a miniscule rubbish dump on the fourth floor of a fleapit block a half-hour walk from a tube stop out in the sticks.

What is the gilded youth, and who are they? It's very simple. They are the children of the rich. Businessmen or top-level bureaucrats from all over the world. It doesn't matter where their mummies and daddies get their money. The main thing is that they've got a lot of the stuff and they supply their offspring with as much as

they need and more. Money. That's the key word here. The trump in the London deck.

London. A huge number of newly-arrived girls – from all over Britain, from Europe and beyond, from provincial towns and cities, all of them arriving in the capital, in this vast city with its splendid avenues, with its thrumming streets of traffic in every direction, its winding streets and narrow pavements. Take Alex's favorite crossroad, for example. It's where Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street intersect, the bars and fleshpots of Soho a short walk away, Foyle's bookshop, "Theatreland" with all the West End shows, Denmark Street with its guitar shops all close to hand.

London. All those girls from different cities and from all across London; the elite all passed entry exams in mathematics and literature and enrolled in institutes and universities. There, they've met boys and they dream, of course, of living the good life in London.

Who wouldn't, after all? To live life as depicted in the glossy magazines: glistening cars, dining at the renowned Ivy, rather than at McDonald's, where there's a huge line for lunch, your miserable burger is fried on an old grill and your fries are cooked in rancid oil, portion after portion, until the oil turns a strange color somewhere between brown and orange. Why do you think the public toilets smell so bad?

But the gilded youth has received everything its heart could desire. And any girl, or almost any, dreams of a son of rich parents inviting them out on a date. She doesn't know if she'll like him or not, or if she'll have sex on the first date or not. The main thing is just to reach that summit, even if only once, where they shoot soap operas about the good life, to touch "that" life, to have the maître d' at a plush eatery open the door and say: "A good day to you, Ma'am." So that she can go back to her bedsit and call her sister Claudia in Birmingham or Leeds on Skype or WhatsApp and tell her all about it. Even if it's only once.

The gilded youth. They never sat in traffic. They smoothly skirted round the jams, driven by chauffeurs, their crocodile-skin wallets received from daddy for their birthday always tightly packed with cash and cards. They got everything. And having received everything, they tried to get the biggest high they could find. And the stakes in that one-sided game would climb ever higher.

Alex had been invited to the party by Jake, a rich son of rich parents. Jake's mommy was a highly paid lawyer, and his daddy was the founder of six (or was it eight?) major companies in the capital of an Eastern bloc country. The apartment that Jake's forebears had given him was in a penthouse in Docklands, looking out over the Thames.

This wasn't just a building for the very rich. It was a clubhouse. You could happily ask for any service and it would be provided almost instantaneously in your penthouse. Guards, cleaning, a separate room for your pets, anything you could dream of. In order to get into the building your name had to be on the guest list – then the guard, followed by the concierge, would let you into a sumptuous apartment where the thick walls and soundproofing would ensure that everything that happened within those elite walls would stay within those same elite walls.

That evening, as was the custom in such places, alcohol of the most expensive brands was pouring like a mountain stream. Remy Martin, Chateau Lafite, Screaming Eagle, Macallan, Glenfarclas, Frapin Cuvee. And, of course, at the peak, stood absinthe. Seventy five percent proof, tintured with wormwood, absinthe would take your head off, but it would do it so slowly, so reluctantly, you could even say politely.

It immersed you in a cozy, soft warmth, in a soft dream, but you remained awake. It's no accident that the Impressionists loved it so dearly. Lovers of absinthe included Vincent Van Gogh, Paul Gauguin, Emile Zola, Paul Verlaine and Oscar Wilde. The French poet and dramatist Alfred Jarry insisted that it be drunk neat, while the no less famous Baudelaire used it with opium, and Rimbaud combined it with hash.

Alex loved absinthe too, or "the muse in the bottle", as it had once been titled in France. Absinthe gently moved aside anything and everything that had been incessantly causing you harm. And Alex was grateful to it for that.

He would remember that night for the rest of his life.

About ten people had gathered at Jake's apartment: five or six young men and about the same number of girls. It was a chilly afternoon, though it was sunny outside. The guests gathered around the fireplace for an unhurried chat. They were all young, beautiful, in refined evening wear, they were relaxed, uninhibited.

Apart from Jake, Alex didn't know any of them. And he only vaguely knew Jake. They'd met through Arthur, a mutual acquaintance, at a party in honor of a theater premiere in the West End.

Jake had heard that Alex worked on the speech patterns of the kind of famous people who appeared on the covers of glossy magazines or leading internet publications, so-called "speech sellers." Jake said that they'd been having problems at his agency and he asked for help. He said they needed a fresh, aggressive, entirely new approach.

Alex helped him, they celebrated their acquaintanceship and Alex's successful work at the famous restaurant, Jean-Georges at the Connaught, where they'd got very drunk as they ate Black Pearl oysters from New Zealand. A few days later, along with a hefty payment, the invitation had arrived, no doubt as a thank you, or perhaps as an invitation for them to "be friends", which is to say continue hanging out.

Alex was used to clients sending him an envelope with money instead of a simple "thank you", along with an expensive present – there even appeared to be some sort of competition in terms of who could provide the most exotic gift. Here it was a "black-tie" invitation, which indicated, even in London, a city spoiled in terms of the wealth of its entertainments, an event to be held at the highest level with a great deal of preparation.

All this came in spite of the fact that acquaintanceships in London often ended almost as soon as they'd begun. For a prolonged friendship, something more than a brisk, mutually advantageous acquaintanceship was required. Masses of people met, mingled, got something out of it, satisfied their momentary needs and wishes and then headed off in their different directions, dissolving into the city of twenty million. They went to sleep in their lonely beds from IKEA or, curled into balls next to their partners who no longer gave them comfort and warmth. Or they huddled up, covering themselves over in their blankets, waking up six or seven hours later to the sound of their Xiaomi or Alcatel alarms, forcing themselves to wash their faces, shave or put their makeup on, and again enter out into the hustle and bustle of London's streets, dragging themselves back into their humdrum lives, washing away the night before and the acquaintanceship that had brought them nothing.

With Alex, it was altogether different. He was a professional in his sphere, even though he was entirely sick of it. People had a high regard for him and really did want to "be friends."

Jake didn't play the role of kindly host and didn't entertain his guests. The broad river of expensive drinks poured of its own accord, everyone quietly and very lazily

got introduced, the girls laughed ever louder and ever longer, and the party slowly warmed up, London-style.

Afternoon dissolved into evening. A beautiful London sunset, tender pinks in the blue-white sky, all seen from the balcony of the Docklands clubhouse, creating a sense of a unique performance that only the select had been invited to by some kind of wizard.

Alex noticed that one of the girls, the only blonde, was tenderly kissing a tall brown-haired man, but then moved on to another guy. She pushed up against him, drinking white wine from a beautiful glass with an incredibly long stem.

The guy didn't object. That was clear from the way that the girl's new conversation partner placed his hand on her thigh and calmly smiled.

The other girls also changed who they were hanging out with from time to time, it all happening quite sweetly and somehow naturally.

Alex heard Jake's voice. "You're not very gregarious..."

"Sit down," said Alex, smiling. "Make yourself at home."

Jake, smiling, sat down next to him and poured himself a gin and tonic.

"How are you? How's work?" asked Jake.

"All going smoothly," smiled Alex. "Were my articles a success?"

"A stunning success! I was rushed off my feet, so I can't have sent you our leads. I'm guilty," joked Jake. "So, take this invitation as my apology and evidence of my delight at your work."

"You've got a nice pad here," said Alex, changing the subject.

"We don't need everything. Just the best," answered Jake, laughing.

They chatted for a little while longer. Then another young guy joined them. They shot the breeze, discussing the probability of the pound rising again and, accordingly, the profits to be had from buying dollars, before the newcomer asked a question.

"When do we start the concert?"

"You can start if you want," smiled Jake.

"A concert?" Alex asked Jake.

"A concert," answered Jake, again smiling.

The young guy left them.

"A symphonic concert," said Jake, looking Alex straight in the eye.

Alex looked at Jake questioningly. The background music suddenly died out, and there was silence.

Out of a backroom came four musicians, climbing onto a stage that had been set up for them in the corner, a little further on from the fireplace. The musicians, as befitted a symphonic quartet, were dressed all in black, but if you looked a little closer you could see that the black material was actually transparent.

If you looked really closely, you could see the first violinist's nipples or the firm butt of the cellist. The male bodies were also covered in transparent trousers and black chiffon shirts, leaving their genitals visible to the spectators. You could easily see that the musicians were incredibly embarrassed, although their young bodies were in great shape.

The musicians seemed to be aware, however, that they wouldn't get this kind of money – it would appear that this involved a major sum – anywhere else at any time, so they simply tried not to look around so that they wouldn't catch anyone's eye. This was helped by the black masks that they all put on, as if following an inaudible command.

Classical music began to play. Beethoven. Alex was no great expert in classical music, but he recognized this work, a string quartet. The music poured out tenderly, appearing to fill the entire space of the apartment.

"The theme of the party is 'two violins, two bows,'" whispered Jake, leaning closer to Alex.

Ah, so that's what it's all about.

Jake quietly laughed.

Of course. Two violins, two bows. Among the younger generation, this was slang for group sex poses, both involving two men and a woman.

Two violins was when a man would lie down on a bed or on the floor. A woman would sit on him. Then, already riding the man's cock and making herself comfortable, the woman would lean forward, opening up her rear. The second man would slowly enter her butt from behind the woman. As the sexual movements of the woman with regard to the two men were in different directions, and almost perpendicular to each of the men, this wasn't a comfortable pose for the men. It did, however, arouse fantasies with its unusualness. The woman got two cocks at once, doubling her joy, as some put it.

The "two bows" position, no doubt, was born in the imagination of a person who was a seeker, and by no means modest in his or her desires. That person, irrespective of what age he or she was living in, must have seen a lot before coming up with it. In comparison with the "two bows", the "two violins" looked like a fairly traditional home-style affair. Well, perhaps spiced up with a little innovation, but a fairly modest, homely approach all the same.

The opening description of the "two bows" entirely matches that of the "two violins." A man with a good, confident erection, lies on the floor or a cozy bed. The woman again sits her vagina down on his cock and leans her breasts down to the man's chest. But the trick here was that, in this pose, between the vagina with a cock in it and the rear wall, a small space is forced open. The third party in this ensemble puts his cock into this space.

Alex finished his absinthe and put the glass on the table. In the meantime, in the center of the living room, on a sumptuous soft carpet, the girls were putting on a slow, calm, even homely striptease. They moved beautifully, slowly undressing.

"I've never seen a striptease to classical music before," Alex said to Jake.

"Beethoven must've been regarded as popstar back in the 18th century," laughed Jake. "We're having an old-style disco, 'invitation only'."

Alex liked the semi-naked, beautiful, dancing girls. He liked the atmosphere in the flat, he liked the behavior of these pleasant, elegant people. No one was hitting on the girls or touching them up. The men unhurriedly drank their exclusive drinks from their Ridley glasses, watching the slow dance of the girls. It all looked natural, as if the guests were sitting around the table and discussing the new Spike Lee film.

One of the youngsters went up to the girls and started dancing with them. Just as slowly, to the same rhythm they were dancing to, the girls started undressing the young man.

"The party's getting going," Jake said to Alex.

"Are these girls from your modelling agency?" asked Alex.

"Just one of them, the dark-skinned girl there," said Jake, pointing out one of them. "A couple more of them are models. The other girls are just their friends – this is the first time I've seen them."

"They don't look like prostitutes," said Alex.

"You know why?"

"Why?" asked Alex.

"Because they're not prostitutes," laughed Jake.

One of the girls, a striking brunette with large breasts, slipped off her beautiful panties, and danced on entirely naked. Another young guy joined the dancers.

"Two of them are studying at King's College," continued Jake. "They're the country's brains trust," he laughed. "And the fourth, with the small tits, is writing her dissertation at UCL. It may not be Imperial, but they're good people too," he said, again laughing.

"Whose idea was this party?" asked Alex.

"Mine," answered Jake.

Almost everyone there, apart from Alex and Jake, was dancing on the carpet. The girls, either already naked or almost there, were undressing the guys, caressing and kissing them, sometimes kissing each other.

"Did the girls agree to the theme of the party from the outset?" asked Alex. He immediately thought of another question, though he didn't voice it: "Why does that interest me?"

"Well, I suggested that too," said Jake, "but it's a purely voluntary matter."

One of the girls turned her back to a guy, took his cock in her hand and gently guided it between her appetizing butt cheeks.

"It seems everyone's agreed," smiled Jake, pointing at the action in the middle of the room.

Another girl, the plumpest of the lot, crouched down on her tiptoes in front of one of the guys and tenderly sucked his erect cock.

"It really is a beautiful picture," said Jake.

Two guys were already getting hot under the collar. One of them was slowly fucking a girl from behind. She was bending forward, her mouth coming up against his friend's cock. She held the second guy by the hips, sucking his cock and quietly moaning. The first, his eyes closed in ecstasy, rhythmically swaying back and forth, smoothly slipped in and out of her.

Alex noticed an empty condom packet on the carpet.

"People have learned to slip condoms on without being noticed," he thought.

Alex poured himself a sizeable portion of Blue Label and downed it in one. He could already feel the first wave of arousal. When your cock isn't yet hard, but the first charges are already pumping into it, like small balls, small hot spheres rolling down the length of the cock in waves, little plasticine balls that grow larger and hotter as they push on. He sensed a tension in his chest, breathed in deeply through his nostrils and shut his eyes for a second.

Jake's voice returned him to the apartment.

"Are you going to take part in this hit parade?" smiled Jake.

Alex stuck out his lower lip, indicating that he hadn't yet decided if he would enter this sinner's circle of fucking bodies.

"It'll become clear soon," answered Alex.

The second movement of the deaf Austrian genius's 17th symphony began.

"By the way," Jake suddenly asked, "I wanted to introduce you to Howard." Jake pointed to one of the guys who, strictly in keeping with the theme of the party, was about to become the second bow in the symphony.

"Now's probably not the right time," said Alex.

"He's got a production company, promotes various pop acts. They need a specialist in provocative material," said Jake.

"My pleasure," said Alex. "I'd be delighted."

Alex knew the London in-crowd perfectly. These brief acquaintanceships, as a rule, came to nothing. Yes, we'll give it a try, let's call each other, let's try and have lunch next week, bla-bla-bla, it was all just a waste of time. If they needed material they'd call, having asked for the number from Jake.

The group sex was in full swing. The girls and boys were moaning and groaning. The party had turned into an orgy.

"And you?" Alex asked Jake. "Are you going to take part?"

"No," Jake immediately replied. "I'm just getting warmed up. I'm meeting my girlfriend at the airport tonight."

"Can you get the apartment tidied up in time?" asked Alex.

"We're going to her place in Hampstead Garden Suburbs," Jake replied, referring to an elite suburban neighborhood. "We've got an important breakfast there tomorrow with our partners. I have to be in good shape. My manager deals with the flat. He's a master in these affairs," he replied.

"They say that in the olden days the aristos would get turned on getting their servants into their bedrooms and forcing them to have sex with one another," said Alex.

"I'm no aristocrat, Alex," Jake said, getting up from the table. "I'm just a rich motherfucker," he laughed.

Jake stretched his hand out to Alex.

"Just in case we don't see each other again today. I have to leave for a while."

Alex shook his hand.

"If you need something, ask for my brother in that bunch," he said, pointing in the direction of the orgy.

"All right," said Alex.

Alex felt a weight had been taken off his shoulders when Jake left. He was happy to be left alone. If, of course, you could say that in view of the fact that a few yards away from him about a dozen people were hard at it.

Alex clearly understood that soon he would get up from his chair and take part in the orgy. But nevertheless, he carried on sitting in his chair, sipping his Blue Label.

One of the girls stood with her back to a swarthy guy. The guy was leaning up against a wall. It seemed that he was already inside her. She slowly got up on tiptoes, as high as she could, and just as slowly slid down on his cock. Alex caught himself fixated on her legs, or on their lower sections, to be more precise. He'd always liked women's feet.

"Interesting – are those two going out and they just came here to refresh their feelings, or did they meet here?" thought Alex. He became more aroused at the thought. Just five minutes ago he'd been thinking that he could leave "untouched." But now, after this scene, which was, in fact, still ongoing, there could be no talk of "simply" leaving.

His arousal reached the necessary level. Alex sensed a powerful surge in his chest, in his cock, the blood was pumping into his head. He wanted to replace that swarthy guy and find himself within that gently moving girl on tiptoes.

Strauss's famous waltz could be heard playing.

He took another sip from his glass and got up, but none of the girls were free and he didn't want to squeeze himself in among one of the couples.

People were still entering the living room. A new couple came in. The guy went over to greet a semi-naked, long-haired youth, and the girl, pouring herself a glass of wine, began dancing on the edge of the "stage."

Looking from one copulating trio to another, Alex caught himself thinking that they all looked a tad too theatrical: “Yes, it’s an orgy, but it’s all a little too directed, too high-minded, like in a film.”

A door slammed in the corridor. Either someone had left or new “musicians” were arriving.

Alex suddenly felt bored and looked towards the real orchestra sitting up on the stage. A thought occurred to him – the real sex was going on there. Beautiful people playing great music, their shoulders proudly thrown back, forgetting where they were, the time, the circumstances, and how they looked.

He watched for about five minutes and even forgot why he’d got up from the chair, but then he felt someone’s tender arms embracing him from behind. A light, pleasant shiver ran through his body. All of the alcohol that he had drunk over the course of the evening suddenly achieved its goal, and Alex’s weary, tortured mind allowed itself to think of nothing.

He didn’t know who was embracing him and caressing his chest, but then he didn’t want to know.

The girl hugged him more tightly. Alex sensed her firm chest pressing into his back, and her hands, slowly, very slowly, undoing the buttons on his shirt. Then those same hands began to caress the skin of his chest, smoothly gliding over his body. One hand touched his nipple, while the other began to skim over his stomach along the top line of his trousers, going no lower, all done very delicately, if such a word could be used in such circumstances.

His desire was heating up fast. Alex closed his eyes in satisfaction and he breathed in deeply. He sensed someone covering his eyes with tender hands, soft lips kissing his neck. Then Alex sensed someone coming up to him from in front, putting soft silk over his face. The piece of material was quickly bound over his eyes. Invisible hands blindfolded him, tying the soft fabric behind his head.

Alex liked this game. The silk material was tied in a knot at the back of his head and Alex was plunged into complete darkness, an oppressive darkness even, and almost immediately someone’s tender lips touched Alex’s. It was a very tender, soft kiss. Long and tender. Then the kisses began moving lower and lower, warm, tender, barely touching Alex’s body, his chest, his nipples, the depression in his stomach, they began slowly, slowly, crawling downwards along Alex’s body. In the meantime, the girl standing behind Alex’s back moved to his side and, turning Alex’s face to hers, gently locked onto him with her lips. Alex sensed the difference in the lips. They were very engorged. He felt like he was falling into them.

Below, someone’s delicate fingers touched Alex’s cock. Alex’s entire body shuddered. With his whole body, he wanted his cock to already be in the mouth of the person touching it so delicately, a person Alex couldn’t see because of the blindfold. But the same body pined for that moment to be delayed. For as long as possible.

The girl with the puffy lips continued kissing Alex. The music coming from the stage, in Alex’s imagination, turned into a violet-purple trail that circled in the room. Alex groaned quietly. He groaned and heard his tender groans being interrupted by yet more groans. He could no longer tell which were male and which were female. It was all becoming mixed in a light violet-purple mass. His body burned, desire breaking through to the surface.

Two palms, at the same time, came to rest on Alex’s thighs, grasping their outer sections and a small area of their inner sections. The hands slowly moved along his thighs. Fingers touched the most tender, sensitive area, wrapping round his cock.

Here, Alex howled. A noise broke free from his chest, almost like a growl. Alex forced out a plea: "Please!" He felt as if he was no longer in control of his body. Somebody else had taken possession of him. Down there. It was all down there, below. He was. His entire body. Time had simply frozen. Alex sensed that he had transformed into a single, invisible point. As if someone was holding him in the air, though barely touching him.

A tender tongue barely touched the head of his cock, which was already fit to burst. It was impossible to withstand. Alex suddenly realized that his hands had been hanging down the side of his body the whole time, he'd forgotten about them, he didn't want to do anything with them. Alex realized, the thought flashing through his mind, that he didn't want to interfere. However funny that might sound. Alex wanted them to do everything. He just wanted to stand there. Stand, lie, hang.

A tongue was already licking Alex's cock, climbing up, making its way down to the base, diving down deep, to his tender balls.

"I can't take it anymore," flashed through Alex's thoughts, "but I don't want it to stop."

"Please!" Alex groaned. And almost at that exact moment his cock found itself in a mouth.

It was an amazing moment. Tender, and at the same time frenzied. Alex's cock was engulfed, entering into a warm, tender, but at the same time powerful sea, before resurfacing. As if gasping for air. And then back again, into the warm, embracing space. And back again. Into the air. And again.

Alex's head was spinning. He reeled, but the girl kissing him the whole time, exciting his mouth with her tongue, gripped onto him harder, hugging him close and stopping him from falling.

"Put me on the floor," went through Alex's head, but he didn't get the words out. "I'll stand here, hanging in the air, but don't let it stop, let everything spin around me like this, let me spin like this. Up and down. Into the cold, into the warmth. The embrace of the tender mouth and the embrace of the air. I want it all to end like this. On these waves. In this breath. On these three breaths."

The girl who'd been kissing Alex unexpectedly broke off, leaving Alex's lips and starting to kiss his nipples. Kissing one nipple, she took the other between thumb and forefinger, gently but forcefully pinching it. Alex sensed a powerful rush, a charge shooting around his entire body. In the literal sense, he understood nothing, he only sensed, sensed with his body and skin. Again, her mouth locked onto his. Their tongues intertwined in a frantic dance.

The movements of the mouth below became faster and faster, it seemed that down there they understood everything better than Alex himself. The speed increased. A tender palm clasped Alex's cock, and that was the final drop that spilt over. "Enough!" flashed through Alex's mind. Still faster, more, the lips squeezed harder as the cock moved, more, yes, more, his head spinning, thrown back, yes, more, yes, more.

A powerful stream shooting through Alex's cock, cutting through all the sounds around, the music, the groans of others, the powerful first stream of sperm broke through in a wild rush, burning the cock inside. Alex's mouth opened as wide as it could, letting out a sharp groan forced out from deep within his chest. More! It seemed to him that his energy was flying out in one endless stream. Another short, burning push. Time stretched out and hung-over Alex's head. More! His body bucked forward. Alex embraced the head of the girl kissing his chest and hungrily dug into her lips, dissolving in them, hooking on to her tongue with his own. With his other

free hand he clamped someone else's head to his cock, not coming out of her mouth, coming and forcing out the last remaining sweet drops.

The girl's hand reached for Alex's head and she pulled the blindfold from his eyes. First he looked at her. He'd already seen her that day. He looked down. To the head that his hand was still resting on. The eyes of a person giving him extraordinary pleasure looked up into Alex's. And now Alex understood everything.

It was a young guy.

A man.

He looked up at Alex and said nothing. His lips that had been pleasuring Alex for all of this time said nothing. He didn't smile, he didn't express any emotion. On his knees at his feet, he simply looked at Alex.

It seemed to Alex that the music had stopped. He couldn't hear it, at least. He'd even forgotten about the girl who was still standing next to him and who had just been giving him ecstasy.

The young, handsome guy looked up at Alex from below. A young, fit guy of about twenty, maybe twenty-two. He just looked up at Alex from below.

His head was pounding. The guy finally looked aside, got up from his knees, and moved away. Alex closed his eyes. He didn't know how long he stood like that for. Without a single thought.

Opening his eyes, he looked round and immediately saw a girl with puffy lips and firm chest, she stood at the bar chatting away with her girlfriends. Noticing that he was looking at her, she blew him a coquettish kiss. But Alex realized that she didn't interest him at all right now. He looked around again, seeking out the tender young guy. But he was nowhere to be seen.

Alex collected up his things and went back to his seat where he'd been talking with Jake before all this had happened. He sat in silence for a while, trying to understand or, perhaps, come to terms with what had just happened. Then he poured himself a whisky and, leaning back on the sofa, began to drink it in small sips.

The musicians stopped playing. The silence entirely returned Alex to reality.

Alex, carefully weaving his way between the guests, headed in the direction of the bathroom. He opened the door, revealing another picture in this musical evening. A tall, sporty brown-haired man was entering the young guy from behind. The youngster was bent forward and down to the cock of another guy, giving him a blowjob.

Alex froze. None of the members of the trio turned to look in Alex's direction.

It seemed to Alex that the guy being fucked from behind and giving a blowjob was the same youngster that just a quarter of an hour before had been sucking him off. Alex tuned in to his own thoughts – how did he feel about this? It seemed to be insane. That's what he thought. At that moment. But Alex, momentarily, was feeling jealousy.

It really was insane. "Insane," he heard himself saying in his head. "I don't even know who he is."

Alex left the bathroom, the words of Hermann Hesse, from *Steppenwolf*, bubbling up in his head. The central character was afraid to open his eyes during an orgy, scared that he might be kissing a man, a man who was giving him extraordinary pleasure. He smiled sorrowfully.

Reaching the corridor, he looked for his things among the heaps of clothing. He quickly got dressed, but heard a voice as he was unlocking the door.

"I saw the way you were looking at me."

Alex turned round and saw the girl with the beautiful feet that he had, in fact, checked out.

"I'd like to make love to you. Just the two of us," she said calmly.

Alex looked at her in silence.

"When you recover. When you're ready," she concluded.

She didn't say anything more. She just looked at him.

"All right?" she asked.

He looked at her and didn't answer. There was no doubt that he would have liked to be in bed with her. To sense the scent of her body. Not in an orgy. Just the two of them. In the quiet. To feel her skin in the palm of his hand. To sense the aroma of her pussy. She was extraordinary.

"You're not going to give me an answer?" she asked quietly. Somehow quietly, without emotion.

Alex realized that he could hear her, but that he was thinking about what had just happened. He'd just been given a blowjob by a man.

"Yes," he said to her.

"They call me Jez here."

"Like the girl from the TV show?" asked Alex.

"Yes," she said. "We've got a little conspiracy here."

"What for?" he asked.

"Did you like the way he kissed you?" she asked, instead of giving an answer.

"Yes," Alex answered immediately, without thinking. "It was my first time," he admitted for some reason.

"That happens in our experiments," said Jez. "That's why we meet up."

"To do what?"

"To collect sensations," answered Jez. "Didn't Jake tell you?"

Jez looked at Alex with interest. With interest, but without emotion.

"But what's this whole conspiracy for?" Alex asked, repeating his question.

"I'm married," she replied.

Wow. He'd thought that there were only students here.

It was as if she'd understood his silent question.

"There are different kinds of people here."

"How can I contact you?" he asked.

"Tell Jake: Jez asked you to put us in touch. That phrase exactly."

"Jez asked you to put us in touch?" he repeated.

"Good," she said, still without appearing to express any emotions. Then, just as quietly as she spoke, she turned and left, beautifully swaying her butt as she receded into the distance.

A series of contradictory thoughts immediately assailed him, dragging him like a cuddly toy tightly packed with cotton wool in every direction imaginable. How had this happened to him, how had he been overcome by two contradictory emotions at one and the same time: a timid euphoria and an internal fear? A painful mixture that, as a rule, only brought pain. He knew that well.

May 2017
Vickey, Alex

Vickey was woken early in the morning by a delightful feeling at the pit of her stomach. Alex, lying next to her, her beloved Alex, was caressing her crotch with his hand. Without opening her eyes, Vickey moaned quietly.

Alex's fingers became increasingly insistent. Vickey sensed her sleepy body being overcome by a sweet bliss of sexual arousal.

"Good morning, my delicate Viktoria!" said Alex, leaning over and kissing her on the lips as she finally opened her eyes. Vickey sensed the taste of mint toothpaste and coffee. So, he'd woken some time before but got back into bed to be with her. She hated it when he went off on business. It meant she would wake up in the apartment on her own, and that meant that it was time for her to go.

She accepted this state of affairs, of course. As she accepted many other factors. For him. Vickey really wanted a family, but once, when she'd told Alex that her period was late, she was told that she should immediately get an abortion. Alex didn't want children. He'd raised his voice at her for the first time, telling her that the planet was overpopulated as it was and that he didn't want to be responsible for yet another poor creature. He was beside himself in fury. It turned out that she wasn't pregnant, but she decided that if she did get pregnant by chance she would keep the baby. Alex would see the baby and fall in love with it, and he would be the best father on the planet. She was convinced of that.

In some article that she'd come across in Psychology magazine she'd read something that had stuck with her. The author argued that people fall in love with the image of a person that they themselves have constructed, rather than an actual person. But Vickey had done everything to get rid of that idea. Alex was the way she saw him – the best, the kindest, the bravest, it was just that he was a little lost, hurt, confused. What was most important was that she loved him more than anyone else on Earth, her love was strong, and nothing could change that. She didn't doubt that and she was ready to fight for her right to be with him.

Vickey smiled him a happy smile. It was only when she woke up with him that she felt happy.

Alex smiled to her in answer and moved his lips down to her neck, to her ear, her earlobe, along the length of her neck to her breasts, biting at her nipple until there was a sweet pain.

Along with the pain, Vickey was penetrated by the thought that she'd been in bad spirits the evening before. But the sex that night had been so passionate, prolonged and exhausting that she'd fallen asleep allowing Alex's hot sperm to gradually drip out of her pussy onto the sheet. She rushed to stop him.

"I need to clean up down there, don't," said Vickey. Alex looked at her, smiled mercilessly and, taking her throat in his right hand, forced her head back down onto the pillow.

"Dirty little slut," he said slowly, stretching out the words, looking over her naked body pinned to the bed beneath him. "You know that I love it when you're a whole cocktail of scents – sweat, sperm, desire and ecstasy. I'd fuck you for days on end and never let you into the shower."

He'd lowered his head to her tummy and sniffed with a theatrical gesture.

"The heavenly aroma of debauchery," he confirmed, laughing.

Vickey cheered up and relaxed. Alex could always make her laugh in bed.

He sat up on his knees on the bed, behind her, turned her over onto her back and put her legs over her shoulders. He used his saliva to make her pussy wet, lubricating the entry.

At first, Alex only went halfway inside her, and then slowly pulled out, then he entered Vicky again with a sharp motion, this time three quarters of the way, and again slowly pulled out. With his third thrust he went fully in. And then began to slowly, very slowly, move inside her.

Alex took Vicky's right leg with his hand and moved it across his chest. Her toes were in front of his mouth and he licked them. Toe by toe, separately. And then stuck them in his mouth and began to suck and lick and bite them.

Vicky's body began to shake from this sweet torture. His right hand returned to her neck, fixing her head in place and slightly pressing in on her breathing.

Vicky groaned loudly, a wave of powerful excitement washing over her. But she couldn't raise herself up higher to continue ascending this winding path of ecstasy.

"More, please, more!" she groaned. "Don't stop!"

Alex's fingers dug into her harder and he sped up the pace. Now he was fucking her with fast, rhythmic motions. Vicky balanced on an invisible line dividing incredible satisfaction from an all-encompassing orgasm.

"Again, again!" she repeated insistently.

But now, on the contrary, Alex stopped, pulled out of her, and in a single motion turned her over, putting her on her knees.

Vicky's face sank into the pillow. She couldn't say another word. Alex took her hips in his hands and she sensed the heated head of his cock slipping past the wet entrance to her pussy and touching her defenseless, naked buttocks.

A spit, and Alex entered her ass. She shrieked out in pain, but thanks to the pillow only weak, muffled cries could be heard. Alex didn't notice them, or he pretended not to. He continued to move mercilessly in and out, faster and faster.

Vicky sensed the pain gradually transforming into unavoidable ecstasy. She cried out louder. She curved her spine so that his cock would bump into the back wall of her pussy deep within her stomach. She could hear Alex breathing heavily and his passionate, animal snarling.

A flash of light. The exultation of two bodies merging. Time stopped.

He fell together with her onto the bed, continuing to move weakly within her as his prolonged orgasm came to an end, but it no longer caused her any pain. She didn't want him to pull out of her, she wanted to lie like that a little longer, every part of her body touching his, listening to his breathing as it gradually calmed down.

"Good morning!" Vicky said in a whisper. "On mornings like this I think we should thank Mother Nature more often for being alive."

Unexpectedly, Alex shuddered. He pulled out of Vicky and tried to raise himself up. But Vicky gently tugged at his arm.

"Don't go, please, stay for a while," said Vicky, but Alex, without turning round, pulled his palm out from beneath her. He picked his things up from the floor and then froze for a moment.

Vicky's last phrase about "thanking Mother Nature" and her attempt to hold onto him for a moment longer had pushed him off balance.

He got up from the bed sharply and headed off into the bathroom.

"God, Alex, what happened?!? Alex!" Vicky shouted out after him. She just needed to look at his face to understand what was happening.

Already in the doorway, he turned round abruptly, took two giant steps back to Vicky, and shouted with a fury that was unexpected coming from him:

"Leave me alone! Get out of my life! I don't owe anything to Mother Nature! I don't owe any mother! I don't belong to you! I hate you!"

Alex fell silent, training a heavy, blank stare on Vickey, and then moved off to the bathroom quickly. His whole body was shaking. He got under a hot shower, the sound roaring in his ears, there was a cold fury piping through his chest. His taught skin, burning under the hot water, slowly massaged him back to his senses from afar.

Alex gradually realized what he'd done. He imagined poor Vickey, desperately crying in the bed that had just been their love's cradle. Lost, hurt, not understanding what she'd done wrong or what had happened to him. He felt sorry for her, but he couldn't think about her right now.

He recalled that just before he'd been overcome by that uncontrollable fury, in his mind's eye, he'd seen an image of his mother, with a belt in her hand. Mother Nature. An image so precise and unshakable, that for a moment he'd even forgotten where he was and who he was talking to.

Under the water raining down on him, he suddenly wanted to grow smaller, to cease to exist, to not have been born. He dropped to the floor of the shower and huddled up into a ball. And lay in that embryonic pose for a long time.

May 2018

Greg, Maxim

The meeting at which Max and Greg slightly changed the plan for the preparations for the main robbery took place at a football match. Arsenal Football Club was playing against Tottenham Hotspurs in a local derby at the Emirates Stadium in a North London derby. The venue was packed with rabid fans, and Greg and Max were among them. They both loved football, both had been fans of Arsenal in the past, and neither of them had been at a match in a long time. So, as well as discussing work in the breaks between quarters, they'd decided to have some fun by following the game.

"Business first, though," said Greg, as they lounged on their plastic seats in the stands.

"Get in there, kid!" smiled Max. He was in an upbeat mood. For him, this trip to see Arsenal, was a shining symbol of the beautiful life that lay ahead. Max, in a great mood, in clean, good clothing, at the Emirates, at his home team's stadium. There were tens of thousands at the enormous space of the sports complex. And he, Max, was just like them. An equal among equals. He sipped his coke. He didn't have to open the door for anyone, he didn't have to give anyone a lift anywhere, he didn't have to humiliate himself for a tip, he didn't have to be worried about getting fired or the management being in a bad mood. For him, this evening was a symbol representing the good life that awaited him.

"Come on, let's have it," said Max. "I can see that you're fit to bust."

Greg smiled, revealing his yellow teeth.

"Hitting bank machines is too risky right now, you know that. They're in the street, and the city authorities have stepped up security, every bank machine in every godforsaken corner of this city is brightly lit with dozens of security cameras poking in its direction. But Fatty here has to check that on the big job he's not going to screw up when he presses the button or make a mess of himself in some other way. So, this is the plan I've come up with."

Greg looked around just in case, and then continued in a quiet voice.

"We're going to blow up the lockers at a station."

Over the speaker system they announced that the match would soon be starting.

"We'll carry on at half-time," Greg said to Max quickly, turning back to the football match playing out before them.

The huge pitch of the Emirates had torn him out of his grey, humdrum, dangerous life. The harsh, often aggressive life that he had chosen for himself. He looked at the group of fans, predominantly men of different ages, arguing about football, the couples in love hugging one another and waiting for the game to start, the happy, proud fathers who'd brought their growing children along to watch.

The teams started coming out onto the pitch. Greg observed the players closely and the expression on his face suddenly soured.

"Just look at that," said Greg indignantly, pointing at the Arsenal players. "The back five are out and only one of them is English. What's going on, can't we create footballers anymore?"

Max smiled.

"It's the way of the world now," he said.

"What a fucking world Max?!?" Greg continued, riled up. "The right back's a Bosnian and the centre half's a Greek" he said, pointing at two of the Arsenal defenders. "And those two, Iwobi and Aubameyang where are they from?"

"What does it matter?" asked Max.

"What?!?" Greg asked back.

"What's wrong with it?" Max replied.

"Max, wake the fuck up," Greg almost shouted. "We've had a brilliant team back in the day, remember Anfield 89, Copenhagen 1994 when we won the Cup Winners Cup? That team that beat Parma, was all ours, Adams, Merson, Smith, Campbell, the midfield was all English lads that night, Davies, Selley and Morrow."

"Morrow was Northern Irish," said Max, flaunting his knowledge of the game.

"What's the difference? He's British. We're one country," said Greg, not giving in.

"All right, all right," said Max, trying to calm him down, although, because of his age, he didn't really remember the Arsenal glory years

"What do you mean 'all right, all right'?!?" Greg continued, still angry. "And not just Arsenal, before the ban, English sides always won the European Cup, Liverpool, Forest, Villa, we dominated Europe with all English players, and the odd Scotsman of course. It's fucking wrong! It's an insult to the country, right? Is this Arsenal or the Harlem Globetrotters out there?"

Max smiled. Greg's attitude to a time in the world that no longer existed, and to football itself, surprised him.

"And the managers?" Greg continued. "We haven't got any British managers left. Look at the premier league it's all French, Italians, German, Spanish..."

"Wenger's French," said Max. He's the best manager we've ever had."

"There you fucking go again," Gregory said angrily. "What about Herbert Chapman?"

They started watching the first few minutes of the game. Greg shouted at the Arsenal midfielder with the ball.

"Pass it, you fucking idiot!" screamed Greg.

"Calm down, Greg" said Max. "Don't attract too much attention."

"Managers..." said Greg, lowering his voice slightly. "Look at George Graham. He was a real giant of a man, and I don't mean in stature. He kept those real giants we

had in line. He made them champions. He was a rock. The way he'd keep Ian Wright or Paul Merson in line, they knew not to mess around with George."

"We almost won the Champions League a few years ago, we got to the final didn't we?" said Max, getting into the conversation.

"But nearly all that team was foreign," objected Greg.

"What's the difference? All right, Thierry Henry is French, he won us everything, The invincibles was down to him. You've got to admit you owe him some thanks for that, He's Arsenal through and through, It's just the way things are now, things have changed."

"Yeah I can agree with you on that, Henry was something else. "But look what we've got out there now. Look at them out there, for fuck's sake. They're not good enough for Arsenal." He screamed towards Xhaka in the center circle. "What the fuck are you doing, you Bosnian prick!?"

"He's Swiss," Max corrected him.

"At least Wilshire is playing, he's one of our own," said Max.

"Yeah he's quality," Greg drawled, falling silent for a while.

Bizarrely, it turned out that he had something in common with Greg, thought Max. Something named England. A small country with an incredible history. With a complex, ambiguous history, with painful eras when a whole section of society found itself in a vacuum, when everything changed in the blink of an eye. A country that was loved. Loved by people who lived in that country. And even Max and Greg, criminals, people who lived by stealing, wanted to be proud of their country.

Greg's voice interrupted Max's thoughts.

"Let me explain, Max," Greg said, talking calmly now. "The Arsenal defense – a Czech in goal, then a Greek, a Bosnian and a Spaniard alongside one Englishman."

"So what?" asked Max.

"So what?" Greg said, imitating him. "It's a fucked-up disgrace!"

Max laughed.

"Here's a question for you," said Greg. "In Greece or Bosnia, are English players making up half the teams?"

"I don't know Greg," said Max, shaking his head. "There's a British lad in Germany at Dortmund who's meant to have a bright future, then there's Gareth Bale at Real Madrid, he's doing alright, I don't know really..."

"That's just it," said Greg bitterly. "'nobody knows...' That's our problem – nobody fucking knows anything."

Max didn't want to argue with his mate.

Greg waved his arm in resignation.

"Let's go down and talk. I can't watch this," said Greg.

As he was leaving, both saw a piss-poor pass from Iwobi, the sort of thing that had become the Nigerian's trademark and he started shouting again.

"Open your eyes, you fuckwit!! Who're you passing to?!!!" Greg gave a dismissive wave of his arm and disappeared through the exit from the stands.

Max liked Greg. Not just because of his debt to him and the unusual way in which they'd met. Greg was a kindred spirit. Neither of them had achieved much in life, but both thought that Mother Nature had given them something. That they'd been given something they could work with and develop. Or life hadn't given them the opportunity yet. They just hadn't yet had the chance to do something with that opportunity.

"So, I've been thinking," continued Greg when they'd sat themselves down at a table in the hall with some beers, a hot dog and a couple of packets of nuts. "There's no better place for a controlled explosion than the automatic left-luggage lockers. Just think about it – no guards, the lighting's gloomy, the security cameras are a joke. I'll take a look round the stations, try and find something suitable, and you speak to Leon, it's his turn to show us what he can do."

Max nodded his consent.

"Then we need to check out Alex," said Greg.

Max could see that there was a certain tension between Greg and Alex. And Max sometimes asked himself what would happen if he had to choose between them. If he had to point the barrel of his pistol at one of them. If there was no choice. Before he could drive that thought out of his head, he managed to come up with an answer: He would always choose Alex. His childhood friend.

"Give us the plan, then," said Max, frowning slightly.

"I think that we need to choose a place where there's a lot of people, on the one hand, but there's no alarm button on the other, simply because no one's ever robbed a place like that," said Greg, clearly pleased with himself.

"Sounds good," said Max. "So, can you tell us what such a place is, dear friend?"

Greg looked from side to side again before going on.

"Bowling," he said, and looked at Max.

"Bowling?" Max asked, amazed.

"Yes, fucking bowling! Did you mishear and think I was suggesting robbing a morgue?" answered Greg.

"It's a bit unexpected," noted Max, shaking his head.

"You've got to realize, Max," Greg said in a wheedling voice, but with confidence, "we need to get Alex in shape. Alex has to take out the guard. From behind, pipe across the back of the head. There's no other way."

A beautifully-dressed couple walked past them. Greg waited for them to get a little further away.

"As soon as that loser of a guard hits the deck," continued Greg, "right at that moment, we have to take control of the girls on the till and the manager."

Max nodded.

"And that's it," said Greg. "From then on it's just technical. We leave in 12 minutes. You'll go nuts when you go in there, bro. The bank tellers are behind a plastic desk in the corner. Can you believe it? They don't give a damn about security, the fucking losers."

"This is a walk in the park," smiled Max. The beer was spreading delightfully through his body, and if you'd asked him, he would have preferred to spend the rest of the evening watching the basketball game.

"The main thing is that Alex shouldn't screw up," said Greg.

"Right," Max said to himself quietly.

In his thoughts, he wasn't far away – he was 50 yards away from the Emirates food court, watching the game. The beer had put him in a peaceful mood. He didn't want to discuss aggressive plans in all their brutal details. He wanted to relax in his seat and cheer on his beloved team. Even if half of it consisted of foreigners from all over the world.

July 2017

Vickey, Diana

“Can you love two people at once? Genuinely wanting them in your life, in your bed, even though they’re so different? Can you wake up in the arms of a beautiful woman and still remember your unfaithful beloved? Can Diana sense that? Is my pining for Alex going to hurt her?”

It turned out that before getting to know Diana, Vickey knew little about the female body, or even about her own body. Sex with Alex was wonderful but, in some way, completely different. Unlike the very dominant Alex, she felt she was on an even footing with Diana, they continually swapped roles, even over the course of a single night. It was if a predatory instinct that had long been dormant was awoken within her. She liked taking Diana to the edge with her caresses, possessing her body, guiding her orgasms, studying her.

Endlessly studying. They could spend hours on end studying each other’s bodies, millimeter by millimeter, exploring erogenous zones with their tongues, the tips of their fingers. Thanks to Diana, she’d learned that she could experience multiple orgasms if her clit was caressed beyond the first climax. At thirty years of age! Vickey thought she would miss the male organ in her games with Diana, but the swiftly developing sex toy industry and Diana’s brains as a researcher had convinced her of the opposite.

Back in the early days of their relationship, making use of an “unexpected” day off – something doctors didn’t get a lot of – Diana dragged Vickey off to a sex shop in Soho. Side by side with Diana, Vickey didn’t feel ashamed, even in a place like that. Her lover, like a true medical specialist, expressed concern about the dildos the size of baseball bats, and when she got to the artificial vaginas she joked that some men must confuse them with cunnilingus training devices, with the result that there would be even less orgasms to go round.

Holding each other by the hand, they wandered among the aisles of goods for a long time, examining what was on offer, giggling and choosing. All this resulted in the purchase of some aromatic oils, nipple clips and a couple of whips, a “Womaniser”, which had only just appeared on the market – a vacuum vibrator with five levels of intensity – and a “Jolly Jo.” That’s what they called their huge black dildo on leather straps, although it was at least to some extent comparable in size with a human organ. It buckled onto the waist and constituted the first strap-on in Vickey’s life.

It was an incredibly hot day in June and it must have been about 25 degrees centigrade out in the street. Having been in the shop, and having got hot under collar at the thought of all the toys they’d bought, they decided to have a cold glass of wine at a table in front of one of London’s innumerable wine bars.

They made themselves at a sheltered spot in Soho where there were few people, it being working hours. They sat at a table, next to each other on a sofa, so that they’d be able to embrace and kiss without getting up. Diana asked for a blanket to be brought.

“It’s getting cooler,” Diana explained to a waitress in her doctor’s voice. “It’s windy, and we might catch a chill without even noticing.”

Diana put the blanket over Vickey’s knees and with a crafty look in her eye reached into the bag of toys. Taking out the vibrator, she looked Vickey in the eye and cheerfully said: “I can’t wait to give it a try!”

“You’ve gone nuts.”

"Nobody will notice," answered Diana, leaning forward to kiss Vickey on the lips.

She pushed her hand under the blanket, under Vickey's skirt, into her knickers, and declared in a satisfied tone: "I can tell you want it. I mean, you're already wet, aren't you?"

Just one touch of Diana's fingers on Vickey's clit had her moaning. This woman drove her insane.

Diana pushed the vibrator under the blanket and under Vickey's clothing, nestling it against her clit and pressing it down tight with her hand. She turned it on.

The Womanizer began quietly kissing away.

It wasn't like a normal vibration, it was as if it was kissing her there, gently sucking in air. The sensations were extraordinary, but incredibly powerful. Vickey squished around on the chair, she was uncomfortable, she thought that everyone was looking at her, she sensed that she was losing control and beginning to drown in the waves of delicious sensations that were washing over her.

But Diana looked at her with determination in her eye, stopping her from breaking free as she pushed the Womanizer to a higher setting.

The Womanizer began to hum more insistently, but the noise of the street masked its buzzing to all the people surrounding them. Vickey had difficulty restraining her moaning. She gasped for air, trying to silently breathe out the arousal that had overcome her body.

Unexpectedly, the waiter again appeared at their table to take their order.

"Oh, yes!" Diana responded cheerfully. "We totally forgot to order something. Bring me a glass of Prosecco, please."

She gave the waiter a smile, as if nothing was out of the ordinary, and turned to Vickey, adding: "My girlfriend might want something else."

Vickey desperately grasped for reality with her consciousness. She thought that Diana would pull the vibrator back while the waiter was there, but, on the contrary, she just pushed it up to a higher setting. This torture was almost unbearable.

The waiter turned to Vickey for an answer. His look betrayed that he knew perfectly well what he was witnessing, and that he was enjoying himself too. In order to get rid of him as fast as possible, Vickey pulled herself together as best she could and noisily forced all the air out of her lungs: "Prosecco, please!"

The waiter, either because he was observing the rules of the establishment, or because he simply wanted to stay a little longer, didn't leave immediately, instead reading the order back to them.

Vickey thought she couldn't take any more, she thought she couldn't bear it. She pressed her face into Diana's shoulder to somehow hide from the inevitable. Finally, the waiter turned his back to them and left their table.

Vickey looked up to Diana, her eyes full of a silent plea. Diana smiled tenderly to her and put the vibrator on maximum.

An explosion. In order not to shout out, Vickey dug her teeth into Diana's naked shoulder. Another explosion, and another, and another. Vickey thought that her heart was about to stop, that she couldn't take anymore. But another two explosions came, and then another!

Finally, the orgasm began to die down, slowly leaving her stomach. The muscles of her vagina continued contracting, but less ardently, leaving a pleasant aftertaste in her body. Vickey pulled herself away from Diana's summery, naked shoulder.

"There'll be a bruise," said Vickey, getting her breath back. "But I think I love that Womanizer! It's the best!"

"And I love you, my girl!" answered Diana, turning to the waiter who had arrived with their glasses.

"Have a pleasant evening!" said the waiter, as if somewhat disappointed to have missed the culmination.

"Thank you!" Diana answered, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. "An evening full of surprises..."

"Diana loves me! Love? What does it mean? Do I love her? Do I love Alex? Can you love two people at the same time?"

A long line of questions streamed through Vicky's head, unable to find answers and hurtling onwards. Her heart was thumping away desperately in her chest. Without the strength to hear what the waiter was saying, Vicky had no idea how much time had passed since Diana, her wonderful, caring Diana, had said those three key words.

Finally, Vicky pulled herself together and looked Diana in the eye. She was about to say something, but Diana interrupted her.

"My dear Vicky, I really do love you, I want to be with you, and I want you to know that. I loved you from the first time I saw you. That's the only kind of love there is. But I don't want your answer right now. People discover their feelings at different paces. Let's not rush. Let's just carry on spending our time together as we have, ok?" Diana said in a totally calm voice.

It seemed that these words, formed up into sentences, came from Diana's lips with a magical, extraordinary speed. Not fast, not slow, but as if in some sort of film. But a film about her. About Vicky.

Vicky's heart was ready to leap out of her chest. She wanted to say: "I love you, I love you too! How couldn't I love you? But I don't know what to do with my love for Alex. I miss him! I think about him the whole time. Can you love two people at once? Now I know that you can. But can you be with both of them?" But the words stuck in her throat, and she merely nodded in silence.

It seemed to Vicky that the hour that followed stretched on for an entire day. All sense of time deserted her and it felt as if she'd been enveloped in cotton wool. That was exactly how it felt.

Having finished their wine, they walked along the boulevards for a while, and then headed home to watch a film that they'd been saving for one of these "unexpected" days off – the black-and-white film "Man With a Movie Camera", with a soundtrack by the Cinematic Orchestra.

November 2016

Alex. Diary

"We think we're not like anyone else. That's what we want to think.

But there's something that, it seems to me, we don't even think about, and if, all of a sudden, we do think about it, we don't see it, even though it's right before our eyes. The habits, the basic upbringing that our parents gave us, that they gave us when they taught us to walk or to eat our beans on toast, and then, under various guises, cultivated in us until we're sick of it, our throats retching, our minds poisoned. We'll deny that it – I don't even know what to call it, that thing with no name – is ours entirely. The reality, those standards of thinking, the square walls of our barbarity, our slippery grip on an understanding of life, the all-encompassing lies around us

that we will deny until it's too late, far too late. We can clutch at specks of the truth, but they're only miniscule crumbs, bones thrown to us as if to a dog, already stripped bare and hiding their true spite. As if to a dog dreaming of eating its fill and falling asleep, even if it's on a patch of cold, dirty asphalt, but in the sunlight of Acceptance and Approval. The approval of Mom, Dad, Uncle Dave from Sheffield or god knows where, fat or obese Auntie May from Coventry or Basing-fucking-stoke, or some fucked up cousin from Canterbury or god knows where who Granddad Dennis loves so much, along with his schizophrenic sister. And, of course, we need the approval of our colleagues. Colleagues we chat with at work every day. Until we're ground down into dust. Every day, for nine, ten, eleven hours. In offices with dank air, two or three square yards per person, where we spend the best days of our lives. Five days a week. Week after week. Day after day. The best hours. The best days.

Damned colleagues at work. All those people around us. Without even raising an eyebrow, they'll stick a blunt needle of contempt and betrayal into you, and then, as if nothing had happened, help a half-blind old crone cross the road. Colleagues who are ready to stick a knife in your back because you might have a bad influence on their two-thousand-a-month pay packet. Who tremble, terrified that they won't be able to make rent on the single-roomer thirteen minutes' walk from some far-flung metro station.

Because they all know. And they tell everyone. Everything. And they tell you. From your childhood. And that something, even if we're lucky and we see it and understand it, immediately loses any meaning for us, it gets lost in a series of jackets and black coats of the masses, the bulk of humanity that's chaotically moving around, all over the world and, of course, in our extraordinary London.

We don't let it show, we pretend that it isn't there. In front of our neighbors, in front of the phlegmatic shop girl at that Waitrose in Edgware and our acquaintances by a tube station out in the sticks. We even pretend to ourselves, for god's sake. And we do it so well that we even start to believe. We mask our pretense with that sham smile of happiness that we just posted on Instagram or Facebook or god knows where else.

But that IT prevents us from smashing up our cursed iPhones and Samsungs when the alarms start bleeping on them, to shut them up forever, that IT forces us to throw off the blankets and go out to meet the world, to put up with it all when that bastard boss starts moaning in his dismal incompetence and skill in surviving for the sake of his job. He'll betray any and all of us and then happily carry on poking his tongue up the ass of his boss so far that not even the Guinness Book of Fucking Records can work out just how far it's gone in, not that anyone's ever actually even seen that Guinness Book of Fucking Records. It's that Acceptance and Approval that forces us to put up with it all, and put up with it for so long, to put up with the idiocy of others, the dismal smell of bodies and clothing of certain colleagues at work and passengers on the metro, to put up with stupid, horrifically undereducated Debbie who, nevertheless, thinks she knows everything, that awful, uneducated head of the sales department, to put up with the stupidity and boorishness, to survive, to put up with the blood-soaked news, to put up with the tears. And all for a REASON as old as the world itself, because of something that, when observed up close, turns out to be a fiction, nonexistent dust, all because we want to prove to others how incredibly cool we are, and educated and beautiful, what good company we are, that we're not greedy and, most importantly, how wise we are. Why else would we need all those megatons of selfie photos on the social networks? All those "look at my tits, look at my lips, look at my cock poking out of my trunks" videos? All those fake poses in the

photographs, with the women curving their backs and necks as if they're about to stick their noses into their own clits and come, and come better than anyone – where do they all come from? “You can hold me in contempt at work, my loser relatives can hate me, fear me or value my ability to make an apple pie for celebrations, just don't think I'm like everyone else.” That's THE REASON! We all want to be like those beauties on the covers of glossy magazines or, at least, like those skinny girls in the gutter press, but we're still not like everyone else.

We're united by that narcotic. A tough drug that's stronger than whisky, sex and marijuana, because you can't get off it. We're drug abusers stapled to the chair, hooked on the needle of approval and acceptance. We'll do anything just to be valued, to be applauded, to get a pat on the back and be given a golden watch with a recognized label, like a real Citizen, or a fake Rolex at the least. We're ready to serve those guys, to wear our white shirts to rags, just as they're all shouting: “Wow, that's cool! Well done! Fucking hell!” “Just check out what a wise guy he is, he's got the latest badge, beaten everyone, and now he's hanging his Olympic silver medal in knitting up on a nail.” All of that drives us mad. We're just monkeys who've put on suits, desperate for the recognition of others. If we could understand that, we wouldn't do it. But someone's hiding the truth from us on purpose.

If you had the chance to start it all over from the beginning, you'd immediately ask yourself: “Why?”

July 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vicky, Leon

As for Leon, everything went smoothly, with no surprises. They went to the huge Liverpool Street Station in advance and used their mobile phones to photograph the crime site. Leon did his calculations and prepared the explosive matrix.

Going into the far corner of the luggage locker room, Leon used special suckers to attach the matrix to the lockers in the last row from the door, putting them right over the locks. Alex and Max watched all this, pretending that they were putting some things in their bags. Apart from Leon, no one went into this corner of the locker room, it all went smoothly, and having set up, the members of the team got down to working on the next scene, where Vicky would play the main part.

Vicky had prepared perfectly for her role as a mute French woman. She was wearing a dark wig in the style of Mireille Mathieu, red lipstick and a broad-rimmed linen hat. Along with all that, she wore simple jeans, trainers, a white t-shirt and a checkered shirt. All very French, especially as she wasn't bothering with a bra, leaving her pointed nipples poking upwards through her clothing, attracting the immediate and unambiguous admiration of all members of the male sex in the area.

Seeing her, Greg whistled, causing Alex another poorly concealed flush of jealousy.

Vicky stood surrounded by suitcases that Greg had ordered them to put several bricks in. Her chest was heaving, drops of sweat on her nose – it was clear that she was very worried. But that suited her role perfectly – this was clearly a foreign student lost in the catacombs of an empty station at night, in a place where everyone speaks an unfamiliar language. She couldn't pronounce a word. Just try being calm in such circumstances.

Greg checked that everyone was in place and Leon got down to work. Then he walked briskly back into the waiting room and took up his position, ready to give the start signal. Suddenly he saw two hipsters heading for the locker room, carrying two heavy rucksacks.

Greg, trying to walk soundlessly, went after them, hiding next to the open door leading to the staircase where Vicky was standing.

Talking amongst themselves excitedly, they didn't notice Vickey immediately, only spotting her when they got to her quivering chest, which at first they couldn't take their eyes off, despite the worried mumbling and nervous hand movements of its owner.

"Is she playing Charades with us, or is she really dumb?" one of the guys asked the other when she failed to get a word out.

"You could be right," his friend answered, trying to look past Vickey.

"Maybe she's asking us to help with her suitcases?" the other asked, trying to pick one up. But Vickey tried to push him aside, pointing at her telephone, which was turned off, and trying with gestures to make herself understood.

"What does she want from us? I can't understand!" the guy asked, indignant. "We can't touch the suitcases. We can't get past them. This is like some sort of quest, 'Guess what the woman wants'."

"We've never been good at this kind of thing, pal," said the second, who looked like a typical IT geek.

"So, what do we do then?" asked his friend.

The guys looked around, at a loss as to what to do, and then, without discussing it, both turned round at the same time and walked off.

Greg had already disappeared behind the wall. Everything was going according to plan.

"She's not leaving. She isn't moving from the spot. She's pointing at her mouth – maybe she wants to eat?" came the voice of one of the two guys. "What can you do?" They both laughed.

"Lost in translation!" joked his friend. "Maybe we'll get out of here? The hostel's not that far, we can dump our stuff there."

"Excuse us, lady, we're really sorry, but there's nothing we can do to help, bye!" one of them said, and Greg heard them shuffling off and hurriedly climbing back up the staircase.

In a flash, Greg was just a few yards from the entrance. Vickey would now count to sixty and give the signal. The guys left the waiting room. He heard Vickey's quaking voice on the radio.

"It's a green light here!"

Greg quietly spoke in a hoarse voice.

"Hit it, fatty!"

He didn't hear the explosion itself in the waiting room. Leon later boasted that it was no louder than a cork coming out of a bottle. Very soon, Greg saw Vickey walking through the hall briskly, and then Leon, covered in sweat, came bouncing along to catch up with her. They were the first to leave.

Greg waited for the glass door to close behind them. Then he gave the signal, and Alex moved off, followed half a minute later by Max.

Greg remained in the waiting room, looking from side to side. "A perfect performance!" he said out loud to himself, satisfied.

Visiting Liverpool Street Station a couple of days later, he was genuinely surprised at the results that Fatty had managed to achieve. The lockers for small pieces of luggage stood exactly where they had been, but now they had a sign hastily pinned up on them, "Out of order", and neat little holes where there had previously been locks.

"A tidy piece of work!" Greg later said to Leon, praising him. "You didn't let us down bro! Max wasn't kidding when he called you a genius! That means you'll crack the safety deposit boxes at the bank too!"

Leon beamed a smile of satisfaction, apparently forgetting that everything that they were doing was illegal and that he was an indispensable member of a criminal gang.

May 2017
Alex, Diana

Diana phoned Alex back when she got out of the operating theater.

"What're you calling me for?" she asked angrily, although she was actually incredibly pleased to hear his voice.

"I want to talk. Can we meet at Ronnie Scott's in an hour?"

Arriving at the famed club in Soho as they'd agreed, she found Alex in a separate booth. Judging by his pose and facial expression, Alex had already had a lot to drink. Seeing Diana, he broke out into a smile and with a generous sweep of his arm invited her to sit down.

"I'm so glad to see you, my dear!" he told her. "You go ahead and choose your poison. I'll slip off and powder my nose."

Alex headed off to the toilet, coming back far more sober and centered than when he'd left.

"How long have you been using?" Diana asked calmly as soon as Alex sat back down on the sofa opposite her.

Alex tried to joke his way out of the question, quipping "We're not here to judge!", but Diana didn't smile.

"How long? A week? A month?" she continued, rather than retreating.

"Well, a couple of weeks," Alex answered reluctantly.

"What's upset the Great Gatsby this time?" smiled Diana.

"I'm tired, Diana. Tired, do you understand?" said Alex, staring her right in the eye. "From all this pointless fuss, these stupid people around us, they all need something from me, and I, unfortunately, need something from them. This sickening work for the system for a miserable pittance."

At the words "a miserable pittance" Diana rolled her eyes, but didn't say anything.

"These talentless colleagues dreaming of taking your place," Alex continued grumbling "That's dirty, beloved London. But I want freedom, all-encompassing and all-forgiving freedom. You see?"

"I understand," answered Diana.

"And I'm really tired of people too. Tired of lying bosses and revolting clients. They think they're loyal and bold, although in reality, they're all cowards. They might be really charming when they're with you, but as soon as you turn your back, they'll throw you under the bus just to protect their good names."

"So, you've been using for a couple of months," concluded Diana, shaking her head unhappily and ignoring Alex's soul-searching outpourings. "When are you planning on coming off? I know a good team of drug counselors and medics – drips, hypnosis, the works. Just give me the word."

"Diana, dear, my sweet," continued Alex, as if he hadn't heard her, "there's so much cruelty in this world, such ugliness, so much injustice, that I refuse to look at it all while I'm sober. Do you remember what Churchill said? 'I've gotten more out of alcohol than alcohol has taken out of me'," he smiled wearily.

Diana looked at him in silence.

"All I've done in this horrid life is search for freedom," he sighed. "But I can't find it."

"Everybody wants to be free," she said quietly.

"No, not everyone," he retorted quickly.

They sat in silence for a while.

"Alex, you are my close friend," Diana began in a concerned voice. "I can see how hard it is for you now, and how you're tired of struggling against all these difficulties that, for the most part, you yourself are inventing. I understand you. Really, I understand. I really feel sorry for you. But drugs and alcohol are just slow

suicide. I can imagine how wonderful it is to die high. In my third year at uni an anesthesiologist who was hitting on me treated me and my girlfriend to ketamine. I really can understand how easy it is to breathe when nothing hurts and nothing worries you. But if you keep doing that, in three years' time you'll be my patient for a heart transplant."

Alex looked at Diana gloomily.

"Let's regard the lecture as having been given and heard. Can we move on to other news, Doctor?" Alex asked challengingly.

"Let's move on," sighed Diana.

"I've split up with Vickey," said Alex, draining the remaining whisky in his glass in one gulp.

Diana replied by quoting a folk saying: "The sweet things argue, they're just playing! This isn't the first time, after all. You'll be asking her to come back in a month."

"Three months have already passed. I kicked her out of the house, out of my life, forever," said Alex. After a short pause, he added "I did it for her own good."

"How's Vickey?" asked Diana, concerned.

"I don't know how she is. I didn't ask. You can phone her. I think you wanted to take her off me – be my guest!" The alcohol was winning out over the coke in his blood, and Alex again appeared to be getting drunk before her eyes.

Diana winced at these words. She looked at Alex angrily.

"Think about what you're saying!" she said sternly.

"I'm being absolutely serious. Take her! You yourself said it: A wonderful chick, a unique specimen," Alex continued in a cavalier tone.

"If you don't immediately stop talking offensive nonsense and don't go and get some sleep..." Diana fired off, losing her breath and coming to a stop.

"Then what?" Alex asked cattily. He was trying to argue with Diana, he was hungry for a fight, for blood, hungry to stir up some shit. He suddenly wanted to wreak vengeance on her for having refused him. The worst in him was stirring up at the very pit of his drunken soul.

Diana didn't give him an answer. She took out her wallet, threw a ten-pound note on the table for her untouched martini, turned round and left. And stopped answering Alex's calls.

May 2017 **Alex, Robert**

Alex came to Robert worked up. His hands were shaking, so he turned down the glass of water that was traditionally offered to him and immediately sat himself down in the patient's chair. He was hungover, but had decided not to cancel their session. Robert was very strict in his attitude to "truants", simply stopping any further work with them.

And Alex needed Robert like he'd never needed him before. He was the only person he had left that he could talk to, the only person he could possibly talk to in the life situation that he'd driven himself into. All the more so, as for all that time he hadn't been suffering from hangovers, though he'd been drinking all the same.

Robert, of course, noticed his patient's unusual condition, but didn't let on. He didn't start pressing him with all sorts of questions.

Having slightly calmed the shakes in his hands, Alex spoke in a downcast voice, though challenging tones in his words would crop up unexpectedly on occasion.

"I've split up with my girlfriend. I kicked her out of the house. For good."

"Split up with Vickey?" Robert clarified calmly. "With the person whose love, if I remember correctly, you don't feel yourself to be worthy of?"

"Yes," confirmed Alex, mournfully. "With Vickey. I shouted at her. I shouted at her like my mother used to shout at me."

He leapt up from his chair at the memories that were assailing him and began to walk round the room, disturbed.

"I don't know, I really don't know what came over me." Alex was forcing the words out in bursts. "Vickey is nothing like my mother. She's good. Kind. Delicate. She loves me."

"But she can dump you too," Robert said, concluding Alex's thoughts. "And you were afraid of that? You took fright and dumped her first."

"I don't know," Alex answered. "I'm scared of destroying her life. Mom always told me that I made her unhappy." Alex had started to breath heavily, so he walked up to the open window. "While Granny Maggie was alive, Mom would even smile coquettishly in the family photographs, holding me as a plump little baby in her arms. But then being stuck with me turned her into a monster which ruined my whole life."

Alex fell silent.

"The arrival of a baby," Robert began after a certain silence, "can have an unpleasant impact on a mother's life, but it can never ruin the actual person. That's the way children are built. But what is it that you're actually afraid of? That something will happen to you and turn you into your mother?"

Alex winced.

"I'm worried that I've already turned into my mother. I recognized her, I recognized her voice in mine. I shouted in that voice at Vickey, and I wanted to hit her. I felt my hand filling up with iron. I drove a woman who'd done nothing wrong out of my home because I was afraid that that fury would never pass."

Robert didn't interrupt.

"You know, in that moment I didn't even see Vickey, I didn't realize that she was in front of me. Everything that I shouted, of course, wasn't meant for her, it was meant for my mother. That doesn't excuse the fact that I was totally unable to control myself. I was torn up inside. I wanted to break and destroy everything. I wanted to beat somebody the way that scum had once beaten me."

Alex left a weighty silence.

Despite what had been said, Robert looked at Alex with understanding and sympathy. He left some time for Alex's words to settle in before continuing, as always, in his calm voice.

"Unfortunately, the trauma that we experience in childhood is capable of leaving some serious consequences. But that doesn't mean that we can't work with that and lower the effect of the overwhelming influence of the parent. That's why you came here. Let's try and work with that trigger."

Alex nodded in silence.

"Tell me a little about the relationships that you'd had before. Was there any violence in them? Were there any outbursts of aggression from any of the parties?" asked Robert.

"I'm afraid, doctor, that I don't have a lot to tell you," said Alex, shaking his head sorrowfully. "I live alone. I have a lot of sexual partners, but apart from Vickey I can't really say I ever really went out with anyone. I fell deeply in love two or three times. I

fell in love with Elaine, but we were kids, so we didn't live or even sleep together. Then there was that tragic story with Maria. And then that wild story with Rachel." Alex tried to focus on his memories. "Once I fell in love with my best friend, but she turned out to be a lesbian, I fell in love with a colleague at work before that. I suppose that could count as a relationship, although we didn't live together. We did spend a lot of time together, in the editorial offices by day, in bed at night. But I don't remember us shouting at one another. You couldn't describe it as a healthy relationship, though. Shouting just isn't what I do."

"Tell me about your colleague, please," asked Robert.

"She was called Natasha," Alex began. She was a tall, statuesque beauty with d-cups that she was very proud of. She wasn't stupid – on the contrary, she was extremely quick and was moving up the career ladder fast. I liked her for her cheerful approach and 'her tits that never felt down', as she herself joked. But the first time we fucked, after we'd completed the New Year issue, I couldn't have imagined that I would love this woman, or beg her to live with me, even though she never once came when we were having sex. We went out for about a year and, Doctor, I was literally high on her."

Alex sat back down in his chair and continued.

"Natasha made an incredible impression on people. Men would literally throw themselves at her. She was married."

Robert wrote something in his notebook.

"Natasha had never been faithful to her husband, and he didn't seem to have any problem with that, on his initiative they'd had an open marriage and polygamous relations for a long time," Alex continued, "so I was one of many. But at first that situation turned me on."

"Go on," said Robert.

"Something happened, Doctor, and we fell in love with one another. In an instant. We woke up in the same bed, and I thought that I wanted to wake up with her by my side for my whole life. Her scent. She had an incredible scent."

"There's a well-regarded theory that maintains that a man, first and foremost, loves a woman's scent," said the Doctor.

"We had sex the whole time," said Alex. "Everywhere, the more dangerous and risky the sex, the more turned on Natasha got."

He wanted a drink badly. Alex asked for a glass of water, and when the doctor's charming secretary brought it he thirstily drained half of it. As soon as the secretary had left the room, he continued.

"We often had sex at a height of 40,000 feet, in the toilet of a plane, but that's a standard, a classic. It was riskier when we got stuck in a lift in our former office – we had sex there too, we could have been caught by the whole editorial staff. That seemed to be her secret goal, the whole point of our having sex. But she never admitted to that. At the beginning of our relationship that really turned me on too. But there was no violence in it." Alex broke off unexpectedly and asked Robert a question. "Do you find that a lot of people are latent exhibitionists while their bodies are young and they're in good shape?"

"The majority of people have light sexual perversions. In my opinion, it only confirms that they're people," agreed the doctor.

"Anyway, at the beginning of our relationship I was incredibly happy because I had this striking, sexual and interesting character as a partner," Alex continued. "I fell in love with her love for adventure and her hunger for life. We spent so much time

together that I didn't notice that I'd started to need her, I'd miss her when she spent the weekends with her husband at their house out in the country.

"I wasn't jealous, I just wanted her entirely. But she refused to even talk about the possibility of her divorcing her husband. She said to me 'I love you, but I've loved my husband for longer.' That drove me nuts. 'loved him longer.' What does that mean?!?"

"I imagined their bed, and that slowly tore my heart to shreds. I couldn't understand how she could love someone else when I didn't love anyone apart from her. I understood her polygamous ideals, I often had sex without love, often changed partners, I was in groups, I did all that. But that was different."

Robert listened to him attentively.

"I felt incredibly dependent on Natasha on a physical level. Fluids, pheromones, the best sex in my life – I don't know what it was, but I was literally drowning in the aroma of her body, I disappeared. I could lie in bed with her for hours, my nose in her lap, breathing it all in, I liked to be spattered in her juices. I'd get drunk on her scent. I'd never felt anything like that before. She said she felt the same way," Alex said as if in one breath.

"Then what happened?" asked Robert.

"About a half a year passed like that," Alex continued. "Then it started to get me down, subtly, but persistently. I was angry when, for her birthday, she flew to Cyprus with her husband rather than spending the day in bed with me, which I'd been dreaming about for a long time. Then her mother-in-law broke her hip and after work she had to go straight to the hospital."

Alex thirstily drank some more water.

"I understood that it was tough for Natasha, but instead of giving more support, like a fool, I demanded more and more attention from her, and proof of her love," he said. "We saw each other less and less, and we argued more, but we never shouted. I would just spend hours hopelessly recounting to her how I was upset and how I was in pain, complaint after complaint. She felt sorry for me, I think she loved me too, but it seems that she loved her husband more. And for longer," he said gloomily, and fell silent.

"Go on," said Robert.

"After another half year, my obsessive desire to entirely possess her reached shocking heights. On my birthday, instead of having sex as we'd planned, I got drunk and I was in tears telling her how I couldn't live without her, I threatened to ruin her reputation at work by sending out one of our home porno videos where she sucked my cock, if she stopped seeing me. I begged her to leave her husband and just be with me. She didn't take me seriously and later I was really ashamed about what I'd said. But, basically, I really was going out of my mind."

"Then what happened?" Robert asked Alex.

"It was a kind of obsession," Alex said. "I was on my knees in front of her, grabbing at her hands, when she was trying to leave, I was sniveling, in tears. That really made her angry. She looked at me coldly and said: 'I don't come. I've never come with you. I don't have an orgasm. I fake it.' And then I didn't stop her leaving."

"Did you believe her?" asked Robert.

"I thought about it a lot afterwards: about the art of faking it, about the art of not saying what's in your heart, about the art of hiding and keeping things secret. But I couldn't understand: Why? Why would she fake the best sex I'd ever had in my life? The way she would shriek at certain points... Once, we got kicked out of a hotel in Lisbon in disgrace because we'd been making so much noise in our room."

Alex got his breath back and then continued.

"It occurred to me, of course, that she'd lied in anger in order to hurt me. And, of course, I read a lot about female frigidity. I even went out with a girl who never orgasmed, she'd just moan loudly and monotonously for hours on end. I also know that there are men who fake orgasms," said Alex.

"It does happen," said Robert.

"But Doctor, there was always laughter in her eyes – when she said those words, though, there was no laughter in them. Yes, I believed her that evening. And I believe her to this day. I suddenly understood her drive to have dangerous sex – it was only then that she got as close as she could to release."

"How did that make you feel?" asked Robert.

"At first I felt the pain of incomprehension, I'd lost my bearings, I felt betrayed, conned and abandoned," answered Alex. "I began going through partners furiously, hunting their orgasms and all too often I would forget my own. I trained, I gave head to my colleagues at work, I fucked everything that moved, I didn't worry about my reputation at all. I started drinking a lot. At the office, Natasha and I tried to avoid one another. And I hated her." He fell silent, and then added: "Maybe someone had to knock me down in that series of pointless victories."

"And what do you feel now? Do you still work together?" asked Robert, as if he hadn't noticed Alex's last remark.

"Yes, we even slept together one time after a big drinking session with the editorial team. Years later," said Alex, laughingly loudly. "You have to get closure, after all, don't you, Doctor?"

"It helps," agreed Robert. "But first you have to live through that process. What did you feel when you were intimate with Natasha again?"

"You know, it's strange, but nothing at all! Absolutely nothing. We mechanically fucked, and it wasn't bad. She, no doubt, faked her orgasm as usual, but I didn't ask about it. I wasn't interested in her anymore, she even smelt different – she'd got into smoking cheap ladies' cigarettes. I didn't want her anymore. It's strange, but I immediately started thinking about Vickey," said Alex and unexpectedly remembered that it was Vickey that he'd come here to talk about.

"You were seeing her then?" asked Robert.

"Yes, I think it was at the very beginning of our affair," answered Alex. "I cheated on Vickey right from the very start of our relationship," he concluded gloomily.

"And what did you think of her?" Robert asked again.

"I thought that with Vickey – and she was the only one – I never asked myself if she was faking her orgasm," Alex answered, deep in thought.

"You trust her?" asked Robert.

"I tested her a lot," Alex answered with a bitterness in his voice. "And she passed all those tests brilliantly. God," Alex said, suddenly breaking off in the middle of the sentence, "I'm hearing myself now, and hearing a bad person. Who the hell am I to test anyone?"

A heavy silence hung in the room for a period of time.

"Alex, listen," Robert suddenly began with a passion that was unusual for him. "Security is one of the main values for anyone. It's something that you will always, subconsciously, be working towards. Exceptions are motorcyclists and mountain climbers, but we're not talking about them now. We're talking about people with statistically average levels of adrenaline. I think that Vickey, for you, is the embodiment of security, she's your place of strength. But you drive her away."

"But I do that..." Alex began to object – Robert interrupted him.

"For her own good," he said, finishing Alex's sentence. "It's possible that that's the case. But you're destroying yourself. I think that you'll agree with me on that."

Robert looked at Alex. The water in his glass was quivering as if they were in the middle of an earthquake.

"You've had major trauma in your life, injustice, betrayal. You don't believe people anymore. You drive everyone away in order to avoid the pain of their loss. I understand that," the doctor continued. "But we're built in such a way that we can't live without trusting people. At some point you have to learn to do that again. It will be very painful for both of you. Like learning to walk again after a very complex leg fracture where you've had to be in plaster for a long time."

"You're saying that I have to go back to Vickey?" Alex asked, shocked.

"I'm not saying that you have to. I just want you to ask yourself one question. Let's say that you accidentally killed someone. Who would you tell about that and why?"

July 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon

Greg opted for bowling in East Finchley, in North London. The club was ideal for his robbery plan. Greg understood that they needed to get the main job that they were preparing for done as fast as they could. He told the team, which was to say Alex, Vickey and Leon, that the prep for all successful jobs was done to perfection. But as an experienced criminal, he knew that there are no ideal robberies. Something unexpected can crop up at any time, someone trying to play superhero or some detail that wasn't thought through, and that could put Greg away for a good ten years for armed robbery. He'd be "doing porridge", as London's criminal underworld would put it when referring to prison, fighting for his life against higher-ranking criminals.

If he didn't need people right now, would he have got mixed up with this trio of dilettantes ... Max, of course, was a pro and had been a good shooter in the past. There was no denying that. But these three... Max had brought Leon along when he was needed when they were robbing chemist's. That wimp was perfect for the role.

But Alex... He was a pampered, egotistical journalist, or whatever it was that he did. Greg could see that Alex belonged to an entirely different class, he noticed Alex's disdain for him, it seeped out of him however hard he tried to disguise it. But Greg didn't give a damn about that. All that mattered was Alex doing the right thing on the main job, and that he take out the guard. Everything else had been planned for. And Alex was the only guy that he and Max had to work with. Finding someone else was too risky. Together with Max, he'd control who had access to the button. Greg had already thought through the option where he took out the security guard at the bank. In that case, however, the girls on the till would have a few extra seconds. And that would mean that they could, and probably would, press the alarm button, and a few minutes later cops with machine guns would be coming through the doors of the design school's bank. And without saying a word they'd shoot up the whole team without a care in the world, and then happily tell this amusing story to their friends while having a barbie in their back gardens out in the suburbs.

That creep Alex would do the job. Otherwise, he'd miss out on five million and would end up with nothing. Greg spat dismissively. And today that white-collar wimp was going to have to show what he could do.

The long corridor leading in from the street to the main bowling hall would be controlled by Vickey. Inside the hall there was a desk. As a rule, there was one member of staff there who gave out the bowling shoes, took the money and put it in the till. In a corner there was a window into the kitchens. They wouldn't even have to go in there. They'd just put Leon next to it – he'd control the situation and if there was any danger he'd give a signal. And, most importantly, there was a security guard.

He was the only one there. Greg had gone there twice in different disguises – a beard with no moustache, a moustache with no beard – and he'd thought everything through. The layout was simple. The entrance from the street. The long corridor. A door into the main hall at the end of the corridor. A table for the guard at the end of the corridor, right in front of the main entrance. According to the rules, he was supposed to be on his feet almost all of the time.

In reality, he spent almost all of his time sat at his desk reading a free newspaper.

Greg came up with the following plan. Max would go into the main hall and then come back a bit later, open the door from inside and ask the guard something. He'd get his attention. The guard, according to Greg's plan, would get up from his table and head to the door.

At that moment, Alex and Greg would be behind him. They'd stand at the beginning of the corridor pretending that they were talking on their mobiles. As soon as the doors opened, they'd see Max asking something of the guard. The guard would get up from the table, and Alex and Greg would head for him. And in that key moment, Alex had to whack the guard over the head with a section of pipe.

Vickey, meanwhile, would be keeping the general public outside in the street using the tried and tested trick of the "Service break" sign. That was it. Alex would tie up the guard. And Greg and Max would go inside, quietly take all of the cash out of the till, and then they'd all leave.

The entrance East Finchley tube station was a five-minute walk from the bowling club. Two minutes if you were running. The metro was packed with cameras, but Greg knew exactly where they were sited and how to get round them. To make sure, he'd gone on the tube several times with Leon. They'd both reached the conclusion that if you stood at the end of the platform, you were in the camera's blind spot. They'd be able to turn in the direction of the tunnel from which the train was coming and, unnoticed, quickly take off their moustaches and beards – that wouldn't be a problem and they wouldn't attract attention.

Then they'd go into the last carriage and take their coats off. Together with their wigs, they'd bought reversible, multi-colored coats, unisex models that had been made in China – they could easily be turned inside out. In literally just a few seconds, a red coat could be turned into a yellow coat, a black coat into a white one, and so on.

Leon went in first. He got a bottle of Corona and walked through the club, mingling among the people playing. At six in the evening there were about 25 to 30 players – guests were only just beginning to arrive. Leon walked around, pretending that he was talking to someone on the phone through his hands-free Apple earpiece. He looked like an overweight guy who lacked confidence, a guy who'd come to the club in the hope of chatting up a girl.

Having circled round the club, Leon sat himself down at the table closest to the kitchen door and dialed Max, hung up and then dialed Greg. That was the signal that everything was going according to plan and there was nothing to stop them.

Out in the street, Greg saw Leon's signal on his mobile and nodded to Max, who immediately headed into the bowling club.

"They haven't put much into the till yet," Greg said to Alex. He was standing with him outside, waiting to get started. "Let's hope they didn't collect the cash from last night and all the dough from yesterday is still in there."

Alex watched Max run across the street and go through the door into the club. You couldn't recognize him at all in his disguise, he thought.

"But that's not that important," Greg said.

"What's not important?" asked Alex.

"It doesn't matter how much dough there is in there," answered Greg. "The important thing is that we work as a team today."

"Yes," Alex answered dryly.

Alex caught himself thinking that he really wanted this all to be over quickly. Not just the blow, as Greg had titled the day's robbery, but the whole thing. This whole escapade, this whole episode with the big robbery. The conspiratorial phone calls, the meetings. And, of course, Alex dreamed of the moment when he'd never see Greg again for the rest of his life.

Yes. The sooner this is over the better, thought Alex. He wasn't afraid anymore. He'd got into the game. He understood that there was no way back. That he was already mixed up in it. And that Greg, of course, had played his hand brilliantly. Having got them all mixed up in it with the first job, and having pulled a gun, Greg had tied them all to him.

Yes. Now, to get off this train that was hurtling forwards, he just had to disappear. Get all his stuff, take Vickey by the hand, and disappear from London. Because Greg didn't seem to be the kind of person who'd forget someone letting him down. And Max wouldn't help in the way he had when they were kids.

There was another call on Greg's mobile. From Max.

"Your turn, pal," said Greg, patting Alex on the shoulder.

If Greg had touched Alex just a few days earlier, Alex would have experienced extreme revulsion. But now, before getting started on the blow, Alex didn't experience anything of the kind. On the contrary. He felt that he was a participant in something secret, something special, something that made him stand out from the crowd. He didn't feel that when his most successful articles were published. How many people found out about that? A hundred? Two hundred? A thousand? Two thousand? They'd read the article and then move on, clicking on a link about the dollar-pound exchange rate or an article from the gutter press about whether some popstar or another was gay or not.

"Yes, we're up," said Alex, giving Greg a friendly pat on the shoulder in return. He did it sincerely, without even thinking about it. Greg noted it, smiling barely noticeably. Alex was playing his game and Greg liked the fact that he was totally in control of the situation.

When Alex and Greg were already approaching the door to the bowling club, Vickey appeared. She'd been at a bus stop a little further away. As soon as Alex and Greg went through the door, Vickey went through an already familiar set of motions, pinning up the sign about the service break using double-sided sticky tape and taking out her clipboard with her fake questionnaires.

Alex and Greg went into the club, and found themselves at the start of the long corridor.

As soon as they were in the corridor, Greg phoned Max. Max answered.

"We're arriving," Greg said into the phone.

"At last," said Max. "My beer's been getting warm here."

That was the signal that in exactly eight seconds Max would open the club's inner door and call the guard over. Eight seconds that Greg had measured out several times to be sure. Eight seconds from the outer door to the second, inner door that the guard's table was next to.

At that moment, Alex sensed the piece of piping on his body – it was wrapped in a newspaper and stuck down his trousers. It was held to his side by the belt in his jeans, and his coat, hanging free, masked it from anyone looking at him.

Alex broke out into a sweat. He was hit by a thought – how had he got himself into this? He followed Greg down the bowling club's corridor. Eight seconds that seemed like an eternity to Alex. A thought floated round in his mind – I could kill a person here.

"Hit him at the base of his neck. Don't touch the actual head," Max had told him the night before. He'd gone to see Alex specifically to tell him that. To teach him how to knock a guy out. They'd rolled up a newspaper and used it as a dummy. "But hit him hard, that'll knock him out, and it'll be easy for you to tie him up."

God, how did I get here? His inexplicable euphoria gave way to fear. It gripped him so hard that he found it hard to breath. His chest started to heave. Why? How? How did I get here? "When you get scared, think of just one thing," Max had taught him. You understand me, bro? Just tell yourself one thing: I'm going to hit him, I'm going to hit him. That's the only way you can get over the shakes, bro. The only way. I'm going to hit him, I'm going to hit him..."

Eight seconds.

Six. Seven. Eight.

The door to the main hall opened. Max's face appeared.

Alex and Greg approached the guard.

"Guvnor, can you take a look at me for a second?" Max asked the guard in a laid-back voice. "They said I should show you."

Max stood in the doorway, blocking the view into and out of the room.

"What? I don't get it," said the guard, a man of about fifty years of age in wrinkled trousers and a worn-out shirt from his security firm. Unhappy about being distracted from his crossword, he came out from behind his table, his chair giving a nasty squeak as he pushed it out of the way along the floor. He came up close to Max.

Alex and Greg, precisely according to plan, hit their mark right behind the guard's back.

Alex faltered for an instant, but a shove from Greg came just in time. The shove brought him back to his senses. The shove was a cold ultimatum. "I'm going to hit him, I'm going to hit him..." The words rattled round his head. An electric charge surged through his body. From his left rib, where Greg had hit him with his elbow, through his stomach and right through his right arm.

He didn't know how it happened. His hand found the section of pipe of its own accord. He only saw the guard's neck ahead of him, and then sensed his right hand. A powerful hand lying on a cold section of piping. Just don't kill him.

The blow hit its target just the way he'd practiced with Max. Sharp. Powerful. He put his whole shoulder into the blow. Right into the neck. Between the neck and beginning of the spine.

Max quickly stepped into the corridor, closing the door behind him. A grey, slimy shroud clouded over Alex's eyes for an instant. But through that lackluster film,

Alex made out Greg catching the limp body of the guard before it hit the ground. Max took him by the legs and they carried him behind the table.

"Tie him up!" Greg ordered Alex.

He had plastic ties at the ready, they were in a trouser pocket. Alex whipped them out and moved to the guard's body fast.

A single thought whistled through his head on repeat: "Let him be alive. Let him be alive..."

The hair under the wig Alex was wearing was already dripping with sweat. Alex thought his fake moustache was shaking. It felt like this whole masquerade was about to throttle him. Alex couldn't get enough air.

"Turn him over, for fuck's sake!" snapped Greg.

Alex turned the guard's body over with difficulty. He pulled his arms behind his back and then froze, holding his thumb on the guard's wrist to check his pulse. He felt it throb, and it felt like a weight had been taken off his shoulders.

At any moment, one of the guests could come into the corridor. According to the plan, all this was supposed to take ten seconds. To Alex, it felt like several minutes had already passed.

He pulled the plastic ties tight on the guard's wrists, then crouched down, his back lent up against the wall, and pushed the guard under the table. He moved the chair back into position, making it look like the guard had slipped out to the toilet.

"Let's go!" ordered Greg.

Greg entered the hall. Max followed him, the long hair of his disguise trailing in the air as he moved.

Alex followed Max. He followed Max, his childhood friend, but Max was now very much a different person. Again, Lord, how did I get here? Vickey was standing outside the door to the club. A girl who loved him. A girl who was devoted to him. And he'd led her. Into this furnace. He'd been weak. As always, he'd only thought of himself.

Lord, why? He wanted the robbery to be over as fast as possible, and then he wanted to rob the bank as fast as possible. Fast. Both of them. Faster. So that he could forget all this. Sell his apartment and leave. So that no one would know how to find him.

Max tugged at Alex's sleeve and then pushed him in the direction of the desk with the till on it. Everything was going according to plan. Greg stood opposite the cashier. Alex stood at the side of the desk in order to cut off the cashier's route to the side door and to be ready to empty out the till. Max stood a few yards away from Alex with his back to him, facing towards the bowlers playing on numerous lanes, just in case one or more of them wanted to play hero.

It was as if Alex's consciousness had clicked on. He couldn't remember how he'd got to this point. Alex. Member of a criminal gang.

Alex shook his head. Hard. As hard as he could.

"Just stay quiet, kid," Greg said in a commanding voice to the cashier.

Alex looked at the cashier. The latter had frozen up, looking at Greg. Or, to be more precise, looking at his pistol, which Greg was holding at stomach level so that it was less visible.

"Just keep quiet and you'll be ok," Greg repeated. "Got it?!?"

The cashier, a young, skinny guy of about twenty to twenty-two years of age, may have been happy to answer, but it was as if he'd been pinned to the ground and he couldn't get a word out. Alex suddenly noticed the unnatural pose the cashier was standing in. His arms were bent at the wrists, which were almost touching his body,

and his fingers were splayed out in every imaginable direction. The cashier stood there with his mouth open, and it wasn't clear if he was about to break down from the fear or just carry on standing there like that eternally.

"Open the till, pal," Greg said quietly, although it seemed to Alex that Greg's voice could be heard by every player in the bowling club over the loud music that was playing.

Alex took a quick look round. Max stood facing the players who were busy getting on with their games and paying no attention to what was happening twenty yards behind them. Alex glanced at Leon. He was sitting by the door to the kitchen, keeping an eye on what was going on at the cashier's desk. If someone was to come out of the kitchen, he was supposed to shout: "Tracie!" That was the signal for Max to come up and take out anyone coming out of there. It would probably be a waiter. But nobody came through the door, and the whole operation was supposed to be over in a few seconds.

"What's your name, kid?" Greg asked the cashier.

"Dave," he replied quietly.

"I'm telling you one last time: open the till, Dave," Greg ordered. "Then we'll go quickly. Nobody will get hurt, Dave. Nobody will get hurt."

Alex heard a click and winced. Greg had cocked the gun. One pull on the trigger and Dave would be dead on the spot.

"No, no," span through Alex's head. This wasn't in the plan. Nobody was supposed to die.

Alex walked round the desk fast, positioning himself right next to the cashier. He didn't know how he managed it that fast, but he took out the piece of pipe, still wrapped in newspaper, which was poking out from beneath his belt. He whacked it with all the strength he could muster into the cashier's ribs. The cashier crumpled up in pain, but he didn't say a word, his eyes still fixed on the barrel of the gun.

"Open the till! Open it!" Alex said quietly to the cashier.

"While I'm around, he won't shoot him. He won't," pounded in Alex's temples.

The cashier grimaced in pain.

"Open the till, you idiot!" said Alex. "We won't hurt you. Open the till!"

The cashier, without taking his eyes off the pistol in Greg's hand, quickly pressed a button on the till and it opened. The draw pinged out in Alex's direction, revealing piles of fivers and tenners.

"Well done!" Greg smiled through gritted teeth.

Alex wasn't sure who Greg was talking to – to the cashier or to him. But Alex didn't really give a damn.

"Lie down on the floor," Alex quietly commanded the cashier. He didn't want to hit anyone else over the head. He didn't want to do that again.

The cashier appeared to have been waiting for such a command. He quickly got down on the floor at Alex's feet. Alex quickly crouched down, took out a plastic tie and in a practiced movement tied the cashier's hands behind his back. He got up, took a plastic bag he'd prepared in advance out of his pocket, grabbed the notes, chucked them in the bag and closed the till.

The beat of a rap track, standard for this kind of place, was still pounding out. Alex took a look around. The customers were still hurling their heavy balls down the lanes, happily asking each other for high fives after every successful strike.

Leon was already heading for the exit with Max.

Alex took a look at Greg. He was standing, his lower lip sticking out, nodding with approval at Alex.

"The only person I'd whack with that piece of pipe right now is you, you scum," thought Alex.

He nodded back to Greg, came out from behind the desk and they headed for the exit.

Alex again got the feeling that his clownish disguise had started to throttle him.

"Don't turn around," Alex heard Greg say behind him, the words returning him to reality, from which he found himself sometimes wondering into his own thoughts. "Just don't turn round!"

It was almost over. Let it be over fast, that was the main thing. And that would be it. The bastard. He would have shot him. Or not.

"Well done!" Alex heard coming from Greg behind him, and it was again as if he'd woken up. They were standing in front of the door out of the club.

Greg threw open the door and the air from the street hit Alex.

He saw Vickey.

"Is everything all right?" she asked and smiled with joy.

Alex saw the backs of Max and Leon receding into the distance, about twenty yards away from him.

"Everything's fine," answered Alex. He took her by the hand and they started moving away from the building of the bowling club. "How are you?"

"A couple came up," Vickey said quickly. "I said there was a service break and that we'd only be opening up in a half hours' time. And that was it."

"And that was it," Alex thought to himself. "I told her everything was all right. But nothing, damn it, is all right." Another 450 yards to the East Finchley tube station. But first, at a shop along the way, they would buy a bouquet of flowers, five carnations, so that they would look like a couple in love. Then they'd sit in a café, also close by, and only then would they head for the tube station. Max knew, from his experience as a policeman, how they would be looking for people following the call from the bowling club. He knew what they would be looking for. A couple with a bouquet in a coffee shop, a well-dressed man, Greg, also with a bouquet of flowers, walking down the road to meet his nonexistent girlfriend, and a couple of friends, Max and Leon, finishing their three pieces and fries in a fried chicken shop – they didn't look like the kind of people who had just knocked over a bowling joint.

A half-hour later, standing in a carriage on the tube, Alex stared point blank at Vickey. He couldn't think about anything. He just looked at her. Looked and understood that she was dear to him. And that was it. And nothing more. She was dear to him. And in answer, through the noise of the rolling iron wheels of the metro carriage, Vickey's sad, loving eyes looked at him. The eyes of a person he'd got involved in this whirlpool. Got involved in this dangerous, very dangerous game. Where nobody could predict how it would end.

Like the light from a lamp at the end of a dark tunnel, through which the carriage was hurtling, a thought dawned on him – he didn't know if the guard was still alive... Perhaps he'd felt his own pulse when he checked his wrist?

"Kentish Town station," came an announcement from the public address system of the Northern Line tube carriage. Following the plan precisely, Vickey got out of the carriage and headed for the exit. She walked without looking back. "Break the stupid rules. I want to see your face," thought Alex, as if bidding her farewell. But Vickey stuck to the rules. She walked calmly, only looking ahead.

"The next station is Camden Town," came the next announcement.

"Not now," thought Alex, "when I need her more than ever. Right now." His heart tightened up into an abandoned ball. "Idiotic plan. Idiotic safety measures."

He needed her now more than ever. If he could hold her now, by the hand. If only she was with him now. Her hand would have been a bridge to the rest of the world. "I can't go on without her," he thought, gripping the rail so tightly that it began to hurt.

But Alex was imagining all this, it was wishful thinking – Alex was traveling alone. To King's Cross station. Then he was to walk in the direction of the new Google building, to find a quiet, secluded spot, to crouch down, as if tying his shoelace, take out the piece of pipe, unnoticed, remove its wrapping of newspaper, and throw it into the bushes. And that would be it. Those were Greg's orders. This was how Greg taught them patience and a cold-blooded approach. After the main job, after all, he would have to walk down the street not with a pipe but with money and jewels from the safe boxes. And he would have to pretend that he was shooting the breeze with his girlfriend and a pal.

But Alex wasn't thinking about that right now. He was thinking about Vickey, who'd just been standing next to him. With a bouquet of five humble flowers in her hands. "I never gave her flowers," he thought. Flowers are a sign, after all, there's so much warmth in them, so much gratitude: for female beauty, for female warmth, for female love. "I need her so badly now, I need her so badly," Alex repeated to himself like a mantra. "God, I need her so badly now. I need her," he thought, and the idea warmed him. He carried on repeating the phrase, warming himself further. He was starting to need her. Only her. The iron wheels of the carriage pounded out a monotone waltz on the rails of the metro, bam-bam, bam-bam, and to Alex their racket appeared to be a beautiful melody, a refrain that hadn't yet been composed, a song being born. She's needed, she's needed. She's needed. Bam-bam, bam-bam.

The train stopped at King's Cross station.

"If only everything would be all right. If only it would all be over, and everything would be all right. If only no one's died. One more step. And it's over."

But to do that he now had to think about something else. He had to finish off today's job. Another step to the main job. Another step to freedom. He had to concentrate on Greg's instructions.

The pipe, hidden under his clothes, touched his rib. A chill went through him, and in his mind's eye an image of the training, where Max had taught him the right way to hit someone, flashed up. Alex had got it right, he'd whacked Max in the right place with the rolled-up newspaper, and Max had laughed: "I need to be very afraid of you from now on. You're an animal, now you could kill me easily." Was it his own pulse, or was the guard still alive after all? One more step.

September 2017

Diana, Vickey

It was Diana's birthday. Traditionally, it was celebrated in her parents' big, spacious apartment on an alleyway near Hampstead Heath, with its panoramic view of London.

Usually, Vickey loved family suppers with Diana's parents, but she'd been afraid of this day from the very start of their relationship. Diana's friends were supposed to go too, and Alex was Diana's closest friend.

Alex. They hadn't seen each other since that morning when he'd shouted at her. She'd left before he'd come back out of the bathroom. She'd known nothing about him. She'd waited for a call. But he never rang. She didn't even know if he knew about her and Diana. They never mentioned him in their conversations.

Diana knew, of course, how strong Vickey's love for Alex was, and she wasn't expecting her to forget all about him, but she was careful not to remind her of him. What Diana didn't know was the extent to which Vickey, in her heart, hadn't gotten over him. She simply couldn't forget him.

When Vickey imagined them meeting she was overcome by a weakness, it was as if her legs would give out. She dreamt of seeing Alex, and she was afraid of seeing him.

Half the evening had already passed, but Alex still hadn't arrived. Vickey looked at Diana, who was giving a toast to her parents.

"Let's drink to my beloved Mere and Pere!" That was how she always referred to them, in French. Vickey found that very charming. "They brought me up with love, a love of work, and an ability not to take myself too seriously," Diana said, concluding the toast. There was applause and some shouts of "hurrah!" Having waited for them to finish, Diana continued. "I want to thank them for having taken me, when I was little, into the operating theater because they didn't have anyone to leave me with. That taught me a lot and I gained the profession of my dreams and the work of my life. I became a surgeon like them. True, sometimes they'd forget to take me home and I'd spend the whole night at the hospital."

There was a friendly roar of laughter.

"That gave me a lot of skills that are useful for someone working in medicine: I learned to sleep on chairs lined up in a row, covered in surgical blankets, and how to open the lock into the dining room without being spotted. I became a virtuoso at avoiding anyone I needed to, and getting into the morgue where Uncle Simon worked as a medical assistant was no problem."

"That Simon was a scoundrel," said Diana's father, "I remember. But we used to apologize to you in the morning, didn't we?"

"Sometimes," Diana agreed, laughing. "If you noticed that you'd forgotten me. So. Uncle Simon didn't seem in the slightest bit concerned about an underage girl of famous surgeons spending the night alone at the hospital. He'd spent most of his life alone in a cold basement, reading books and having conversations with the corpses. And I remember that he used to joke that as soon as the corpses would start answering him, he'd switch to being a medical assistant at a psychiatric hospital. He'd allow me to examine the corpses for hours on end," Diana continued. "Once he showed me a frozen heart. Some maniac had killed some people in Whitechapel, he'd cut out their hearts and put them in their hands. One of the corpses wasn't needed, and they'd sent it, along with its heart, to Uncle Simon in the morgue. He prized it very highly."

All of the twenty people sitting at the long table laughed quietly, listening to her attentively.

"I thought about death a lot back then," Diana continued as if she wasn't talking about anything out of the ordinary. "I don't know if that's a good or a bad thing for a five-year old girl, but you don't get to choose your parents. What I will say, is that as I haven't needed a psychiatrist in the 31 years of my life, I really can't blame them for anything yet."

Diana stopped – the guests could see she was anxious. She smiled in celebration, threw back her shoulders, and took a deep breath.

"Dear parents, brother, husband of my brother and my best friends!" she finally declared. "Today I got a phone call from the Surgeons of Europe International Association, and they confirmed that I would be offered a position working as a

surgeon treating kids in Africa! In three months, my beloved Vickey and I will be going to live in Uganda for a year."

There were shrieks of joy in the room, glasses ringing as they were clinked, everyone hugged and congratulated her. Vickey was mesmerized, watching them all congratulating one another. "Nobody's objected, nobody's run off in a fury, nobody's given a lecture. Everybody understands you without having to say a word. They all share the same interests – they're one big family. A happy family," she thought.

She would grow sad at moments like this, she would feel like an impostor at someone else's party. Her family had never been like this. She'd never even met a family like this in her life. She loved Diana, she loved Diana's family which had taken her in with such joy. She was grateful, she was afraid of losing all this. But still one thought rang out in her head: "Alex – is he really not coming? Will I ever see him again?"

She could hear Sophie, Diana's mother, speaking, warm laughter in her voice.

"Girls, I don't have a recipe as to how to live for a long time with a man. I really don't know how it's done. I think in our case, that Michael and I have to thank our Head Nurse Deborah – she does the schedule and she makes sure that we never have shifts at the same time. But Michael would often have Deborah as his chief nurse when operating, and he's always had a very high opinion of her professional qualities."

"Specifically, her professional qualities!" Diana's father shouted grumpily. "Sophie, why're you slandering me? You're sullyng my noble grey hairs in the eyes of the youngsters!"

"Come on, there can be no sullyng of your reputation. Your purer than pure image is unshakable!" laughed Sophie in answer. "But you should remember, Michael, that you're not superhuman, you're just a normal person, although you hold people's hearts in your hands every day and bring them back to life – that must make it hard for you to remember."

Someone objected to her in jest, everyone started laughing again, and it was impossible to work out who was saying what. Finally, Diana's ever-serious friend Christina shouted out.

"Well, give us a culinary recipe, at least, Sophie! Please!"

"Yes, yes! A bewitching recipe," came the voice of Diana's brother, albeit steeped in irony. "Our Mom is an international specialist in cooking nuts – male nuts for the most part!"

"I gave birth to a child who's far too witty for my liking, but you're right – I'm the best there is in urological surgery," Sophie joked. "But let's leave the subject of nuts aside. I'll tell you how to make sausages and your beloved will be offering his or her hand and heart in marriage."

Sophie left a weighty pause before continuing.

"Yes, write it down, write it down ... are you ready? You don't cook it when the kid's cold, you cook it when he's hungry."

There was another burst of laughter.

"How're you feeling, my love?" Diana asked, having left the table to talk to someone and now having returned. "You're not regretting having agreed to go halfway round the world with me?"

Vickey looked up at Diana, she tried to smile, she tried not to let Diana see her sorrow over Alex.

"What's happening to me, damn it? It's Diana's birthday today! It's her day, and I'm only thinking about whether I'll see him or not."

Vickey was ashamed before Diana, very ashamed.
She smiled her the most radiant smile she had in her armory.
“Not a bit.”

She became so ashamed that a need to cry out burned hot in her chest. But Vickey wasn't happy about the trip to Africa. She was happy for Diana, it was a dream come true for her. She'd applied to get on this program for many years running, and finally they'd accepted her. And the trip to Africa itself, for her, a fan 'Out of Africa', sounded like the kind of once in a lifetime adventure that Vickey, with her romantic nature, had always dreamed of.

The Surgeons of Europe Association had phoned Diana when she was out on her run with Vickey on her birthday. Hearing the news, Diana had jumped up and down for joy for a whole ten minutes, only stopping to hug Vickey. Having calmed down, she had suggested to Vickey that they go to Africa together – the program would pay her partner's expenses, and Vickey had agreed.

Of course, she had agreed! They drank a glass of Ferrari Pearl, a highly collectible sparkling wine brought from a small Italian province that they'd kept in store especially for this day. They made love, their naked, young, sweaty bodies merging in a slow dance of passion, cold splashes of champagne mixing with their bodies' juices, the taste of their skin becoming sweet and salty. They embraced each other in love, balancing on the peak of their orgasms. They lay in bed exhausted until lunch, discussing the strange path that their lives were about to take.

“Kid, I know you're scared,” said Diana, “a different continent, Africa, Uganda. I don't know if the civil war and the Ebola outbreak are really over there yet. You can say no at any point and I'll understand.”

Vickey had wanted to tell Diana that it wasn't the exotic diseases, wild animals and well-known security concerns in Africa that scared her. Not at all. What she was afraid of was that she would never see Alex again.

But Vickey had smiled.

“I'd go with you to the end of the world! You know that,” she had said...

“Sophie, it's the third day and he hasn't called. Maybe he died?” Christina said in a concerned voice. “What should I do?”

“Why run to extremes, dear? Perhaps he's simply married and pretended to be single, men often do that. And why should you do anything? You've seen him once in your life!” the wise Sophie said in a friendly voice.

“I really liked him! And you know what,” Christina continued, not giving up, “it was all so great, really satisfying sex, that in the morning I even made him breakfast.”

“Hang on, hang on, let's sort this out – what did you make him for breakfast?” Diana's mother asked. “Maybe he died of it?”

“He hasn't come, he hasn't come, he hasn't come,” echoed in Vickey's head. “Why? He hasn't come, because he's left London, busy at the office or because he doesn't want to see me? He still doesn't like me? I just want to know what I did wrong. Why did he kick me out?”

Vickey glanced towards the door when she heard a pleasant male voice nearby.

“Diana, you were the cleverest on our course, and a woman! Tell me, why are girls always so unhappy with me?”

“They want to marry you, David, but you never get married,” Diana answered cheerfully.

“Why do all women want to get married?” the man continued in an entirely serious voice. “I go out with several at the same time, for example: with one I have wonderful sex, we go for a lot of walks, we go to exhibitions, the theater. I like to

sleep wrapped in another's arms. We have sex too, of course, but it's not important at all, because nobody makes a more delicious roast than she does. I don't sleep with the third, just as I don't sleep with you, but I like to have really deep conversations with her. Why can't they do that too?" he asked, puzzled. "Why do they have to 'put all their eggs in one basket?' Why do I meet so few polygamous women?"

"David, come on, you're a big boy, you have to accept this: that's the way women are, and I don't have any women of a different kind for you," Diana answered him. They laughed. "But if we're being serious, the issue of polygamy or monogamy isn't down to gender distinctions, it's down to the fact that some people are capable of sharing and being shared, and some people aren't. I can even go further – I've seen cases where someone is prepared to share something with someone, but not with someone else."

"They dream of getting married, David, because they're afraid of silence," Vickey said, suddenly butting into the conversation, not least to her own surprise. "They're shit scared of it, because they don't know what it means."

Diana looked at her girlfriend in astonishment, waiting for her to conclude her aggressive thought that had sprung out of nowhere.

"But I love silence," Vickey said, somehow detached from her words. "It's good for people."

Diana looked at Vickey and realized that there was something behind Vickey's barbed phrase. She knew Vickey too well. "It's my birthday," Diana thought, "and she's feeling bad. Something's wrong." It seemed to Diana that she was beginning to understand her mood, but she couldn't get these thoughts out of her head.

"These aren't my words," Vickey said, detached. "They were said by my beloved Mickey Rourke."

Vickey glanced at Diana, and it seemed to her that her girlfriend understood everything.

Awkwardly, Vickey tried to somehow wrap up the conversation.

"Either we shouldn't have mixed our drinks, or we simply haven't had enough to drink today. Don't go anywhere, I'll get us a refill," she said, kissing Diana on the cheek and walking away.

September 2017

Alex

It all started with a call from Arthur.

"Where've you been, pal?" Alex heard instead of a greeting.

"Arthur?" asked Alex. "Where did you come from?"

Arthur never phoned this early. "Normal people sleep at this time of day," he would often say. "And if they're not sleeping, it just means they haven't gone to bed yet."

"Almost where we split up, my friend," laughed Arthur. "A good old after party."

"Majorca, Baden or the nearest 24/7 bar?" asked Alex.

"Right at the third attempt," laughed Arthur. "We're hanging out in Soho. Can you come?"

"I'm not going anywhere," thought Alex.

"I'm not alone," lied Alex. "Tell me."

"Pal, I'll get right down to business. I've got a really expensive ticket to an unusual party, but I've got to go on business to Italy. I'd like to put this invite into good hands."

"What's the ticket to?" asked Alex, understanding nothing.

"To a party that you go to alone," Arthur answered mysteriously.

"Hm..."

"Right..." Arthur drawled somewhat bizarrely.

"Can you explain?" asked Alex.

A rustling could be heard. Then the receiver appeared to have been dropped. Some light morning cursing could be heard.

"Arthur..." Alex said, reminding Arthur that he was waiting.

"Hang on," he heard from the other end of the line.

Alex had to wait a little while longer.

"Pouring a five-hundred-pound bottle of Agrapart on yourself is a real skill..." came from the other end of the line.

"Five hundred pounds for a bottle of French champagne at 9 in the morning," thought Alex. "Why not?"

"Alex, pal," said Arthur, returning to the conversation.

"I'm listening," said Alex.

"This is the thing," Arthur began again. "Throwing a ticket like this away would be a sin, man. This is a really extraordinary party. But there's nothing that will amaze you, so I'm not worried."

"What is this party, then?" Alex asked again.

"They'll explain there," answered Arthur. "They'll explain the rules on the door. They're not complex. You'll like it," said Arthur. "I'll say it again, listen to me," he continued. "It'd be a crime to throw it away. It costs a fortune. Even for me. I can't give it to just anyone. It's a tight-knit crowd, only for those in our circle, only for aesthetes. So don't spread it round. That you're one of London's top aesthetes – I don't think anyone's going to argue with that, my friend Horatio," Arthur laughed.

"I..." Alex began.

"Basically, it's all about fucking. As always," Arthur interrupted him, whispering. "I'm not on my own here," he whispered even quieter. "Why're you being so slow, you numbskull?!?"

"All right," Alex agreed, for some reason.

"Oh! The girl's gone off," Arthur said happily, before going on quietly again, but very precisely. "Alex, it's a place where a person's secret wishes gain independence, but they stay secret."

"Interesting," said Alex.

"Getting you interested is hard work, damn it," laughed Arthur. "But if you don't like the crowd, which I seriously doubt will happen, bro," Leon said with confidence, "you can turn round and leave. So, basically, wait for my driver with an envelope."

"Got it," answered Alex.

"You owe me big time," Arthur concluded.

Again some rustling was heard coming from the other end of the line, and then there were three beeps all of a sudden.

The conversation was over and Alex put his iPhone aside. He wasn't planning on going anywhere on that day, last night's excesses were still clouding his head and he had to write a letter from the editor for the next day's issue.

He turned back to his laptop but couldn't get a word out. He pondered the idea that the thinking process was often helped by the trusty friend that is jerking off,

and even opened his favorite clip on Kink.com, but he couldn't concentrate on the images flashing in front of him, and his cock wouldn't get hard, remaining indifferent to Alex's demands. So, he decided to go back to bed.

In the evening he tidied himself up as he was waiting for the courier to arrive with the invite. He put on a white shirt and his favorite suit from Tom Ford. As always, he wore his trousers without a belt.

Then he ordered a Mercedes from a car service and headed to the address on the invitation.

Kensington– one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in London.

Renowned, or perhaps infamous “High Street Ken.” A proverbial neighborhood. A dream for the whole of Britain. Even for those who've never been there. The shops, the town houses, those who live there, or at least claim to, even have a distinct accent of their own. Anyone can go visit. You just have to pay. A meal at the Ivy Brasserie will do serious damage to your bank account. And if you want to live there, you have to pay big time.

Kensington. A symbol for luxury and a monied, carefree life. Not just a carefree lifestyle, but a lifestyle immersed in calm and care from people who are paid to create that calm, pristine and pleasant life. Gardeners, cooks, cleaners, tutors, nannies, drivers, housekeepers, secretaries and personal assistants.

The private house listed on the invitation was discreet, just another of the multi-million pads lining the street. Stunning, but unremarkable.

“Who are you here to see?” a doorman asked politely, dressed to the nines.

Alex checked the invitation, reading from it.

“Private party. Four, eight, one, four.”

It appeared to be some sort of secret code.

“Please come in,” said the doorman, beckoning Alex in.

A striking blonde stepped forward to greet Alex. Without saying a word, she reached out to take the invitation. Glancing at it, she pointed in the direction of a reception room without saying a word.

Alex walked on through the sumptuous mansion, a palace of hushed velvet and exquisite taste.

The door was opened by a girl who looked very much like the one who had just met Alex: about the same height, long dark hair, a beautiful figure, statuesque breasts, the same refined makeup and absolutely identical clothing.

“We ask that you turn off your telephone while you are here,” the girl said quietly.

Alex obeyed the polite request and was immediately approached by another identical girl. She smiled to Alex and spoke in a soft, delicate voice. “Hello!”

“Hello!” answered Alex. The appearance of these three identical girls aroused him.

“Come with me, please,” the third girl said quietly.

She walked to one of the doors that were equally spaced out along the wall. Alex walked into a room with a small, beautiful, round table, several upholstered armchairs and a couch covered in various masks in the style of the annual Carnevale di Venezia.

“Please sit down,” the girl said quietly.

“Thank you.” Alex seated himself on one of the chairs.

“Champagne?” asked the girl, bending over a small wine trolley with glasses that stood by the round table.

“Yes, thank you,” answered Alex.

"There are no random people here," the girl began, placing a glass of champagne in front of Alex, "and that means that informing you of the rules won't take long."

Alex nodded.

"The first rule: You must choose a mask and wear it from the beginning until the end. You can only take it off in the bathroom, in one of the bedrooms or before leaving the mansion – you can leave it at the door. If you wish, you can keep it as a memento."

"All clear," said Alex. He'd looked at the girl's beautiful figure and his desire welled up. If the rules that she was listing allowed him to take her in that small room he'd do it immediately. He even imagined how he would do it. In that beautiful little room with its heap of Venetian masks. From behind. Against the wall. Pulling her dress off. Leaving her entirely naked. Only in her mask of makeup that made all the girls look the same.

"Every guest has a coin," the girl continued.

The girl placed a beautiful coin in front of Alex. There was a building engraved on it, and it seemed to Alex to be the townhouse they were now inside.

"Take the coin and put it in your pocket," she said calmly.

Alex obeyed.

"The second and last rule," said the girl, looking him in the eye. "You can't refuse the sexual wishes of anyone who gives you their coin. If you fulfill their request, you will have two coins. You can use them to refuse anyone who gives you a subsequent request."

Alex sensed his imagination running wild and arousing his body.

"If, after that, you give one of your two coins to someone and that person fulfilled your wish, you will again have one coin and you will be obliged to fulfill the wish of any person you can't show two coins to."

"I understand," said Alex, sensing his throat tightening up from his arousal.

"Just two rules," the girl summed up. "They mustn't be broken."

"Or what will happen?" thought Alex, but he didn't say anything.

"That's it," the girl said calmly. "You must now put on your mask before you leave this room."

She got up and quietly left.

"So, this is a party 'you'll like'..." thought Alex, recalling Arthur's words. So, this is how the rich and the powerful entertain themselves.

Alex walked over to the dozens of masks on the sofa. His eye was caught by a bright red mask which was fastened tight to a beret made of thick material. He put it on and headed out of the room.

He walked along the hall's sumptuous corridor, its walls made of beige marble. A broad staircase led upwards, with more rooms on the left and right, tightly sealed by weighty, tall doors. Apart from the girls who stood motionless at the entrance, he was alone in the impressively sized hall.

Alex slowly ascended to the second floor, sliding his hand along the smooth marble banister. He found himself at the beginning of a broad hall with a shiny parquet floor. There were about fifteen people in the room. Broken up into small groups, they were chatting with one another. They were all in incredibly varied masks, of course. Some were in bright capes that Alex thought were somewhat theatrical.

The décor in the house was akin to that of a museum or the interiors of palaces in films about the families of the tsars, it stunned with its outlandish magnificence.

All of the windows were draped. Alex noted an evenly spaced line of silver candelabras, with a vast chandelier in the center of the hall. There were antique sofas ranged about the room, armchairs and couches. The servants were distinguished from the guests by their outfits – they were dressed in grey trousers and shirts, their faces hidden by identical grey masks. There were five of them, and they attentively followed the guests, ever ready to be on hand if they needed assistance.

Alex looked round in search of a bar, but failed to notice the small niche in the wall that was partially covered over with a hanging that was the same color as the wall. Next to the niche stood a small group of guests discussing something.

Alex could just about make out a snippet of their conversation. “Eric Berne is my hero. He not only explained how people interact with one another, but also with the world.”

Then he heard a woman’s voice. “All scenarios are from our childhood. Our environments and, of course, our parents in our childhood form the scenarios that go on to mold our lives as individuals. Then each individual runs around trying to find the cause of his behavior without knowing where to look for answers.”

“Yes, all of our childhood scenarios are the locomotive for a powerful psychological force that drags you to your fate, with your help or by overcoming your conscious resistance,” a male voice affirmed.

A tall man in a blue mask left the group and headed over to Alex. After a couple of steps, however, he turned left sharply. Alex’s gaze followed him and spotted the bar he’d been looking for. He headed over and sat down on a chair next to the tall man. The blue mask turned to Alex, who got the impression that the man was smiling.

They could still make out the argument that was continuing among the group: “If I’m not mistaken, Erik Berne attributed a key role to consent in the formation of the child. Consent provides the only way to free a person of his parents’ regulations. The parents were to give consent to the child being happy, to put it briefly.”

The barman, without having asked anything of the guests, served Alex and the tall man drinks at the same time. Taking his glass of cognac from the bar, he looked at Alex for a few seconds. Eyes from beneath one mask looking into the eyes concealed behind another.

“Will you come over to us?” the man asked unexpectedly.

“With pleasure,” answered Alex, also taking his glass of Henri IV, Cognac Grande Champagne.

Alex had heard of this cognac, but never tried it. The price of a bottle of this rare tipple, if he recalled correctly, was over eight thousand pounds, months of work for those on an average income even in the country’s capital. This was a gift from the master of the home to his rich guests, the barman informed them in a quiet voice. “How much did this invite that Arthur give me cost?” Alex thought.

“Allow me to bring you into our circle,” said the man, beckoning Alex to join him and his friends. “I’d like to introduce you, friends, to a newcomer,” said the man when they’d approached the group.

“Don’t invent a name for yourself,” said a woman in a pink mask. “Everyone who’s here for the first time tries to pretend to be someone else. There’s no need for that, though. We’re all in masks. We’re simple folk here. Equals among equals. Without names. And these rules give us a magical opportunity to get by without everyday lies.”

"Very convincing," said Alex. "Unfortunately, there is more than enough lying in everyday life."

"Equals among equals," thought Alex, "drinking cognac for eight thousand pounds a pop ..."

"Yes," the woman replied, "in this house, the masks really do protect us from lies. This house has become a happiness drug. It's a place where all human secret desires gain independence, whilst remaining secret."

This was the phrase that the half-drunk Arthur had told him.

"Coming here, I immediately felt like Tom Cruise in *Eyes Wide Shut*," said Alex. "Whoever came up with the idea for this party did a good job," he smiled.

"You're definitely here for the first time," smiled the woman. "Nine out of ten people coming here for the first time refer to that film by the great Kubrick."

A waitress came up to them quietly and offered some hors d'oeuvres that had been neatly laid out on an encrusted platter.

"Wagyu filet mignon," said the waitress, "and Rogue River Blue."

Small pieces of marbled meat neatly sliced and cubes of blue cheese had been carefully placed to form an intricate pattern.

"This cheese matures in vine leaves soaked in brandy," the waitress said softly.

"I recommend it," the tall man said to Alex, taking a piece of this elite cheese.

All of those present at this invitation-only party behaved with marked politeness. Among themselves and with the servants. They thanked the latter for the food and drinks they were brought and spoke politely with the waitresses, assistants and barman. But they maintained an invisible distance between those who were performing their duties and the participants, the privileged guests of the master of the mansion in Kensington – a master whose identity remained unknown to Alex.

After a while, Alex left his new acquaintances. He walked through the hall, where he'd begun to feel at home, and introduced himself to and chatted with people who had cropped up in his life by chance. He somehow got used to everyone being in masks very quickly. He noticed how, from time to time, couples would move off down the enfilade: a man and a woman, or a woman and a woman. As a rule, they were accompanied by one of the assistants, who appeared to be ushering them to one of the castle's bedrooms.

At one point, it seemed to Alex that two men were disappearing into the enfilade, a long succession of rooms that receded off into the distance. He wasn't sure, however, that they were both men, as one was in a long cape and his or her figure couldn't be made out.

At some point, Alex's arousal at this unusual atmosphere died off. He noticed that, judging by the voices, figures and behavior of the majority of the guests, they were over forty years of age, and he'd always liked younger women. Guests came and went. On the surface, it all could have passed for a rehearsal for a masquerade ball or a film shoot, perhaps.

Alex asked one of the waitresses where he could find the toilet. Walking into the depths of the enfilade, he found it behind one of the heavy curtains and a weighty door.

Alex entered and closed the door. He pressed an elegant button on the door handle and the lock clicked shut. He pulled down his trousers and sat on the toilet. He couldn't work out what material the toilet bowl was made of. It was either some very special, expensive metal, or it was silver-plated iron. The seat gave off a soothing coolness which amused Alex.

He took off his mask and his face felt a physical sense of relief. Alex looked around for the kind of magazine or book that is sometimes left lying about in such places.

And then he saw it. Or, rather, at first he heard the sound of an object being pushed under the door. Alex couldn't immediately work out what was happening. Perhaps someone was trying to get into the toilet that he'd occupied, he thought. The sound didn't die out – on the contrary, he heard an object of some kind sliding across the floor. Alex looked down to try and work out what was going on.

Alex saw a coin with a hologram of the house that he was in depicted on it. It was identical to his own coin. Still not having fully understood what was happening or what might happen, Alex quickly got up. Instinctively. He pulled up his boxers and trousers and did up the zip. And then he sensed, or rather heard his heart. It wasn't just beating. It had begun hammering. It started to shake his body every which way. Right and left, back and forth. In circles, backwards, then forwards, then in circles again, his heart wasn't beating, it was battering him.

"Well?" Alex heard coming from the other side of the door in an authoritative voice. The voice seemed familiar to Alex.

Thoughts came into his head in unison with the pounding of his heart: "I can't. I can't not open it. I agreed. I can't not open it. It's my coin. It's mine now. I have to."

The words rattled around in disorder within his head. They hammered at the crust of his brain. On the skin of the brain. And at his heart. Blow after blow. Like a vast boxer battering his opponent in the ring. The latter stumbles backwards, jerks up his hands to protect his face, but it's all in vain. And it doesn't stop, until...

"Well?" came the voice again from the other side of the door.

And only now did Alex realize that this was a man's voice.

"Yes," flashed through his mind. He heard that "yes" amidst the chaos of blows to his heart and thoughts.

Alex pressed the little button on the doorknob and took a step back. The door slowly opened, and the tall man appeared at its threshold. The same man that had introduced Alex to his friends at the beginning of the evening. The man was still in his blue mask. Alex couldn't see his face. He noticed the tall man's cheekbones in the light coming from the bathroom. The light revealed well cared for, tanned skin.

Unable to look away, he looked into the eyeholes of the mask. Two round apertures, through which, without blinking, it seemed to Alex, a person's eyes were looking at him. The polite, educated and affable person who Alex had become acquainted with at the beginning of the evening had disappeared. Or, to be more precise, he had appeared before Alex in a totally different incarnation.

The tall man slowly entered the spacious toilet that was more akin to a luxury cloakroom. Just as slowly, and without taking his eyes off Alex, he closed the door behind him and pressed the little button on the door knob to lock it.

"Pick up the coin," he ordered.

His heart was pounding alarmingly. Thoughts frenziedly whirled around the room, crashing into one another. One stood out ... "Finally."

It was then that he realized that his mask was on the shelf. That they were on an uneven footing. That...

"Pick up the coin," the man said again.

Alex slowly looked down and saw that the coin was between the man's legs. Alex looked back up at the man. He should probably go, probably...

"Pick it up," Alex heard coming from the man again.

Alex realized that the man wasn't going anywhere. Alex couldn't feel his body. It had stopped obeying him. His arms and legs were shaking. His stomach was churning to the point of pain. His mind was blurring. He understood everything. He'd played these games himself. Several times. When girls had carried out his orders and done so unquestioningly. He knew the rules of the game. But this time he was on the receiving end. He was the one having to obey. And he wanted to be there, he wanted to try it, he wanted it, but he was afraid of it. And that coin that was now between the legs of the tall man was pulling him down, transporting him to the other side.

Alex was having difficulty keeping himself on his feet, he knelt down on one knee right at the man's feet and with a shaking hand he picked up the coin.

"And now we do everything by the rules," the man said quietly.

Alex looked up at the man.

"I love rules," said the man.

As Alex used his hand to support himself getting back up, he heard the voice coming from above, from the mask.

"Don't get up."

Obediently, Alex remained on one knee.

He had wanted to. Many times. He'd thought about it. Imagined it. These scenes. How he would touch men, beautiful, fit young men. But he hadn't known, back then, that when it would happen he would almost die of the fear that would shackle and bind his body and mind.

"Take them off," Alex heard.

Alex, without taking his eyes off the man's pupils, slowly put the coin in the pocket of his jeans and reached for the man's belt. The expensive leather of the belt gave way to his hands easily.

And now a strange feeling overcame Alex. In a flash he understood that he was no longer afraid of the belt. That the fear of what was to come was outweighing, driving out and destroying his old fear of his mother with her father's belt.

"This is wild," he caught himself thinking.

This is insane. A dream. A hallucination.

Alex suddenly sensed that he was no longer shaking.

Alex unfastened the belt, then a button on the trousers, and slowly, very slowly, undid the zip. Beautiful, expensive boxer shorts appeared right before Alex's eyes, a bump in the center where the tall man's penis was bursting to get out.

The mask was silent. Alex, for some reason, imagined him with his eyes closed and his head thrown back. "Or he's looking at me," thought Alex. He really wanted to look up, but for some reason didn't. It was as if he didn't want to anger the mask-man by some awkward movement or action that, perhaps, wasn't appropriate in such situations. He didn't know, he was lost. Lost and aroused. The mask's cock was an inch from Alex's face, he was just an inch from what he'd wanted to try for so long. Wanted it, but rarely admitted it to himself, that whole aspect of sex that had previously been unexplored. And when he had admitted it to himself, he'd been afraid of his own thoughts.

The mask remained silent. "He's playing his own game," Alex thought for a second. It would happen. All of it. There was no way back. All. Of it. That game. His thoughts spouted, twinkled, pulsated. Alex took the expensive boxer shorts in both hands and pulled them down.

Then everything happened very quickly. Alex took the man's cock right at the base in his right hand, just as dozens of women had done with his cock. When they'd taken Alex's cock in their delicate fingers.

And Alex took the man's cock in his mouth.

Cries of satisfaction came from the man and Alex almost simultaneously. Both were enjoying it. The man breathed in a full chest of air and then noisily exhaled it. Alex slowly let the cock slip from his mouth and then just as slowly took it in again. The cock was large. Big, hard and flexible. Alex gently squeezed it at the base, just sucking the head in and out. The cock moved pleasantly along the upper surface of Alex's tongue. He liked it.

He moved back and forth. Back and forth. The hot, pliant, powerful, delicious cock of the man-mask gave him pleasure. He moved back and forth, again and again. The cock in his mouth grew hotter. "I know what he needs," thought Alex. "I definitely know what he needs. I will give him pleasure, I want to, I know exactly how, how to do it." Alex again pulled the cock out of his mouth and then took it all in. The cock pushed into his throat, he had difficulty breathing. A groan of joy came from above.

"Yes," Alex heard.

He began doing it again and again. He tried to take the mask-man's cock deeper and deeper. Again and again. More and more.

Alex felt both of the man's hands on his head. Alex had done the same thing a hundred times – put his hands on a woman's head in order to guide her in the rhythm that he, Alex, wanted. But now everything had changed. Now he was giving pleasure to another man, taking his cock into his mouth again and again, into the warm space of his mouth, a powerful cock with a nice aroma, into his mouth, right onto his tender tongue.

The man put his hands on Alex's head but didn't move it. He simply held his hands on his head. That aroused Alex even more. He let the cock out of his mouth. With his right hand, which was moist from spit and from the cock itself, he started moving up and down the cock fast, faster, Alex wanted the man to come right in his mouth, and he would start swallowing it down right at the point when he started to come.

Alex, still moving his hand up and down the man's cock fast, looked up to tell him, to let him know that his cock was already quivering in Alex's hands, shaking, it was incandescent, and Alex understood, or rather sensed, no, he knew from his own experience that there wasn't long now. The man threw his head back, breathing through his open mouth. "I want, I want to give him pleasure. Everything I can. That's what I want." With the right hand. Faster and faster. Along the man's cock. The man's breathing grew faster. Yes, now. Alex took the man's balls in his left hand and without stopping the main movement with his right, gently caressed the masked man's balls with his left. The man let out a loud groan and his entire body shook. But he didn't come. Alex, still working with his right hand as zealously as he could, took the head of the cock into his mouth.

"Again," the man gasped.

"He's really close," Alex thought. "He's enjoying it. Here and now."

Alex moved his left hand forward slightly. The man's balls were now in his palm. Alex pushed his palm deeper in and the balls were squeezed between the base of his thumb and his little finger on his left hand. His right hand was already beating in ecstasy around the man's cock. The man groaned again, and Alex, holding the man's balls in the palm of his left hand, felt for the man's asshole. He felt for it, and then slowly, gently, pushed his middle finger into it, just a little. Inside the man's ass, he gently pushed in the direction of his balls. The man shouted out. Alex started doing it again. With the middle finger of his left hand, in the man's ass, again and again and

again. The right hand, not stopping, worked with increasing fury, the head of the man's cock in Alex's mouth, tight up against his tongue, again, again, again, on the man's ass, his right hand, furiously, in all that moisture.

A spurt. A spurt of sperm. An explosion in Alex's mouth. A salty glob of sperm shot out of the man's cock, along with a cry from his chest, a glob of sperm coming out of the hole in the end of the man's cock and hitting the upper palate in Alex's mouth.

It immediately felt unpleasant for Alex. "Wash your mouth out, wash yourself," he thought. The man's hand pressed his head down hard while his cock shuddered forward. Another glob of sperm hit the upper palate of his mouth. And then again and again. Until the spurts of sperm began to die down. And died down further. And then the last drops slowly coming out of the cock, gliding down him, informing him of the end of this insane extravaganza. The tension was gone within a fraction of a second, as if a cable had snapped. And Alex felt sick. Physically and morally. "That is the first and last time," pounded in Alex's head. "The first and last time."

September 2017

Vickey. Diary

"A lot of people do exactly what they say. And I don't mean that they don't lie. I mean that they're conscientious, they're obedient and humble.

Mom always said that I need stability. And I would think: What am I, a table missing a leg?!? After a while, I worked it out. What does stability give you? What do you get in exchange? I'm not a table missing a leg.

I often did what I was told to do.

And now I don't know who I am. I look at old things that I used to wear, I look at old photographs, videos where I'm little, crawling around on the floor, running and playing with other kids at the kindergarten, and then at school, or at university. And I don't understand who I am.

I remember that I really didn't like the kindergarten I used to go to. Then I didn't like the school I studied at. My neighbor went to arts school. She told me about that school. And I really wanted to go to that school every day with my neighbor. But my parents couldn't get me in. Or they didn't want to. Or they thought they didn't have to. But I didn't like my school, which wasn't my school at all, that I had to go to. They'd make us all be identical there. And I was trying to be different. Even then. To be special. And I would show that I was special, that I was defiant.

And I clearly remember that I was punished for that. I can't remember how, exactly. My inner wish for goodness and warmth has washed those memories away, the details of those punishments. There was nothing humiliating about them. But the way they looked at me. I think it was terrible. I was punished for my defiance. Immediately. So that I would understand that I was being punished.

I also remember that I was forever being told off by my parents. Told off for sometimes wanting to mess around when I was eating. Me. A six-year-old kid. Told off for messing around, can you imagine? It's insane! What kind of person tells a kid off for messing around and pulling faces? They told me off for "thinking I'm something special", me, a kid of eight, nine, ten years old who watched a film and was playing out a scene from that film, or was repeating a phrase, maybe a risky one, from a film that was "too adult", as they'd say. They were forever telling me off and

reproaching me for being clumsy. My parents. People who, basically, were supposed to be telling me that I'm special.

Damn it.

Telling me off because I wasn't like everyone else.

And I understood. I understood that if I give way and hide my true feelings and wishes, then my patience will be rewarded.

Yes.

God, it's so terrible.

When I reached sexual maturity, like many of my girlfriends, I thought about sex a lot and a lot of the time. I read Guy de Maupassant and Remarque with interest, when my parents were out I'd watch different films that excited my young mind. Bertolucci's *The Dreamers*, Verhoeven's *Showgirls*, and, of course, *Basic Instinct* with stunning Sharon Stone.

It was a big secret. And, of course, I didn't tell anyone what interested me most of all at the time, I didn't talk about "it", about sexual relations between a man and a woman. Not with my parents! Or with the people who were closest to me.

Later, when I was already an adult, many years later, I found out that there were lots of girls among my classmates who discussed all that with their mothers, and some even with both parents. With both parents! Astonishing! The girls would say that they'd discussed these issues at the dining table. While they were eating. While they were eating a veggie salad, cutting into chicken breasts with a knife, washing it all down with orange juice, and then having apple pie for dessert. For me, the fantasy stories that I openly read, not hiding them from my parents, looked far more realistic than that kind of situation taking place in my family. Sex was not discussed. Simply and comprehensibly. And that wasn't the only taboo in the environment that I grew up in.

Another part of my youth was called "lying." Secrets and lying.

Mom lied a lot.

Everyone knew that Mom smoked. That terrible smell that she tried to hide by chewing gum, those stinking hands. Her front teeth starting to yellow early. Once, my girlfriend and I were walking with our moms. My Mom took her phone out of her bag. And her cigarettes fell out by accident. I think they were menthol Kent cigarettes. Mom's face changed. She started to kind of blink furiously, like a little fish that had just been pulled out of the water. She blinked and looked around from side to side for some reason. Then she looked at my friend's mom and said that they were cigarettes that she'd bought for their friend. Cheap lies.

Education was also made up of a multitude of comprises with my conscience. Copying. Faking medical certificates in Photoshop so that I could skip school.

Now I understand that I could have taken up a different position. I could have stopped lying. I could have avoided being evasive. But no. Everyone lies. A guy does it to get a girl into bed to get some satisfaction. A girl does it to marry a guy at any price, because all her friends are already married, while she's still got her "head in the clouds", as Mom would always say.

Lying saturates us right from childhood.

I wanted to become an actress. I told everyone about this dream of mine. But they just laughed at me. People who were close to me just laughed in my face. I wanted to go and wash that face afterwards. It was as if I'd been sullied with dirt, some sort of filth. Later, when a man came on my face for the first time, I remembered that feeling. I remembered it and laughed.

Why do the majority of people leave a trail of endless violence?

I once saw a man hitting his child hard a couple of times because he'd pulled his little hand out of the man's big hand. Nobody – neither his mother, nor his father, his parents, it seems – had explained to him that a child can behave as a child, he can free his little hand and that's exactly what he should do.

God! It becomes our second 'me.' We can endlessly hit someone in the face. And be proud of it. It's some form of continual aggression created by our internal, ossified complexes. We carry all that old baggage around with us. The pain of our parents, who were forever going "I don't want that", "you have to be patient", "everyone puts up with it", "what will the neighbors say" and all those other revolting, dusty old rags of the past.

Those fears of our forebears that breed cruelty and brutishness are still with us.

Why?

Why don't we love our children? Our children whose births we'd wanted so badly. How many people are overjoyed when they find out that they're expecting! And then what happens to those people? It seems that the happy parents were never told that there would be sleepless nights, kids bawling their eyes out, children's illnesses and that the little kid would pull his hand free from the adult's. If you're not ready for all that, then sit in your stinking apartment and jerk yourself off quietly, having opened yet another porn site, grinding your teeth in joy. Lock yourself up in your stinking apartment, you animal, and whack yourself off!"

October 2017

Vickey

Vickey didn't want to wake up. "Please, another five minutes!" she pleaded to the rays of sunlight breaking through the curtains that hadn't been properly pulled. That night she'd dreamt of sex, the sex she desired most of all, and the most unobtainable – Diana, Alex, and her. The two people she was in love with! Together. It was such bliss, she didn't want to move, she wanted to stay there, under the duvet, forever, again and again playing out their love scene in her imagination.

How she and Alex stood up against the brick wall in his bedroom in Shoreditch. He's taller than Vickey, so he was looking down on her. His eyes were laughing, burning her with an amber fire. He tenderly took her hands into his and raised them over his head. The translucent silk top she was wearing allowed her pointed nipples to gently slip upwards. Alex followed them with his gaze, leering in satisfaction. He clearly liked what he was seeing.

Diana entered the room, beautiful, graceful Diana in a black latex bra, short skirt and high boots. She had a fine leather whip in her hand, she waved it from side to side like a black panther swishing its tail, approaching the male that she had won in a mating battle, relishing the fact that she would show no mercy.

Diana came up to them and tenderly kissed Vickey on the lips. Her tongue delved in, slipping past her teeth, taking possession of her tongue, hooking onto it, luring it out of the cozy depths of her mouth. It happened for a long time. And when Vickey had already decided to stick her tongue into Diana's moist mouth, Diana gently pulled herself free of her lips. And turned to face Alex.

Their faces were very close to Vickey's, she could see every pore on their skin, she could sense the familiar aroma of lavender coming from the groove at the base

of Diana's neck and the muscular scent of sweat coming from Alex's naked torso. Vickey grew giddily drunk on both scents.

Diana kissed Alex, but in a different way from Vickey. She slightly opened her mouth, and passed the tip of her tongue along the lower edge of his teeth. Alex lent forward and hungrily kissed her mouth. Two panthers, black and ginger, a female and a male.

His right hand held on fast to Vickey's, she remained helplessly pressed up against the wall while their hair swished past her face and their breath burned her skin.

Finally, Alex broke free of Diana, placing his left hand on her head, forcing her to crouch down.

Diana unfastened his trousers, and they fell softly to his feet. With one hand she gripped the base of Alex's cock, delicately caressing his stomach and the insides of his thighs with the other. As with the kiss, Diana barely touched the head of his engorged cock with her tongue. Alex groaned loudly, his lips kissing Vickey's hard.

Still holding Alex's cock with her left hand and sucking it between her lips, Diana placed the middle finger of her right hand on Vickey's clit.

It was only now that Vickey noticed that she had no panties on. She was suddenly stung by biting shame, a shame that burned at the inside of her stomach, flames flickering over the damp lips of her vagina, concentrating on the confined area directly under Diana's finger. She closed her eyes, she wanted what was happening to never end.

Diana circled her long finger in precise movements. Again and again. Alex kissed Vickey. His breathing was growing faster, groans coming from deep within his chest. Everything was moving to the rhythm that Diana was setting, the joy was building up with each passing second.

But suddenly Alex changed the picture. He moved Diana away from him, pulled Vickey's silk top off her, and sat her down, entirely naked, on her knees beside Diana. Diana again kissed Vickey tenderly on the lips, then licked Alex's cock on all sides with her tongue, before taking it in whole and slowly releasing it, ceding it to Vickey's lips.

Vickey began to suck Alex's cock, it had already turned to enflamed stone. She moved back and forth quickly, a minute, another minute, and then she could feel Alex wrapping her hair up into his fist.

Diana, meanwhile, kneeled behind Vickey, massaging her tits with both hands. Her fingers pinched at Vickey's nipples, twiddling and teasing them. If only it wouldn't end. Ever.

Alex pulled sharply at her hair. Vickey threw her head back. In the same instant, Diana pressed herself to Vickey's back with her whole body. Close, close, her small breasts pressed their pointed nipples into Vickey's shoulder blades. Her long neck touched Vickey's.

Diana leant down to Alex's cock and immediately took it in her mouth whole.

Vickey, with Diana's body pressing down on her, found her forehead pushed up against the base of Alex's cock. She took the cock in her hand and began to lick Alex's balls, then lower, her tongue slipping around and into his ass. Short, frequent incursions. The powerful muscles of his buttohole pushed Vickey's tongue back out. Alex roared his joy. Again and again and again.

Suddenly Alex again pulled at Vickey's hair, forcing her to straighten herself up. He lay down on the bed that unexpectedly appeared beneath them, and Diana sat

down on him from above, pulling up her short, belted skirt. His cock went deep into her pussy.

Slowly raising herself up, she began rocking back and forth. Diana's slender but powerful body curved before their eyes in something akin to an incredibly beautiful dance performed with her hips, tummy and neck. Her arms wandered about her breasts, then lower, pressing down on the lower part of her stomach. Diana began to quietly moan, her motions speeding up.

Vickey froze, stunned by the beauty of her body, their bodies, so beautiful, those beloved bodies. Alex's hand pulled her towards him. And Vickey lightly sat down on his face. His lips to hers... With his hands he parted her buttocks. He entered her with his tongue. Vickey moaned and felt the touch of Diana's hands caressing her breasts, her shoulders, she took her head in her hands, pulling her to her nipples.

Vickey began to lick and suck at Diana's breasts, her fingers, her teeth, her nose pushing aside her bothersome bodice, sucking and biting at her nipples, picking up the pace with each passing minute. Diana moaned louder and moved faster. Her hand went back down, her fingers scratching at Alex's stomach, her palm pressing down on the base of her stomach.

An instant, and Diana gave out a loud but short cry, and then again, gasping for air, as if the momentum was keeping her moving on Alex's cock.

Vickey found Diana's mouth with her lips, helping her maintain her balance after her orgasm.

Alex's teeth in that instant squeezed powerfully on Vickey's clit, his tongue flickering incredibly fast in different directions over her clit. Vickey sensed that she was coming without having the time to break free from her kiss with Diana. Her mind blanking, she bit into her lip. She groaned right into her mouth. A flash.

She was lying on her front on a mound of pillows, her head turned to the side, her hand and legs helplessly hanging down. She felt a softness, a sweetness. She could see beautiful, slender Diana picking the whip up from the floor and approaching her. She couldn't see Alex, but the surface of her skin sensed his presence close by. Vickey heard the movements of their bodies behind her, but she couldn't turn her head to see them. Nobody said a word.

Vickey heard Diana and Alex beginning to kiss. Passionately, for a long time, their thighs and arms sometimes touching Vickey as she lay on the cushions. These touches sent shivers across her entire body. Like a cold ocean breeze blowing across her hot skin. For a second it seemed to her that they were on a deserted sandy beach, the sun was shining bright, and powerful waves were washing up on the shoreline close by. Please, don't let it stop, please.

Suddenly she felt Alex's palm being placed between her legs. His fingers touched her clit and began to move in a circle, insistently, powerfully. She sensed Diana passing her palm down her spine, gently and nimbly tapping with her fingers. She still couldn't see them. Her entire body began to be aroused. She felt the cold leather of the whip touch on her shoulder blades and then slowly move down her back, following Diana's warm fingers, down to the soft semi-sphere of her bottom.

Vickey knew that the whip signaled danger. Danger that she sought. She instinctively tightened up her buttocks and immediately received a sharp, powerful slap from Alex. Once, twice, and again until she relaxed her hips and slumped back down onto the pillows. Then she felt Diana slipping the whip between her buttocks, pausing on the tender, pink, wet circle around her butthole.

Diana rubbed the short, hard whip up and down, reaching Vickey's clit which was again ready to explode. She gently passed the end over the lips of her pussy, pushing it in just a touch, testing if it was wet enough. She gave a grunt of satisfaction and suddenly hit Vickey on the buttocks with the whip. Again and again and again. The blows from the whip left deep red marks on her tender skin and Vickey began groaning loudly.

Diana stopped and repeated her test of Vickey's pussy. This time Vickey could sense how the colorless liquid was starting to drip out of her, indicating that she was ready – very ready. Diana whipped her again and let Alex replace her. Vickey heard the pitter-pattering of her high heels on the floor.

Alex entered Vickey in one thrust. His cock slipped right in without any resistance, and slipped back out again. He fucked Vickey with powerful, fast movements, holding her by the neck from behind. Vickey still couldn't move her head, and still couldn't see Alex or Diana.

Vickey's orgasm tip-toed ever closer to her with every new movement from Alex. She wanted to cry out. "Stop time, I'll be a good girl, just don't let it stop, don't let it stop ever." But she merely moaned loudly to the rhythm of Alex's movements.

Diana came up to Vickey from in front and gently raised her. She looked into Vickey's eyes and innocently kissed her lips. At this moment, Alex pulled his cock out of Vickey and slowly put it into her anus. He began to move ever faster. Tears of pain and joy began to pour from grey eyes. Diana gently kissed them away from Vickey's cheeks.

Alex began to enter each of Vickey's holes in turn.

Vickey could no longer tell the difference, the entire lower section of her back had turned into the fire-breathing crater of a volcano filled with the lava of joy, ready to blow its top at any moment.

Diana stuck the back of her palm into Vickey's mouth and tenderly caressed Vickey's head with her other hand.

Vickey looked into Diana's eyes filled with pity. A push, another push, and the entire world around soared into the air. She felt her teeth digging into Diana's hand as she tried to use them to cling onto the world. But the powerful shock wave destroyed the Earth, blasting it into billions of tiny shards absorbed by the Universe.

Vickey sensed Alex's caring arms turning her onto her back, onto the same cushions where her head and body could now rest. Still rocking on waves of cosmic antigravity, she could see Diana lying down on top of her, her beloved, delicate Diana, her face pressed to her nether regions, her breasts to her stomach, her stomach to her breasts.

Vickey could see Alex's cock, wet from her orgasm, was now entering into Diana's tight pussy, surrounded by tufts of pubic hair cut short.

Diana groaned, pressing her face into Vickey's crotch. She licked, bit and sucked at the millions of nerve endings focused at that point. The whole of Vickey, all that was left of her following the "Big Bang", was concentrated on that tiny section beneath Diana's tongue.

Vickey could see Alex's cock plunging in and out of Diana, the moisture spraying out of her pussy, dripping onto Vickey's forehead, cheeks, nose and chin. It got into her eyes, stinging unbearably. Vickey squinted. She could feel the blood pulsing through her veins faster and faster, chasing after the blood in Diana's body pressed so tightly to her.

Faster. Vickey had already lost count of the number of times this had happened in her dream, but nevertheless she again began the ascent to the summit of human ecstasy.

She reached it almost in an instant, meeting Diana there, her beloved Diana, becoming one with her in their shriek. Their unified orgasm stopped time.

Vickey couldn't understand how their bodies were moving, but Alex pushed his cock into her mouth. She licked the taste of her beloved woman from it – a light bitterness through the sweet nectar.

Alex cried out, shooting flakes of sperm across Vickey's face. They all became one. Alex, Diana, Vickey. If only it would never end.

A bright light distracted Vickey.

Rays of sunshine breaking through the drawn curtains.

August 2018 **Leon, Alex, Vickey, Maxim, Greg**

At about four thirty in the morning, Leon awoke in bed in his apartment, in a panel-built block of flats in Balham, after a sleepless night. His mother was sleeping in the next-door room. She was snoring, as she almost always did. "She must've got drunk again," thought Leon and sighed. Leon went up to the window and looked out. He saw shabby looking housing blocks built in the 1960s and 1970s, dilapidated garages, a few shops, a cheap shoe and clothing repair workshop, and an equally cheap hairdresser's. Then he looked at the peeling wood of the window frame which must have been about forty years old.

"It's all cheap and dirty," thought Leon. He imagined how, in a few hours' time, he would go down the staircase of his building. Jam-jar lids with dozens of cigarette butts sticking out of them. The peeling banisters. Old walls stinking of cheap nicotine, their original color couldn't even be made out anymore. Dirt everywhere.

For an instant his face was lit up by a smile. "I can change all this," he thought. "Please let me get lucky today. I just need to get lucky one time."

Leon suddenly realized that he'd never been lucky.

A chill went through his body. As if a stranger had come up to him from behind. A skinny, bony, muscled stranger, who quickly slipped a noose over his neck.

Leon shivered and looked round. Greg had ordered that they take light sedatives the night before the job so that they'd get a good night's sleep, but Leon was so terrified that he'd forgotten that instruction.

He looked out the window again. There were several guys standing around by the entrance. Some workers, no doubt waiting to be picked up and taken to their building sites. A police car drove up to them and a couple of cops began checking their documents. Suddenly, one of the policemen turned round for some reason and headed in the direction of the entrance to Leon's building. Leon started to panic again. What if they would come for him like that one day? Lord!

"Lord, help me," he whispered under his breath. Leon never prayed. His mother had been a hardcore left-winger and she'd rejected all religions. And Leon hadn't thought about the subject at all.

He looked aside to a box of computers disks. People had stopped using disks ages ago. That box, for him, was a kind of safe. That's where he kept his cash. He hid it from his mother, who would drink her way through it if she found it. Right now, he had about twelve hundred pounds in the box. That was enough – he could throw it in

a sports bag with a few essentials and disappear from the city. He would've no doubt done that, if it wasn't for his mother. "You signed up to it," Greg had said to them, looking each of them in the eye. Those words were ringing in Leon's head right now. At that moment, Leon had looked at Max. At his cousin who had protected him throughout his life. And he'd seen a brutal confidence in his eyes. There was no way back now.

"He'll simply come here and shoot my mother," thought Leon, and that thought made him even more afraid. "He'll just take out his gun, put it to her head and pull the trigger. And then he'd just go to the nearest café, without a care in the world, and have a snack, smiling his chipped teeth at the waitress."

In an instant, it occurred to Leon that if it all went wrong he'd never get to use that secret hoard in the box, and he almost broke down in tears at the thought. He looked at the cardboard box with its useless disks in it. For him, that old cardboard had suddenly turned into an island of warmth where everything was calm and quiet. Maybe not very clean, not a huge amount, but quiet. "Am I really never going to see that box again?" he thought. "Am I never coming back here?" The place that a few moments before had filled him with disgust had suddenly turned into something dear to him.

Leon gave his head a shake and slapped himself on his chubby cheeks.

"God," whispered Leon. "I need to get ready, it's time." He had to carefully pack up the network of squares for the explosives, to just as carefully wrap it all up in foam and put it in his rucksack.

"God, god," whispered Leon. "God, forgive me. Forgive and help me."

At the same time, in one of London's hippest neighborhoods, in Shoreditch, at No.5, Alex and Vicky were lying on the couch. Vicky had moved in with Alex when they'd started preparing for the job.

That evening, Alex had asked Vicky not to go off to the bedroom, and she'd stayed with him. They'd watched television with zero interest. They'd barely slept at all that night. Mostly because of Alex, who just couldn't settle himself down.

"I didn't have the right to get you involved in this," he told Vicky.

Vicky stared at him for a long time.

"You didn't have the right to get to know me at all," she said, entirely serious.

Alex looked at Vicky and thought about how much she had come to mean to him. Now. When his body was as tense as a bowstring, barely holding a sharp arrow back, cruelly biting into the fingers that had drawn it.

He hadn't trusted himself for a long time. All of those sexual experiments, the host of partners, the adventures over the last couple of years, had brought him nothing other than torturous soul searching.

He had tried everything in search of love, and love had been waiting for him here for the whole time, on his yellow couch. Vicky's love. A vast, all-forgiving love in which Alex, for a long time, hadn't been able to believe. He hadn't even believed in the possibility of such a love, that someone could love him the way he is. That he wouldn't have to prove anything to anyone. That it wouldn't end, that it wouldn't disappear.

Yesterday, when they'd been lying on the sofa, he'd told her: "I was punished by my mother so often for absolutely nothing, that I wanted to do something that was really wrong. And get away scot free... Remember, like in Basic Instinct: 'To see if I

can get away with it.' That's how robbing the chemist's with Max got started. But then the thrill of those small-time robberies wasn't enough. I couldn't admit that to myself. And then you and I broke up. Then the suggestion from Max and Greg. And that's it. We're here now."

Vickey was with him now as he prepared to cross a line that would cut them off from their normal lives forever.

Alex was overcome by a wave of gratitude.

"Do you understand me?" Vickey's voice brought him back into the heavy reality of those early morning hours.

He sensed her breath. He sensed the whole of her. He wanted to dissolve in her. To put his head on her lap. And cry. Like a little child. To ask for help, knowing in advance that she would forgive him. Knowing that, but nevertheless honestly asking for forgiveness.

"Alex," she repeated, very quietly.

Vickey stretched out her palm and tenderly touched his face. Alex fought back his tears with difficulty.

"Why, why? How? How did we get into this situation? How did I get drawn into something so awful, with no way back?"

Alex realized that even if they tried to flee London, Greg would find them. Alex didn't know how. He had no idea about that kind of thing. But in his gut he knew that Greg wouldn't just let them go. He'd turn them in to the cops in vengeance. "This is my whole life's work. It's my freedom. It's your freedom, guys." For someone like Greg, those weren't empty words.

"I love you," she said.

"I love you," he told her for the first time.

That night before the main robbery, Max slept calmly in his little two-room apartment on the Caledonian Road. He himself was surprised at how well he'd slept when he awoke at about six in the morning. His Samsung phone bleeped its morning ringtone, an AC/DC track. Max turned to it, lifted up the mobile to look at it, and turned the alarm off. And in that instant, it was as if he was giving himself an order. A countdown to the beginning of the job began. As if an electronic screen had popped up before him, the hours, minutes and seconds ticking away. The figures for the seconds began to turn with an unpleasant screeching that only he could hear.

Unexpectedly, he sensed that his body was beginning to ache as if he had a very high temperature. Getting up and walking around the kitchen for a few minutes, Max realized that he couldn't concentrate on anything. He thought about making a coffee, but immediately rejected the idea, sensing that he wouldn't be able to get or keep anything down. Walking around for a little while longer, Max, working on automatic, poured himself a glass of water from the tap. He took a first gulp, then spat it back out into the sink, writhing. He was sick from fear. It was only now that Max realized that his hands were shaking.

Max suddenly sensed that he was physically afraid. Not afraid of the coming crime. He was afraid of killing someone. The idea that today's job couldn't be compared in any way with what they'd done before ripped through him. Small chemist's with unfortunate girls behind the till. Even the bowling club. They were nothing compared to a bank. All the personnel at the bank would have been through some proper training. There were secret alarm buttons to call the police hidden

throughout the bank. A guard from the main gates could walk past the bank. There could be a guard hidden somewhere. Absolutely anything could happen.

The police. The mere thought alone had him retching with a new force. If the police would turn up, or some guy tried to play hero, he would probably have to shoot. Shoot to kill. And try to flee the city.

Today it would be all or it would be nothing.

Max didn't plan on going to prison. Under any circumstances whatsoever. He knew perfectly well what they thought of cops or former cops in the slammer. It was hell. The convicts would wreak vengeance. And that was the end of the line. He couldn't put up with daily humiliations, maybe even rape. So, if anything unexpected happened he would have to shoot.

And get away. First, he'd make it to the design school's fence. That would take about forty seconds. He'd jump the turnstile and then blend in with the crowd. Then he would lie low. For a few weeks. Max knew a few people in a small town not far from London, Luton - petty thieves, people who owed him, who he'd done some nasty work with a couple of times. They wouldn't turn him down. He knew that for certain.

Then he'd have to get as far from London as he could. Out into the sticks. Get some new documents and live quietly. But if anything unforeseen came up, in order to make it to that quiet life in some forgotten hole out in Wales, he'd have to shoot. To kill.

Max didn't have any pangs of conscience about maybe having to kill someone. He'd chosen to take part in this job, he'd chosen to take the chance. Unlike Alex, Vickey and Leon, Max knew full well where Greg was taking them right from the beginning. Greg was like an open book to Max. At one and the same time, he held Greg in contempt and valued him. If anyone could come up with a great plan that was also very simple it was Greg. "Soon all the girls in London will be yours." Yes, Greg had come up with a great marketing slogan. Max had seen how Greg had gently and elegantly tightened the noose around the necks of the guys. Max had understood everything from the very beginning.

But, all the same, now he was afraid.

Max looked at his hands. There could be blood on them today. As a cop he'd had to interrogate prisoners accused of murder. He remembered that wild, primal fear in their eyes. Those who had been caught stealing but didn't have blood on their hands had a different look in their eye. They hadn't crossed that line. Murder. Depriving someone of life. Those without blood on their hands could believe that things might just work out for them. It didn't matter how. They'd get a sentence and serve it. Or they'd get off on a technicality. Or cut a deal with the prosecution. But those who'd crossed the line knew that now there was no way back. You can only become an outcast once. In the moment of the killing, if he carried it out, he would finally sell his soul to the devil for once and for all. And he would quiver not only at the sight of a policeman, but at the slightest mention of a cop in a conversation, or at the sound of police siren a few blocks away.

Max remembered how he'd gone through fire arms training. Many years ago. He remembered how long it had taken him to get over that, how his body had been shaking for so long. For months afterwards he had difficulty getting off to sleep. He vividly imagined the bullet coming out of his gun, piercing someone's body a few instants later, tearing open the skin and blood vessels, blasting blood out.

Max walked up to the cupboard over the sink in the kitchen. His hands shaking, he took out an opened bottle of cheap White Horse whiskey, quickly unscrewed the

cap and took a slug from it. The poison almost immediately warmed his stomach, for a while distracting him from the thoughts pressing in on him. For a few seconds he thought that it would be a good idea to take some food from the fridge, bread, some sliced sausage, he could lie down on the sofa and watch a football match. He could finish off the whiskey watching the game, and then have a snooze under the blanket. These simple joys now seemed an impossibility for him. They were distant. Almost a luxury.

Max looked at the bottle of White Horse, fighting his internal desire to take another gulp. But he didn't want to lose control of himself, aware of his tendency to drink too much. Max screwed the cap back on and hid the bottle away. He stood there in silence for a while, then went into the bedroom to get changed and put his disguise on.

In London's far from prestigious neighborhood of Lewisham, Greg stood at the only window of a single room in a rented apartment. He looked out onto the thrum of traffic as it started to pick up.

In the distance, the sun could just about be seen rising. Pressing a Marlboro between his weather-beaten lips, he visualized the main job of his life. As if he was a military commander before a decisive battle, he ran through the various scenarios that he'd been developing in his thoughts for six long years. Greg felt wonderful, he even felt a certain high. He stood square, his back stretched long, as if he was a general inspecting a parade, and savored the tiniest details of the robbery.

Having run through it twenty times, Greg allowed himself to imagine, for a moment, that he'd accomplished the job that lay ahead of them. To imagine that he already had those millions and he was living in the center of London, somewhere off the Tottenham Court Road, or maybe even in Knightsbridge. Where the only people living there were third or fourth generation Londoners or "New Londoners", as he called them – people who'd already prospered in the modern capital. London scum, as he and people like him called these people who ate at the best restaurants, drove around in expensive cars with personal drivers, who were never in a hurry to get anywhere and spoke at an affectedly slow pace. Or maybe it wasn't an affectation – maybe they just spoke slowly. Which was even worse. What was the hurry for them? They have everything, they've already grabbed everything and sorted themselves out in this big city of big opportunities.

Suddenly, Greg's stomach turned slightly. Greg, after all, could live like they do. He could dress well, and smell good.

Greg closed his eyes. His thoughts carried him off into the distance, to places he'd seen many times, but through glass, from the street where, in the autumn, a cold wind blew and, in the summer, it was baking hot under the London sun.

How many times had he, and people like him, passing by, say, the expensive restaurants in the West End, looked in and seen that soft, warm light, the beautifully dressed people sitting in cozy red and white chairs around a round table with expensive, beautiful crockery and cutlery? Waitresses swished to and for, almost unnoticed, and there was an extraordinary atmosphere. Like in the movies. But the whole point was that this was no movie now; it was through the glass, within reach. Just try reaching for it. And you can touch it.

Greg, after all, could start a family, begin a dynasty, and his children could go to private kindergartens and high-class schools, like the one he'd worked as a guard at

for a time. His children could make friends, they'd be friends of successful people, and then, thanks to those connections, they could all open successful businesses together.

And after all, Greg could meet a sweet girl who'd bear him happy kids, she'd look after them, teach them how to use a spoon, knife and fork the right way, how to talk beautifully. She'd take care of Greg. She'd adjust his tie and shirt collar before kissing him and wishing him a good day. Anything could happen! He could take off into the sticks with the money. Open a successful business there, build it up, and then come back to London with honestly earned cash and live the highlife.

Greg opened his eyes. The depressing sight of Lewisham was still right in front of him. His heart was warmed by the thought that he'd done everything he could to make sure the job would be pulled off. Everything that had been done had been done well. The plan was ideal and it couldn't be changed now. "Let's just hope that luck will be on our side," he thought.

Greg felt a pleasing warmth in his body and, happy with himself, he rubbed his hands together.

Now, when they'd gone so far, when there was just the last, key step left, he was ready for any outcome. He knew that a lot would be down to luck. Of course, a lot, almost everything, would be down to the prep and the team working well together. But it was luck that would put the final full stop on the whole deal. He'd heard of incredible coincidences so many times, of stupid coincidences that had put hardnosed thieves, real masters in their crafts, away for many, long years.

Greg was honest with himself, and his conscience didn't balk at thinking through how he could rip the gang off once they'd got away with the robbery. The only thing that stopped him in his thoughts was Max. He was an ex-cop, after all, and when it came to something like this, as the saying goes, there are no ex-cops. Perhaps Max had come up with some sort of insurance policy just in case something didn't turn out right. Greg also didn't know if someone would be following him on Max's orders. In any event, he'd decided to play by the rules that he and Max had established. And if something didn't turn out right, he'd decide on the spot. He had a lot of experience.

Let's just hope that luck will be on our side. Let us be lucky.

November 2017

Alex, Ronnie

Alex walked up to the door and threw it open. Ronnie stood in the hall, smiling.
"Hi!"

"Hi, hi!" smiled Alex. "You've come at just the right time. I was about to have dinner."

Ronnie was a student at Imperial, interning with Diana. He came from up North, from Yorkshire, it seemed from a normal family that wasn't too well off.

He was no fool. He couldn't really get his hands on any money, but Ronnie liked to eat, in that field he was quite the expert.

London presented this poor student with the opportunity to access delicious food for free. A city with nine million inhabitants. A huge number of pubs, bars, restaurants, takeout joints and cheap chicken shops where for a few pounds you could get three pieces and fries. The scent of that fried chicken would have your mouth watering instantly. And, of course, the food industry trade fairs held

frequently at the exhibition centers. In order to be fed some delicious dishes, you just needed one thing – to look decent and ask the right questions, to create the impression that you really are interested in the company's products that you're now trying, or, rather, eating your fill of. A clean, bright shirt, a good haircut, a look of confidence in your eye, decent trousers and clean shoes, and you can eat everywhere for free.

Alex had invited Ronnie in the secret hope that he could ask about Diana. He really missed her, but after five unanswered calls he'd realized that he was knocking at a locked door and he abandoned his attempts.

While they ate the steak that Alex had fried, Ronnie didn't mention her once, but he did highly praise his host's culinary skills and spoke about himself a lot. He said that he couldn't understand why he was studying medicine, that he didn't see any good prospects for himself once he'd graduated, and that he was simply drifting in life. He thought he had talent, skillful hands, he could become a good surgeon earning decent money, but he'd had enough of all the sleepless nights and having to memorize endless lists of medical terms.

"You're just tired," said Alex, sympathizing, although Ronnie was already beginning to irritate him in some imperceptible way. "Tell me," he eventually asked when Ronnie fell silent for a while in order to wolf down a huge chunk of steak, apparently without chewing it first, "how's Diana?"

"Fine, I think, she's going out with this incredibly hot chick. I'm openly gay and I'm not interested in women, so I'm quite objective here, totally impartial on this issue. This girl is in the 'I definitely would' league," said Ronnie, stretching out the words for emphasis and then laughing.

Alex looked at Ronnie and then very clearly sensed that he didn't like him. His clothing, his manner, his high-pitched, effeminate voice.

"Ah! There was something else!" Ronnie suddenly blurted out. "Diana's going to Africa. To save the children. Listen, have you got anything to drink?"

Alex had heard about this dream of Diana's long ago and inside he smiled. He was happy for her. He took down an opened bottle from the bar, a cheap whisky that had been left over after some corporate event, and poured two glasses.

"And the girl's going with her." Ronnie took a sip of the drink and his face broke out into a smile. It was clear that he loved gossip. "They announced it at her birthday party. In fact, why weren't you there?"

"And the girl's going with her..." It was as if the words had numbed Alex. A noise broke out in his head. It was as if he found himself in a place that he should never have been in. At some sort of factory. Where a saw was slicing logs in half and making a screeching racket.

He heard a question coming from Ronnie. "So, why weren't you there?"

"What? ... I couldn't make it," Alex answered briefly.

"So, they're just an incredibly beautiful couple, they look like Charlie's Angels, a brunette and a blonde," giggled Ronnie.

The blood pounded in Alex's temples.

"What's Diana's new girlfriend's name?" he asked, his voice shaking.

"I don't remember. Weird. I forgot," Ronnie continued breezily. "There were so many people there! Some good-looking guys. I had them to keep me busy."

In two gulps he drained what was left in the glass.

Alex looked at him as if hypnotized. Ronnie's chatter disintegrated into individual words, then letters, ashes. What he was saying was completely

incomprehensible. Working on automatic, Alex also drained his glass. And poured them another.

"Well, you know, of course, that her elder brother is gay – the whole hospital knows that. The brother's husband is also one of our doctors. They've been living together as a couple for ten years," Ronnie chattered on without paying any attention to Alex. "But what you definitely don't know is that none of that has stopped me lusting after him for all these years. But even if that beauty offered me a ring and said let's go to Africa, I'd refuse! It's Africa, damn it! Alex! There are crocodiles and gorillas and death everywhere there!"

Alex drank some more, getting drunker fast, the whisky going down well on his empty stomach and the yeast from the excesses of the previous evening. He looked at Ronnie – his vision went blurry, now there were two Ronnies, he looked like a multicolored bird, a big parrot. He thought the parrot even looked quite pretty, and he smiled. He'd always loved parrots. In Alex's head, the factory, blaring mercilessly, continued to saw its way through timber.

"So, she's leaving with Diana like the faithful wife of some prisoner who's been sent into exile. And this is right at the beginning of their romance. They've only been going out for half a year. Now that's love!" exclaimed Ronnie, hopping up and down on his chair.

They were sitting at the breakfast bar in Alex's kitchen. Ronnie was also slightly drunk. He was looking hungrily at Alex's untouched steak on the plate in front of him. Eventually he made his move, reaching for it with his fork.

"You don't mind?" he asked, either of Alex or of the steak. And with a skillful movement he transferred the steak to his own plate and immediately started wolfing it down with satisfaction.

Alex caught himself thinking that Ronnie no longer annoyed him, and that when he was blurred and couldn't be heard he was even quite pleasant. He poured the remains of the bottle into their glasses.

"Listen, you're not into men at all, are you?" Ronnie asked, his words suddenly coming through loud and clear to Alex.

He shook his head and tried to focus his gaze. Ronnie's face was very close to his, just forty inches away, the width of the narrow bar that separated them. He could smell the stench of whisky coming from an already very drunk Ronnie, he looked at Ronnie's half open mouth and lips as he waited for an answer.

"I don't think I've really worked out that issue yet," Alex answered in all seriousness.

"Well, you won't work it out until you give it a try," said Ronnie, dissolving into a smile.

"That's just what my therapist says," said Alex, getting up, "and I don't think I've got anything else left to lose. I'm going to the toilet."

He took a step but tripped, and Ronnie had to support him. Ronnie gently propped him up, and then immediately caressed the side of his face with the palm of his hand. Alex didn't resist. His heart started to beat faster in response, he sensed the slight palpitations of desire passing over his body. He wanted this, he wanted to try it. Again, Alex's thoughts and desires got mixed up in his head and he couldn't understand what was going on within him.

"Take off your glasses!" he ordered Ronnie.

Ronnie obediently took them off and put them on the table. Now Alex really noticed Ronnie's eyes – blue, translucent, bright. Like his mother's. Cold, beautiful, damn them.

Alex looked down on Ronnie from above. With a sharp motion he tore his shirt from his chest and then pinched and twisted his nipple.

Ronnie winced but didn't make a sound. Alex liked causing Ronnie pain. In horror, he realized that he wanted to hear Ronnie crying out in pain, begging for forgiveness, crying, unable to take any more of the torment.

He swung with all his might and slapped him on the cheek with his palm. Ronnie's cheek immediately flared up crimson red. But Ronnie didn't let out a sound.

That made Alex angry, so he struck a second time. He no longer understood the feelings that had overcome him, that were guiding him, and leading him on. He continued hitting, blow after blow. Until Ronnie put a hand up to stop him.

"Maybe you could just fuck me?" offered Ronnie in his delicate voice.

And Alex was overcome by a powerful wave of arousal. He wanted to get Ronnie down on all fours and ram his huge, rock-hard cock into him.

Ronnie, as if reading his thoughts, got up from his chair and, swaying from side to side, headed into the bedroom, beckoning Alex after him. But Alex stopped.

"No, right here."

Ronnie didn't object. Rocking slightly on his heels, he began to unbutton his jeans, dropping them to his ankles, bending over with his whole body. He was left with just his boxers on. He raised his blue eyes to look up at Alex.

"Take everything off," Alex commanded.

Without a trace of embarrassment, Ronnie followed his orders.

Ronnie's cock was of average size. Alex noted that it was growing under his gaze, but lazily, not fast. It was as if it was waiting for Alex to take it in his mouth and help it grow.

The thought burned Alex like a slap in the face. He pushed Ronnie down onto the kitchen floor.

Ronnie, naked, dropped softly down on to his knees, the drink cushioning the fall. Looking back up at Alex, he smiled.

"Come on, then. I'm waiting for you. Fuck me."

Ronnie, beckoning him on, wiggled his hips.

Alex was gripped by a million contradictory feelings. Shame. Fury. Rage. Lust. An insane lust. Sinful. He wanted it. He had always wanted it.

With a sharp movement, Alex pulled off his jeans and boxers. It seemed to him that his cock was burning, about to explode from its desire to discharge. He reached for the condoms on the shelf, and skillfully pulled one on, allowing for the fact that he was drunk. He spat on it with relish and then, at a stroke, drove it into Ronnie's ass. Without lubrication. To the end.

Ronnie groaned loudly. Finally. He groaned. That aroused Alex even more. He began to fuck Ronnie. Then harder, ever more relentlessly. "I want you to shriek," he mouthed under his breath.

Alex could feel his orgasm approaching. He was nothing other than his cock. He fucked him over and over. Ever harder. "Give him pain. That's what he wants."

Giving way to his instincts, Alex began slapping away at Ronnie's buttocks. He beat him with a fury on a par with his passion. He closed his eyes in satisfaction.

Ronnie cried out loudly, but didn't beg for mercy. He was fucking him. He used everything he had to delay the finish. He had to hear Ronnie begging him.

Suddenly, Alex opened his eyes and saw his own hands gripping on to Ronnie's hips, red from the slaps. His cock, driving in and out of Ronnie's tender asshole. He looked down and saw that Ronnie's cock still hadn't reached its full potential.

He froze. He didn't like seeing Ronnie's semi-erect cock. A chill washed across his body, causing his own cock to deflate fast.

Alex wasn't moving. Just a second before he'd been ready to ram Ronnie's ass raw, but now he simply wanted none of this to be happening. All of the heavy thoughts that had been tormenting him, in a shot, returned to his consciousness. It was as if the whole situation had frozen. And Ronnie's eyes, so like his mother's. Damn!

Ronnie, very slowly, stretched his hands along his back and began caressing Alex's knees and thighs. But Alex could sense his cock shrinking back to its usual size and almost pulling itself out of Ronnie.

"I'm sorry," said Alex. He could see the empty condom that had wrinkled up in an attempt to avoid falling off too early. "I must have had a lot to drink."

In fact, he didn't want to say anything. He wanted Ronnie to simply disappear, to go up in a puff of smoke and never come back. That familiar, burning feeling of guilt and repentance was torturing his soul.

Ronnie smiled drunkenly, got dressed in silence, and spoke without a care in the world.

"No problem! Just don't go drawing any conclusions from your first try."

He didn't seem to be offended or upset in any way. It was just another event in his packed experience. Not the most successful event. Already dressed, he hung around out of politeness, not sure what to do or how to help Alex, who was consumed by his thoughts.

"Maybe I just wasn't the right guy?" Ronnie said, eventually, shifting awkwardly from foot to foot. "You probably noticed that I'm well into this scene. Don't be upset, ok?" he asked, giving Alex a friendly pat on the shoulder.

His touch drew a powerful feeling of rejection and revulsion in Alex. He caught himself thinking that he found Ronnie unpleasant.

Ronnie sensed the drastic change in Alex's mood. Not knowing quite what to do with his hand, he awkwardly waved it.

"I'd better be off, then."

Alex didn't reply. He couldn't force himself to look at Ronnie.

"Oh, yes – I remembered Diana's girlfriend's name," Ronnie said quietly when he was already at the door. He wanted to do something nice for Alex. He thought that telling Alex her name would cheer him up.

"Vickey," said Ronnie, and quietly closed the door behind him as he left.

August 2016

Alex. Diary

"Maria.

I was twenty-one years old. The beginning of adult life.

I met her. Like in a film. In a museum. Seriously. In the Tate Modern. I was wondering around there alone. I checked out the exhibition of works by Tracey – my favorite. Pencil outlines of girls and a wild desire on the part of the author, expressed in simple strokes, to fuck.

I saw her. She was standing right in the corner of the room, looking at an installation.

My name is Alex. Twenty-one years old. I live in Shoreditch in my grandma's flat. I study at the London School of Economics. I work as a journalist, just starting out.

They say I'm not bad. I've got a full collection of Janis Joplin's recordings. It's a real shame she died so early. But an even greater loss from the "27 Club" is Kurt Cobain. That genius from a small, godforsaken town. I feel sorry for that guy, he couldn't get over his father leaving the family and the damage done in his childhood. Despite his becoming rich and famous.

She stood there listening. And smiled. She had everything. Everything that I was looking for. That a twenty-one-year-old guy was looking for. Grace, intelligence, a lightness, tender lips with a trace of a smile.

She agreed to us viewing the rest of the exhibition together. And then she agreed to go for a walk over the Millenium footbridge for a glass of bitter at the Black Friar Pub – a traditional, warm and weak tipple. I don't know, after an Emin exhibition you should probably be reaching for a cheap red wine, but I wanted a bitter with its hoppy aftertaste.

She said that she was going out with a guy who was studying chemistry at Imperial. I lied that I was prepared to just be friends. She pretended that she believed me, and a few months later she told me that she'd simply found me interesting to listen to.

I simply went out of my mind over her. It was that first love. Like in a movie. Like in books. I didn't eat, I didn't sleep, I walked through Regents Park like a sleepwalker, resting on the benches by the boating pond so that I wouldn't collapse to the ground in exhaustion. Every ten minutes I would take out my smart phone in order to swipe the screen and start gazing fixedly into it. I thought that would make her call sooner.

She told me about her life, about that damned chemist, about her studies at Royal Holloway University in London and she would give a fairytale smile and laugh. From time to time I tried to kiss her. Sometimes she would pretend that she didn't notice my lips approaching, and I would only manage to kiss her cheek. She would laugh and say that I'd promised to just be her friend. I would answer that all I'd done was tell a lie. Our relationship was like an endlessly spinning merry-go-round, a youthful carousel of events and daily impressions of spring and of love. We were fascinated by one another. She introduced me to Jean-Luc Godard, we watched him for the first time together, Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*, we talked about why Kurt Cobain had committed suicide and what a waste it was. And I told her about the real biography of Che Guevara, about Jagger's drinking sessions and experiments, and about Bowie pushing the boundaries of gender. We argued about whether a revolution in Cuba had been necessary or not, we analyzed the works of the Dadaists and the Beatniks, which had to be regarded as a phenomenon, rather than literature...

And then, one day, I told her I couldn't go on like this.

She cried that evening. We wandered around Hyde Park for a long time. And kissed for a long time.

Damn! I want to get this pain down on paper as fast as I can, but I haven't even got close to the middle. It was as if she was never quite giving me the whole story.

The chemist was with her when her father died. Her mother had begun disappearing in the evenings, and she was left alone. In every sense. She didn't ask her mother where she was going. Asking lots of questions wasn't the done thing in their family. Although, if you can't ask questions at times like that, when can you?!?

The chemist, that distinguished candidate of sciences, supported her, he was with her for every minute of every damned day.

And being together the whole time, side by side, hand in hand, they imperceptibly moved closer and closer to the bed, and then they started sleeping

together in that bed. Damn, it's come out as a description of some sort of technological process. She fell into this state of half-dreaming, of a kind of calm, and she was in that state, smiling beautifully with her tender lips, when she met me on that day at the gallery in the Barbican.

My whole body was emitting love and desire. I loved her. I dreamt about her. I wanted her. The whole time. Every hour. But that learned chemist was with her, because he'd been in the right place at the right time.

I told her. She cried. For a long time. And then she admitted that she didn't love the guy with his beakers and test tubes, that she had a moral debt to him and she didn't know what to do about it. And then she said that she didn't want to lose me.

It felt like I was jumping for joy, banging my head against the sky and then immediately coming back down to earth. I said that even if she decided to dump me, we had to know one another. At least once. Like in the film Titanic, I thought back then, although I didn't remember if the lead characters had slept together or not. It wouldn't be cheating on the test tube cleaner as she didn't love him, she was merely paying back her dues. That damn phrase: "paying dues."

I didn't stop kissing her the whole time we first had sex. Not for a second. I gorged myself on her. I was scared that it would be the first and the last time. I loved her. I carried on kissing her after I'd collapsed on her in joy. I breathed her in. I loved her.

She again cried.

I told her what I had to tell her.

I said: "Why do you need that chemist? You don't owe him anything. You've given more than enough."

I want to finish this story. But I've only just begun it. Damn it! Faster.

She went off to talk to the distinguished winner of super-prizes, and I was torn up, I smoked my way through the best part of a pack of Marlboro. I paced back and forth in my room like a windup toy until I started to feel sick from all those cigarettes. I thought that if I went out into the street I could get lost in the deluge of people on Leicester Square. And if I didn't get lost there, then I could go to Shaftesbury Avenue and I'd definitely lose myself there. But if, by some miracle, I found my way back to Shoreditch then I would already start mixing up the streets and my left and right.

Faster!

She phoned and said that it was all over. "Or it's just beginning," I told her. "I don't know," she replied. And, again, it was as if she wasn't telling me the whole story.

She asked me to go to her in the evening. I went out into the street looking like a victor, or, perhaps, as I would have seemed to passersby, like a happy dumbass, I walked from Shoreditch all the way to St. Paul's Cathedral, then walked through the Law Courts and down to the Thames, stopping to get my breath.

The main point. Now. I'm saying it. Or writing it, rather. Finally.

She didn't come.

She didn't experience an orgasm.

Ever. In any pose. Not at home, not on a train in a private compartment, not when she'd climb on top of me as I drove a car at a low speed in a quiet spot.

We tried everything. After going out for half a year we even went to a sex therapist. He asked us a load of questions. I saw, we both saw, in fact, that he didn't know what advice to give us. The problem could have been in her mother and in her upbringing, the same upbringing that her mother had had and had given to her daughter, just as she had received it from her mother. Something had died off somewhere in that chain of women and it was no longer working. Mother fucking...!!!

Her mother hadn't loved her father. Maybe her grandmother hadn't loved her grandfather. All these people I knew nothing about just a few months before had become, in an instant, my personal history, a chain with a rusted link that I had to find and fix. I had to scrape off the rust, peel off the old paint and set everything in motion again.

Just before the end of the session with the sex therapist, which cost a fortune and achieved a grand total of zero, this therapist with little women's hands suggested that we get drunk before sex. Just give it a try. Experiment.

She said that she couldn't stand the smell of alcohol.

Flares. One after another. Memories that I drag round with me, tied up in coarse rope that causes me pain, that bloodies my body and my mind.

The sex therapist, having heard the answer, tried to smile. The result was idiotic. Closer to a smirk.

She began to cry. She slowly got up, without saying anything, and left the office.

I sat there looking at the doctor. It was as if I'd frozen on the spot.

I think that it was in that moment that I understood everything.

That half-smile, half-smirk slowly slipped, sliding off under the table. At that point the only thing I wanted to do was jump up and give him a good crack in the face. To "drag him", as they used to say back in the yard with Max. I did wrestling back at school and could have handled him no problem. Although what was this guy in glasses with his little women's hands really to blame for?

Instead of giving in to my illegal desire to give the doctor a beating, I got up and left.

She cried for a long time.

She probably understood everything at that point too.

That we weren't destined to be together.

We carried on tormenting each other for a fairly long time. We must have split up and got back together five or six times. Until she even stopped pretending in bed. Even those flares of love that come with intimacy disappeared. They melted away. They disappeared like water boiling away in a pot. That really finished me off.

Maybe she went back to the alchemist? Probably.

I didn't sleep with any women for about five or six months after that. If you don't count the prostitutes in the dark clubs of Soho. I chose those that looked like her.

Finally, that's it.

Finally, I've told the whole story.

Have those memories become any less unpleasant?

No. They haven't.

It hurts to this day. Why don't the wounds want to heal up of their own accord? Why does fate hate me so?!?"

December 2017

Alex

Alex was home alone. He hadn't left the place since Ronnie had gone. And he hadn't sobered up. How much time had passed? He couldn't really say. Simple food, which he would occasionally remember to eat, was brought to him by a delivery service. Some crooks he found on an internet site would bring him alcohol without fail. But none of that worried him.

He drank everything going – cheap beer, vodka. He started drinking as soon as he woke up and stopped only when he could drink himself into a deep stupor. He told them at work that he had chicken pox and turned the phone off, losing all track of time.

Alex, as if facing the unavoidable might of an approaching tsunami, realized how lonely he was. A genuine, dismal, existential loneliness. Fear of a lonely death dug deep into his soul with its bony, devilish hands, roasting him on a fire for days on end.

He suddenly felt a desperate need to not be alone. He felt it with his entire essence. He needed someone to be with him. But not just anyone – someone he could be sure of. Vickey.

He needed Vickey. Now, when he was entirely deprived of confidence in himself, he needed her more than ever.

Mournfully, Alex thought about Vickey a lot and about how badly he needed her back. But some hidden force stopped him making the call. “She’s probably happy with Diana. With my Diana,” he thought. And that thought tore at his heart painfully.

During this period, Alex wrote a lot in his diary. He threw chunks of the thoughts torturing him into it. By no means all of them were smoothly written or had a beginning and an end, and they certainly hadn’t had the curse words edited out of them. He had always been a perfectionist, but now it didn’t bother him at all.

He wrote: “A person always gets what he deserves. Vickey and Diana have probably been in Africa for ages, saving sick children, and they’re probably fucking incredibly happy. That ideal picture causes me pain. But I earned that pain, realizing too late that you don’t love and want a man or a woman, you love and want a person. People can want in different ways, and that’s what makes them people.”

There was another text on the next page: “I was ready to hit her. I was too close to doing it. I remember how I wanted to hit Ronnie for his translucent, blue eyes that reminded me of my mother’s cold eyes. I’m a sadist just like her. I’m a monster. And I mustn’t be allowed to have offspring.”

And there was more: “Bizarrely, Ronnie didn’t bring me any closer to an understanding of my true desires. Or, rather, he brought me closer, but he also revealed an entirely different, unpleasant truth – I want to kill my mother. I want my mother’s death.”

And more: “I’m forever remembering how I entered her and she gave herself to me with gratitude. I didn’t value that at all. I had to lose Vickey forever in order to understand that this was what I had been in search of for so long. ‘We don’t appreciate what we have until we lose it.’ How banal.”

Alex couldn’t get texts of any other kind out of himself and he thought about how he could let them know that he was leaving the magazine. He didn’t plan on going back there, he’d got sick of his work long ago. But he didn’t want to have to explain himself to anyone, so he put it off, knowing full well what a scandal the publisher would cause if the editor-in-chief suddenly walked off towards the end of the year.

Even by looking at his own writing in the notebook he could see how he lurched back and forth between painful, whining repentance and horror and desperation, all of them linked and reinforced by fears for himself.

Alex was at home on his own, he wasn’t smashed out of his mind on drink, but then he wasn’t entirely sober either. For days and nights, he’d been swimming in the fetid swamp of a hangover that burnt through his veins, drinking beer when he was

half awake, letting it course through his body to dull the pain. He was sleeping when there was a ring at the door.

Alex didn't know what time it was. At first, he decided not to open the door. But the buzzer kept on ringing insistently. Then the ringing was accompanied by the battering of a fist on the door.

"Open up, bro, I know you're home!" came Max's familiar voice.

Alex couldn't understand how he'd got through the main door on the ground floor, but Max was an ex-cop, so he was used to getting in anywhere he wanted without an invitation.

"Open up!" Max repeated, not giving up.

Again there was a knock. Alex thought that Max was about to break down the door. He got up reluctantly and trudged off to open it.

His only childhood friend stood in the doorway, flourishing with good health and the bracing frosts of December.

"Hello, pal!" Max hugged Alex with his huge arms, pressing him to his powerful chest. Having held him there for a while, he lowered him back to the floor and then wafted his hand in front of his nose to indicate how badly Alex reeked of alcohol.

"Come in," said Alex reluctantly when Max had taken his coat and hat off.

"I was walking by and I saw the light was on. I'll just pop in, I thought," Max said, taking a look round. Seeing the battery of empty bottles, he added: "I see you've already been celebrating for a few days, non-stop Alex."

"Kind of," Alex replied. Amongst the debris of the kitchen, Alex searched in vain for a clean glass for Max. He cursed under his breath.

Alex walked over to the sink and tried to wash one of the dirty glasses that stood on the edge. The water pouring out of the tap, however, tumbled down like a waterfall onto the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, splashed back off it and covered Alex in a powerful wave of water from the top of his head down to his chest.

The sudden cold shower sobered him up.

"How long since I've seen anyone?" he thought. He shook himself and turned off the water.

Alex went over to the cupboard and confidently took out a twenty-year-old bottle of Macallan that he had been saving for a special occasion. "I don't think I'll ever have a better special occasion than this," he thought gloomily.

He went over to Max, who had sat down in the only space on the sofa that was free of trash – it was Alex's spot, but Alex didn't complain. In a single motion he swept away everything that was on the yellow table onto the floor and placed the bottle in the center.

"Oh, that'll do the trick!" Max nodded approvingly, seeing the bottle of whisky and trying hard not to imagine how much it cost. He was used to his friend's eccentricities. Examining the unfamiliar but impressive label with interest, Max continued. "I didn't just drop in by chance. There's a job that's cropped up."

"You sort out the glasses and I'll take a quick shower," said Alex, leaving the room.

"Ok, bro, you could do with freshening up! You're giving off a stink like a pack of pigs. Is it ok if I open a window?" Max shouted out after him.

Standing under the hot shower, Alex suddenly remembered his conversation with the prostitute in Chelsea. He remembered her metaphor for the past – the hump of a hunched back that he had to carry around with him. Suddenly, he didn't want to carry anything anywhere, he wanted to shake it all off, to forget it all, to start

from scratch. "Burn the past before it eats you up," as a doctor had once said to him – a friend of Diana's whose name he couldn't remember, of course.

Returning to the room, Alex found Max where he'd left him, examining the bottle of whisky which he hadn't dared to open. There were two clean glasses by him on the table. The room had been aired, and Alex's lungs filled with the cold winter freshness coming in from the street. It fully sobered him up.

Alex poured the liquid into their glasses and sat opposite Max on a sofa covered in clothing. He didn't drink the whisky immediately, instead placing his glass on the table.

Alex took joy in these rare minutes with a clear mind. He concentrated on his friend, not least because a "job" in their relations usually meant some kind of adventure, something dangerous, a breaking of the rules and the sweet taste of victory. Just what he needed in order to feel alive again. Exactly what would do Alex some good right now. Exactly what he needed.

"A job?" he asked Max impatiently.

Max nodded affirmatively, taking a sip from his glass.

"It's a banger!" he said, excited, and Alex couldn't work out what he was referring to – the whisky or the job he had lined up.

Max left a solemn pause, and then spoke as he exhaled. "Why don't we rob a bank, pal?"

His words hung in the air. Alex shook his head distrustfully.

"You're kidding, of course..."

But Max wasn't kidding. He took a big gulp from his glass. The firewater, like an arrow, entered his mouth, he didn't even notice it. He continued.

"You know I'm not an idiot, right?" asked Max.

"What are you talking about, Max?" asked Alex.

"Hold up," said Max. "I know that I'm not the smartest guy around. But when it comes to anything involving crime, I know what I'm talking about." He took a look round as if they were in a crowded place. "One job. One blow. And then a new life begins!"

Alex again shook his head mistrustfully. If it wasn't for his hangover, he would have taken all this as a joke. Robbing a chemist on the outskirts of London was one thing, but a bank...

"I've got a friend, a good friend..." Max left a pause. "His name's Greg, he's an experienced guy. He wouldn't just talk a lot of hot air. He knows the rules."

Alex remained silent, continuing to burn into Max with his gaze.

"I didn't just meet this guy yesterday, I've known him for years," Max continued. "Working with the cops I often gave him 'protection' on his jobs. Although who was really giving 'protection' and who was getting it – that's a good question. That's not the point, though. Back then, Greg was mostly doing easy apartment burglaries. Sometimes he played around with shops. Well, we did a couple of jobs together. And it always went off without a hitch. Like clockwork, bro."

Max always spoke frankly with Alex, hiding nothing. Alex knew about him, about almost all of his dealings, despite them meeting rarely. He didn't judge his friend – that's why he was a friend. Stealing as a way to earn money had also never seemed to be a terrible crime to him. The rupture between the laws of real life and Alex's life was too great.

"He came to me with this plan a month ago," continued Max. "I can't tell you the details yet, but Alex, bro, this job is a sure thing. We'll finally get to earn a pile of cash,

we'll be swimming in it! And there's almost no risk! One blow, one job," he repeated again.

Max drained his whisky and poured himself some more. Alex, as before, didn't touch his glass. Listening to Max he could sense his interest in what he was hearing, slowly, as if from a deep sleep, was awakening a thirst for life in him, he could feel it tingling as it pulsed through his veins.

If Alex, broken, exhausted, unhappy, angry, lonely, had known in that moment how dearly this dubious ray of hope would cost him, Vickey, Diana and Max, he would have never agreed to it. But, of course, he couldn't know that, and he focused his attention on every word spoken by his friend, who'd suddenly turned up at his home.

"Greg says that the actual job – the bank – will be in the summer. We'll start getting ready in the spring, we'll get to know each other, as it were. So you've got time to think about it."

Max spoke some more. His voice periodically appeared and disappeared in Alex's mind.

"Greg's an experienced thief. He says we'll do some training first, get warmed up, check each other out. The experience at the chemist' will help. I'll get Leon involved, my cousin, we've done some jobs together too."

Alex nodded in agreement.

"He's a smart guy too, in his field – technology, safes, that kind of thing. Maybe he'll finally earn some money too," said Max enthusiastically, but suddenly he stopped short. It was clear that he'd now reached the real point of his visit.

"We're going to need a girl too," Max said carefully. "It's a small role – she has to be lookout, if anything goes wrong then she's got nothing to do with it."

A pause hung in the air. Memories of Vickey seared Alex's brain painfully. He wanted to drink, to drink fast, but he held himself back.

"Me and Leon don't know anything about girls, you know that," continued Max. "And Greg? He's more into whores. I don't think his women would be able to play the part of a low-profile lookout."

Vickey's name was ringing in Alex's head like a deafening alarm bell. He remembered Robert's words: "Who would you call if you accidentally killed someone? Who do you trust?"

"The job is a gift. In, out," said Max excitedly. "And there's absolutely no risk for the girl, bro." He left a pause, and then asked "What do you think, brother, will Vickey agree to do it?"

"Vickey's gone," said Alex after a long pause, breathing heavily.

"What do you mean gone?" asked Max, concerned. This was clearly a real surprise for him. He knew that Alex and Vickey had a difficult relationship, but he'd seen, and they'd all seen, the way she looked at him. You could see the love in her eyes, her determination to follow him to the end of the world if need be, even to kill for him.

"We argued, I shouted at her, and she left. She's gone to Africa. With my best girlfriend, to be precise. She's fine. But she doesn't want anything to do with me," said Alex, unexpectedly blurting out his pain, throwing out all that aching, rotting filth in one bundle, although he hadn't planned on doing that at all.

Max remained silent, shocked. He wasn't a specialist in the human soul. He'd always really liked Vickey and he didn't know how to console his friend.

"We need to drink," said Max.

"Yes!" said Alex, grabbing his glass and thirstily gulping from it. The familiar flush of heat flowed through his chest.

They finished the bottle off that night, of course. Alex couldn't remember how long they sat there for or what they talked about. He entered the state of a real heavy drinker, when parts of the day and even days on end disappear from the memory bank. He didn't remember that, for the first time in eight months, he phoned Vickey. He remembered almost nothing of what happened after his first gulp of an expensive Scottish whisky that had been kept in store for a special occasion.

He was woken by his mobile, which unexpectedly flared up with calls and messages, though he, of course, had no recollection of having turned it on the night before. The clock showed it was nine in the morning, and the planet had obviously got bored without him, Alex laughed bitterly to himself. He didn't answer the calls, though, and headed for a shower.

Standing under the jet stream of water, he remembered details from the beginning of his conversation with Max.

"A bank!" rattled around his head. "A bank robbery." Then there was a gaping black hole of oblivion. Followed by Max's voice, speaking just before he left.

"Alex, brother, there's no one closer to me than you. You'll come up with an option, you were the bright one... We'll work out the details, and the girls will follow, as they say! We'll become millionaires – we'll have girls even hotter than your Vickey."

Max stopped for a second, and then continued in an absolutely sober voice.

"But from tomorrow until the job's done we don't drink anything stronger than beer. You got it, bro? I'm counting on you."

March 2017

Vickey, Alex

Alex returned to London from Prague, where he'd spent the last few weeks on a work assignment. He phoned Vickey, and she rushed round to see him, arriving in an hour and a half. She didn't even go home to spruce up – she went wearing what she'd been in all day at work, her favorite faded Lee jeans and red Zara sweater. She didn't think about how she'd look, she only thought about getting from Earl's Court, where she worked, to Shoreditch as fast as she could.

She jumped on him and wrapped her lips around his as soon as he opened the door. They didn't say a word. They enjoyed one another. Then the Lee's and the Zara sweater wound up on the floor, along with her panties, bra and all of his clothes.

Then she lay on him and continually asked questions. Where had he been, what had he eaten, what was he planning on doing. And they were happy, she could see that. She took him all in and again believed that this time he would never leave. That he would stay with her forever.

They had supper not far from his home, and then decided to have a drink in the West End, and Vickey asked Alex to take a car through an app, Zipcar. For as long as possible she wanted it to be just the two of them, not even a taxi driver with them, especially as they hadn't had anything to drink and Alex was a great driver.

Alex said that, for the day, he'd do anything she asked, and within minutes they were already driving out of Shoreditch. Alex drove their powerful hot-hatch gently, Vickey felt as if she was floating on air, they joked and laughed the whole way. She talked non-stop, hugging him around the neck from time to time, kissing him and making it hard for him to drive the almost new car.

Driving down the Thames Embankment from the City towards the Houses of Parliament, they nearly hit the rear bumper of a Ford which cut in on them dangerously. The driver of the Ford, a young guy, didn't even flash his hazard lights as an apology, and Vickey unexpectedly released a tirade of abuse:

"You can't drive like that on the road! You can't cut other cars off like that, instead of being in a bar up West we could have been stuck on the Embankment in a cloud of petrol smoke waiting for the cops! How about using your indicators?!?" Vickey worked herself up into a fury within seconds. "You know why they behave like that?"

"Why?" asked Alex, smiling.

"You're not going to believe this, but I know why guys behave like that," said Vickey, already calming down and talking conspiratorially.

If Alex hadn't spent the last few hours with her, he would have thought that she'd been drinking.

"Well?" Alex asked, interested.

"Because they've got small dicks!" Vickey quipped.

"What?!?" Alex asked, laughing.

"I'm telling you!" Vickey said with confidence.

"Come on?" laughed Alex.

"Of course! In order to drive like such a jerk, ignoring the road traffic rules, not valuing your own life or anyone else's, you have to have a major reason."

Alex laughed hard.

"They drive around shouting as loud as they can: 'I've got a small cock!'" Vickey continued, almost beside herself. Overcome by this unexpected outburst. An outburst on a completely unexpected subject at that.

"This is unexpected," Alex laughed. "You've caught me off guard here."

Vickey wound her window right down and shouted out, syllable by syllable, to the cars driving by: "Small cocks!!!"

Alex was shaking with laughter.

"You're an extraordinary girl! Incredible!" he said in tears of laughter. "I love you!"

That last phrase of Alex's appeared to cut the air in half. It seemed to Vickey that the world had slowed or even halted its rotation at that moment. Alex carried on driving, cars were hurtling by them, sometimes beeping their horns, cutting in on each other here and there, but for a while it seemed to Vickey that the world around her had turned into something from a Hollywood movie, like in the Christopher Nolan film *Inception* with the incomparable DiCaprio: everything around had slowed, thoughts had also slowed down, and now they'd entirely frozen just like in the film, it was as if thoughts had materialized, become tangible, taken on a color that she couldn't comprehend. Like the wonderful DiCaprio in "*Inception*." And frozen. For some reason it was that film that she remembered. Thoughts froze, but everything around carried on living its life. Without noticing Vickey. A wonderful, tender girl. Who loves with all her soul, with her whole body, with her entire essence. And all that she needed, all that made her happy and lifted her above it all, above all the hardships of life, above everything and anything, all she needed were those three words. Three words that her beloved, the only one she loved, had to say. Yes, yes. What was happening? Yes, it was like a dream, a naïve girl's dream, like in a Hollywood film when everything freezes and then slowly starts to move again. Vickey couldn't remember the last time Alex had said those words: "I love you." Just three words. That meant too much. Too much for a little girl who loved with all of her

heart. A little girl, but with a big heart, and she loved just one person. Just one. Him. And his words. Those words he'd just spoken.

Vickey remained silent. It seemed to her that Alex had understood everything. The silence didn't last long. But in that instant it seemed to her that you could have cut the silence with a knife. Right down the middle. But she didn't want to cut anything. She wanted it whole. Now she thought of a scene she'd read in a novel. Two characters were walking through a forest, and the man wanted to propose. But he couldn't bring himself to do it. An invisible push in the right direction was needed, a gust of wind, the hoot of an owl, something that would allow that step to be taken, that step that required resolve, a move that would prevent any going back. And that was fine. It was fine that it was like that. But in the book, he didn't say anything, he didn't offer her his hand and his heart. He didn't take that step into the beyond. She couldn't maintain the pause, she couldn't hold back, and she said something that took him off that wave, took him away from that crucial thought, from that step.

It was so close, after all. Happiness. "Be my wife."

But those words weren't in the book.

Suddenly she wanted to cry. Her eyelids began to swell, to grow heavier, and there was a lump in her throat. She wanted to bawl her eyes out and run away. And she wanted Alex to run after her. To catch up with her, hug her, hold her tight. So that she'd get caught up in clothing, in his sweater, in his scarf, in all of him, her beloved Alex, so that they'd get tangled up just as they were tangled up in their relations, in her relationship with herself, with his relationship with himself. With the world that surrounded the two of them. So that he would hold her tight. With strength. And so that he would tell her that she's a fool. A fool for running away. And that he really did love her. More than anyone else on Earth. And that she is the dearest thing to him. The most precious.

August 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon

At ten to ten the Trust Bank armored security truck, with an armed driver and guards, entered the territory of the British Higher School of Design on Taylor Street. Everything went as it usually did. The truck drove past the guard post and entered the educational establishment's territory. Driving on for about another three hundred yards, the Trust Bank truck went down into an underground carpark and stopped in front of some iron gates.

Not far from the bank truck, a young blond-haired guy sat in a parked, inconspicuous, white Hyundai Solaris. He was looking down at the mobile phone he was holding in his hand. Without raising his head, the guy looked up in the direction of the truck now and again. After a while, the gates were raised, and the bank truck drove into the buffer zone to unload, the gates coming back down behind it.

Alex, Vickey and Leon were sitting on a bench opposite the bank. Each of them had a paper coffee cup in their hand. All three of them were nervous.

Leon looked distraught. His arms and legs were shaking. Leon's breathing was intense and spasmodic. He had a canvas rucksack on the ground between his feet, the kind that students usually use. But Leon didn't have textbooks in his. Leon kept looking at the rucksack nervously, as if he was afraid of letting it out of his sight.

Alex tried to keep calm, but he was trembling on the inside too. He tried to control his breathing, but every time he brought his cup to his lips he thought he'd pour hot coffee over himself.

Vickey was the calmest of the three of them.

If you hadn't known, you would have thought they were three normal students. Three friends waiting for their lectures to begin. They were again in disguises, their hands covered in thick layers of liquid plaster. They were showing each other stuff on their mobiles and chatting quietly. Next to Vickey lay a file of questionnaires, her props for the role she was to play whilst keeping visitors out of the bank.

A hundred yards from the bench where the guys were sitting, there was a square. Max and Greg, in their disguises, stood right by the entrance. They were also dressed up as youngsters – ripped jeans, hooded tops, dark sunglasses.

Everything was going according to plan.

At five minutes past ten the mobile phone in Greg's pocket pinged, indicating that he'd received a message. Greg opened it. "Training, as usual, is at 1, don't forget the balls." This was an agreed signal from Greg's guy, who was in his Solaris in the underground parking – the bank's security truck had left.

"We're up," Greg said quietly to Max.

"Just once, Lord. Let us win once!" said Max.

"In, out," muttered Greg. He was clearly nervous. Drops of sweat had appeared on his forehead. "Luck's on our side, bro," he said, as if to himself.

Greg headed towards the bank.

Alex, Vickey and Leon stopped talking among themselves and watched Greg as he approached the bank's entrance. Alex suddenly felt a rush of inspiration. Not fear, but some kind of sense of faith, that the game had begun, that he was in the game and that he had every chance of winning this game.

Greg threw the door open and entered the bank, the door slowly closing behind him.

Vickey felt nothing. She simply observed what was happening. As if it all had nothing to do with her. Just before they'd left home, Alex had told her what to do if the robbery went off the tracks and they got caught red-handed. He would say that he'd tricked her because they needed a girl on the door, he'd say he had promised to pay her if she carried out a sociology poll for some advertising campaign he'd dreamt up. It all seemed pretty stupid, but Alex hadn't been able to come up with anything better. If it all went wrong, then, according to Alex's plan, Vickey would cut a deal with the police and at worst she'd get off with a suspended sentence.

Greg, entering the bank, walked up to a desk with blank forms. He took one and started to slowly fill it in.

Max was already approaching the entrance to the bank.

Leon, forgetting all cautionary measures, was openly staring at his cousin. Leon could hardly breathe. He was totally overcome by fear. "What will Mom think if I end up in prison? What will happen to her?" he thought. The idea circled round and round in his head, entirely depriving him of a will or ability to do anything. It was accompanied by Greg's words from the day before: "It's too late to look back, son. You've been involved in several armed robberies. You could go to the police and inform on us, of course. But then that same guy who's going to be driving our money away in a stolen car will go to your mother's apartment. And you know what he'll do? He'll torture your old lady. And then he'll kill her. And before she dies, she'll find out that she's only being killed because her beloved fatty son got scared. He turned chicken right before the most important job which could have made him and his dear

old mother rich.” This wasn’t the Greg that had a heart-to-heart discussion with him as they wandered around town, this was the real Greg, a hungry, hounded animal with no time for empty talk. Leon hadn’t told Max about all this. He was scared that Max already knew about this conversation.

Max, having walked up to the door into the bank, took a quick look round at the guys. Leon knew that tough look his cousin could give, a look which brooked no objections and didn’t bode well. Leon shivered, as if he’d been hit by an electric shock that, at least to some extent, brought him back to his senses.

The door closed behind Max. He took a ticket for the line from a machine at the entrance, went over to the seats for those waiting next to the bank manager’s office, and took the one closest to the manager’s door.

As soon as Max entered the bank, Alex got up from the bench. “Let’s go,” he said firmly. “Let’s go,” repeated Vickey. They headed towards the bank. Hesitating for a while, Leon eventually got up and held onto Alex’s arm. Alex turned round and looked at Leon. Leon looked totally pathetic.

“Leon, everything’s going to be fine,” Alex said firmly. “There’s no way back.”

“It’ll definitely be ok?” asked Leon. He was almost in tears.

“Definitely.” Alex carefully picked up the rucksack and helped Leon to put it on. Then he gave Leon a careful pat on the shoulder and pushed him in the direction of the bank. “Let’s go!”

They quickly walked over to the bank’s entrance. At around the same time, a middle-aged, sporty looking black guy also got to the door. He was in old jeans, a grey t-shirt and a light brown jacket. The man looked at Alex, Leon and Vickey and stopped, letting them go in first. Alex, lingering for a second, entered. Leon scampered in after him.

“Please,” the man said to Vickey, holding the door open for her.

“No, no, thank you,” Vickey quickly answered. “I’ll stay here, outside.”

“You’re the boss,” the man said, smiling to her.

Vickey found herself thinking that her disguise, the makeup she’d put on, the fake eyelashes, the heavy eyeliner, the thick wig that covered half her face, this whole masquerade merely made her stand out like the meat of a chicken stands out from the bone when it’s being baked in an oven. She thought this man could see the real her, that he could almost see her standing there naked.

“Thank you,” she quickly repeated.

The man answered her with a smile and went in.

Having gone in, Leon headed in Greg’s direction. Just a few yards before reaching him, he stopped and pretended he was looking for something on his smartphone. He was sweating heavily from the tension. He suddenly had a thought – if it wasn’t for the training robberies, as Greg called them, he would have run away as fast as his chubby little legs could carry him.

Alex stopped not far from the entrance, with his back to the door into the bank and the guard right in front of him. Alex took a few brochures off a stand right next to the entrance and pretended he was reading them. He looked at the brochures, but because of his nerves the text just floated in front of his eyes. The guard paced back and forth off to the side of Alex.

The seconds rang out deafeningly in his ears. Alex tensed up. He could distinctly feel the piece of pipe, wrapped in newspaper, rubbing against his side, clamped down by his belt. In the corner of his eye he noticed the black man in the light brown coat who’d smiled to Vickey when he entered the bank. Alex caught himself thinking that the roguish smile in Vickey’s direction from a guy like that was

extremely unpleasant. Was he really jealous? For a fraction of a second that thought distracted him from the job in hand, but it disappeared just as quickly, leaving him alone with his fear and his tension.

In the meantime, Vickey, who'd waited when the guy in the coat went into the bank, and had now made sure that there was no one around in the street, took out her file of questionnaires and her "Closed" sign. She quickly stuck it on the glass of the door. Then she turned her back to it and stood on guard. All as planned.

Inside the bank, none of the team looked at each other directly, but they kept tabs on what their comrades were doing. Leon was supposed to distract the guard and then Alex was supposed to go into action.

There was a moment when it seemed to Alex that the guard was turning his back on him. Alex even reached his right hand under his armpit, feeling out the end of the pipe. He wanted to pull it out, just as he'd done a hundred times practicing at home, and just as he'd done when he'd been in action at the bowling club. But at just that moment the guard unexpectedly turned round in his direction and Alex pretended that he was merely reaching to scratch himself. It looked fairly natural and the guard didn't notice anything, but Alex suddenly broke out in a sweat.

The tension was now reaching unimaginable levels. Alex looked at Greg, who was looking somewhere off to the side. Alex quickly looked over to Max. Max looked him right in the eye, and Alex could sense support in his gaze. He felt a little better. His childhood friend, the only guy who'd protected him from the hoods in the yard. The only person who could get Alex out of this insane situation. Alex suddenly realized that he hadn't been breathing for a few seconds. He gasped in the air hungrily. It wasn't enough, though, and the oxygen got caught somewhere in his chest. He could sense his stomach quivering. Not his body, not his hands. But his stomach. That recognition made him want to cry. To burst into tears right there, in that damned bank. Which he'd come to of his own free will.

Alex looked at Max. At the only thing that could save him in the world at that moment.

Max looked at Alex. Just for a moment. Then he looked at Leon and gave a barely perceptible nod. Barely imperceptible, but enough for Leon to be sure what he meant: "Now, do it!"

Leon turned to the guard, who was standing by the door a yard or two from Alex, and called out to him loudly.

"Excuse me, are you the guard? Where do you pay for ... for ... the electricity bill?" he asked, stuttering, but comprehensible all the same.

The guard immediately responded, turning in Leon's direction, leaving Alex directly behind his back. At the distance of an outstretched arm.

February 2018

Vickey, Diana, Alex

After the news about Africa, Vickey decided to quit her job. She rushed around the city for days on end doing paperwork in order to wrap up all her and Diana's affairs in London while the young surgeon carried on saving human hearts without being distracted.

With each passing day, Vickey convinced herself that the trip was the right decision. She even began to dream of training as a nurse so that she could work with Diana in the hospital and be of use to humanity. She continued to think of Alex, those

thoughts providing a sorry backdrop, but she learned to drown them out with dreams of a new life with Diana on their travels, telling herself that it would be the first, key adventure together.

That evening Vicky was on her own at home. Diana had had to stay on at the hospital and Vicky wasn't expecting her before midnight. She didn't feel very well because of the vaccination she'd done the day before, so she got into bed early and had even managed to fall into a deep sleep when her mobile began ringing.

She answered without opening her eyes.

"Hello?"

Alex's painfully familiar voice came back to her from the other end of the line: "Hi! It's me."

Vicky's heart broke free from her and fired off into the stratosphere. She got a lump in her throat. She didn't know how to answer and simply remained silent.

"Vicky, forgive me, forgive me for everything that I've done to you and that I'll do to you, Vicky," Alex said drunkenly on the other end of the line. "But I need you. I need you. It's a matter of life and death!"

Vicky remained silent, unable to get a word out, tears hailing down from her grey eyes. He'd never asked her for forgiveness, ever.

"Vicky!" Alex said. "I got really mixed up, I don't trust anyone else anymore. Nobody, apart from you. Are you listening?"

Vicky nodded in silence.

"Vicky?" the voice on the other end of the line implored. "Vicky, are you there?"

Vicky, fighting back the tears, spoke quietly.

"I'm here."

"Come over. Right now. I'm begging you! Only you can help me," said the voice of her beloved that'd she long to hear for so long. Vicky distinctly heard the pain, the yearning, the desperation and the fear filtering out of him. She'd never heard Alex speak this way.

Her heart was breaking from the desire to rush over and hug him, to understand what had happened, to help. But the thought of Diana, her Diana, rattled round her mind like a bird caught in a cage.

"I can't," Vicky finally answered with difficulty.

"Come to me! Please!" Alex begged. "Vicky, I want to live with you. I've got a plan: I want to sell my apartment and get the hell out of this damned London, I want to move to a village out in the sticks! There, we'll build a house in the Lake District, on the shore, and I'll write plays, and you'll bring up our children. Vicky! Remember when we were in the car and I told you that I love you? You remember that, right?"

There was a loud popping on the other end of the line, following by some scurrying around. A minute later, Alex's voice was heard again.

"I'm drunk, Vicky. Really drunk. But tomorrow I'll sober up and I'll be waiting for you, just come!" There was more crashing around in the background and then the line went dead. Alex didn't phone back.

Vicky sat on her bed. Her sleepiness had gone, and her peace of mind and will power had gone with it. Her thoughts fluttered about like birds and she couldn't catch any of them.

Alex. Her beloved Alex. He'd phoned. He was alive. He'd called out to her. He'd asked her to go back to him and be with him, just like she'd dreamed of doing. But why, instead of joy, was she overcome by a feeling of impending disaster.

She sat in silence on the bed until Diana came back.

"What are you sitting in the dark for?" asked Diana, turning on the light in the hall. "Did something happen?"

Vickey didn't want to tell Diana about Alex's call, not now, not today.

"I need time to think," she said to herself.

On seeing Diana, as usual, her heart fluttered, but now it ached with a new feeling – a feeling of guilt.

Vickey jumped up from the bed. "I don't feel very well today. Let's have a drink of wine and get in the bath? Today I..." She thought for a second. "... I don't want to think about anything."

"An excellent plan!" Diana answered quickly. "I've been on my feet all day in the operating room and they're about to give out. I'll go and have a wash and run the bath."

She went off to the bathroom.

Vickey took out a bottle of red wine, poured it into a decanter and left it "to breathe." She found some big candles and took them into the bathroom – when the two of them were home together they never locked it.

Entering, she saw that the bath was already filling. The air was full of the aromas of Diana's favorite bath salts from L'Occitane – a tart scent of lavender fields and the vineyards of Tuscany where they'd dreamed that they would one day buy a house. And Diana, her adored Diana, svelte, strong, gracious Diana was in her top and panties, her leg up on the toilet as she shaved it whilst talking to someone on the telephone.

Vickey smiled and went back into the living room so that she wouldn't interrupt Diana as she got back into a homely mood.

Vickey aimlessly wandered around the room. Her heart was aching. She got the feeling that she could no longer distinguish between the different objects surrounding her.

She was sleep walking for a while until, right up close over her head, she heard Diana's voice. The beloved voice of her beloved Diana.

"The bath's already ready."

Diana laughed happily and passed her a large glass of wine on a long, thin stem.

Diana. An island of calm and love. I don't want to think about anything. I only want her. To listen to her. To be with her.

"I want to drink to you, my love!" Diana said with feeling. And Vickey sensed that tears were coming to her eyes. "To how lucky I am to be with you."

Diana led Vickey by the hand into the bathroom.

The candles were already burning and the room was wrapped in romantic, dusky shadows. They helped each other to undress and climbed into the hot water, placing their glasses on a small table next to the bath.

Diana sat down first and Vickey nestled between her legs, her back up against Diana's breasts. Diana's long, slender legs embraced Vickey on all sides, her knees sweetly poking out from the water and through the thick, soapy foam.

"We'll ask for an apartment with a piano so that you can play!" Diana said happily. "We'll put it in the rental contract, next to the point stipulating that we need an air conditioner and a bath."

The hot water and Diana's embraces relaxed Vickey's body. It was as if Diana's arms were protecting Vickey from Alex, blocking him off. Diana tenderly massaged her beloved's shoulders. She kissed her behind the ear.

Vickey sipped her wine. For a few moments she felt happy – she was with Diana, they loved one another, they were together. Alex hadn't phoned, it had just

been a dream. She would have loved that long-awaited phone call to have merely been a dream.

Diana passed the back side of her palm down Vickey's neck, skimming off the foam as if she was washing away her heavy thoughts, and kissed her. It was as if Diana was transporting Vickey to a different space where there was only the two of them. Diana gently pinched Vickey's skin between her teeth, caressed her with her tongue.

Despite the hot bath, goosebumps passed up and down Vickey's body.

Diana's hands caressed Vickey's breasts. Vickey began to moan, turning her head to meet Diana's lips, tender, soft, luscious. She vanished into them.

They kissed one another for a long, long time. They were in no hurry, before them was a night of bliss and love.

Diana's hands slipped lower to Vickey's belly, freezing at her appendix scar. She passed her index finger over it several times.

"This scar on your body – it's my favorite scar ever in my life," she laughed. "I'm telling you that as a surgeon."

Her palm moved between Vickey's legs. She began to move it, her powerful fingers skillfully massaging Vickey's clit. Another mouthful of wine. Yes, please, more.

Vickey took down the shower head that was hanging on the wall. She turned it to its broadest setting and aimed the stream of water between Vickey's legs. Vickey groaned. Then harder. Another minute, more. And an explosion. Vickey came.

Diana turned the water off for a while, giving Vickey a chance to get her breath back.

She kissed Vickey on the neck, nibbling at her earlobe. She whispered.

"I love watching how you come, I love your moans, your shouts and your groans." Diana smiled happily.

Vickey looked at her as if in disbelief.

"Seriously," Diana laughed. "I think I love your orgasms more than my own. I want more."

And Diana turned the water on again. A powerful jet, further strengthened by Diana blocking a third of the nozzle with her finger, again began to arouse Vickey's clit.

Vickey touched her breasts with her hands, they slipped over skin wet with foam, she pinched at her nipples. Vickey sensed that she was building up into a ball, into a single point. The second orgasm came slower, but with the same inevitability.

They slowly swapped positions. Now Diana lay on her back in the water and Vickey sat in the middle of the bath under the tap, Diana's thighs pressed between her body and her legs raised up onto the side wall of the bath.

Vickey looked at Diana, naked, floating before her eyes. And her heart ached with love and tenderness. She spoke to Diana.

"I love you! You know that I love you?"

Diana looked at her with laughing, loving eyes and answered with confidence.

"Of course I know."

Vickey took her glass of wine and took a big sip, but instead of gulping it down she lowered herself over Diana's face, kissed her on the mouth and let the liquid out in small portions. Diana drank. She laughed happily. Beautiful, beloved Diana.

They continued kissing. Vickey moved the glass away. And placed her hand on Diana's thigh. Vickey could feel Diana's soft butt, rocking slightly in the water, slipping along her stomach.

She placed her hand on Diana's breasts, and the other in her crotch. Her fingers confidently felt out the right spots on this body that she knew so well.

Diana quietly groaned, writhing slightly, the foam beautifully sliding over her body. Her small breasts, with their nipples almost painfully hardened and sticking up beautifully, inspired a burning desire in Vickey to tease them with her mouth.

Vickey lent forward slightly and touched one with the end of her tongue. Diana shrieked, but then immediately fell silent and waited for it to continue. Vickey passed her abrasive, moist tongue over the second nipple.

Diana lay still in the water, but her heart was pounding so hard that Vickey could clearly hear its beating as she locked her lips over Diana's left nipple. She began to suck and nibble at it, taking the right nipple in her hand and pinching it to the threshold of pain. Diana groaned loudly.

Vickey placed her palm between Diana's legs, her four fingers confidently burrowing into the depths of her pussy until the thumb lay on the clit, powerfully circling it.

Vickey's fingers felt out the prized depression and began sharp movements pressing in on it. Again and again and again.

Diana cried out, writhed and then, all of a sudden, broke out in tears. She came. She came for a long time, loudly. Her thighs clamped hard around Vickey's hand.

Through her fingers, Vickey could feel the orgasm exploding within Diana. Forcing her heart to leap out of her chest and hammer its beat in ecstasy.

May it never end. Beloved, beloved Diana. I never want to get out of the bath. I want to hide in it. It was as if Vickey had woken up. At the realization that she would have to come out into the light from this life-saving refuge.

Diana said that they would get out of the water when they'd finished the wine. Settling in opposite one another, they raised their glasses into the air.

"Yes, first a toast," Vickey said with a theatrical grumpiness, pulling back the glass that she'd raised to her lips too early. "You can't live without them."

"Yes, I love toasts," Vickey smiled, somewhat sorrowfully.

"Often they're the quintessence of my thoughts," Diana said.

"So, my dear girl!" Diana continued after a theatrical pause. "I think it's important that a person should have a dream. It's vitally important that they follow it. Maybe it will lead to disappointment and failures, maybe it will lead to victory – nobody knows in advance. But it'll be a great pity if you don't give it a try."

She swayed her glass back and forth in her hand, as if thinking about the words to follow.

"This work in Africa has always been my dream," Diana continued, smiling, "and I'm very grateful to you for agreeing to help me pursue my dream. I'll say it again, though: I really, really love you, but you're in no way obliged to say goodbye to your family and move to another continent with me. We can always find a middle way."

Diana saw tears appearing in Vickey's eyes at these words. She stopped, lent forward to her beloved and tenderly caressed her cheek with the palm of her hand, pushing back a lock of hair.

She looked Vickey in the eye, pupil to pupil. It was, no doubt, at this moment that she understood everything.

It seemed to Vickey that an hour had passed before she heard Diana's voice again.

An oppressive silence enveloped her. And then there was an explosion. The world, as if in a slow-motion film, flew apart. Diana was too clever not to understand.

She'd understood back then, at her birthday party, but she had driven away the thoughts that only brought her pain.

"Did Alex phone?" Diana asked, almost whispering.

Vickey felt a cold in the palms on her cheeks, she looked into her eyes, they didn't have the strength to lie. Her head slumped down onto her chest, hopeless.

"You're going to him?" Diana asked again, her voice somehow detached.

Vickey was silent. She didn't know the answer. She'd been blown every which way by a storm that had raged from the moment he called. She was silent, it seemed, for just half a minute. But it felt like an eternity, an eternity that now separated them.

"No," Vickey blurted out, coming back to her senses, "I'm not going. I love you! You're all I need."

"Vickey," Diana said in a sensitive voice, "I love you. I really do love you. But being a surgeon, helping children in Africa – it's my dream, it's always been my dream, since I was a kid. It's not your dream."

Vickey couldn't understand. Diana was saying that because that was what she thought. Or did she feel sorry for her? Or had she changed her mind?

Diana's voice was quivering, but she straightened her back and lay back, pulling away from Vickey, still talking. Only she knew how difficult it was for her to say what she was saying.

"Your dream has always been Alex. And my love for you won't let me deprive you of your dream."

Wise, kind, generous, subtle, delicate Diana. Diana. She no doubt wanted to cry now too. She loves me.

Vickey, crying, could hear her own quaking voice begging Diana not to abandon her, not to leave, she swore her devotion and love. Diana gently caressed her knees and thigh. But then she got out of the bath, put on a bathrobe and went to leave the bathroom.

Vickey rushed after her, slipping and almost falling to the floor. Diana helped Vickey back up, hugging her shivering body to her chest. She held her tight in her embrace.

Vickey wanted it to last forever and never end. But she knew her. She knew how she took decisions. In an instant. Irreversibly.

It seemed to Vickey that a ringing silence and the sounds of the entire world had become jumbled in her head. She didn't understand anything, couldn't feel anything.

Diana moved away, and Vickey's gaze followed her as she left. With a parting smile, she spoke.

"Do you remember? Your favorite quote: 'He smiled calmly and eerily, and told me: "Don't stand in the wind!"'"

Diana spoke that way, because that was what she thought. Or because she felt sorry for her. Or because she'd changed her mind. Again, that fog in my thoughts. I don't understand anything. I don't know what to do.

Diana stepped through the bathroom door. And out of Vickey's life forever.

January 2018

Alex

Alex kept the promise that he'd given to Max and stopped drinking. He even went back to his editing job in order to gradually prepare for someone to replace him.

He saw almost no one and, it seemed, for the first time in his adult life didn't sleep with anyone.

He carried on keeping his diary, but, for the most part, kept it to quotes from other people that would come to mind from time to time. It was Orwell for the most part:

"Happiness can exist only in acceptance..."

Or:

"Freedom is the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

And then an unexpectedly brutal quote from the rapper Snoop Dogg:

"Sex is like a beautiful meeting of the genitalia. It's the dance of love between a penis and a vagina."

But, for the most part, his thoughts were focused on the coming robbery.

In the coming crime he saw a hope that he could be rid of the shackles of everyday rules, that he could be free of his hated former life that had led him up a dead end. He felt sorry for himself. And blamed himself for having lost what had been in his grasp. He also saw this wild act as being a victory over his mother. The robbery, for him, would be like slicing through the Gordian Knot just as Alexander the Great had done.

Alex didn't recall his drunken conversation with Vickey. Max said that he would find a "suitable chick" right before the job. He said there was a guy, maybe in Bromley, who owed Greg a lot of dough, and that he would agree to talk his chick into doing the job for them.

Alex really missed Vickey. And Diana. The two people closest to him in his life. He genuinely regretted having driven himself to a state where he couldn't pick up his mobile and dial them in order to hear their familiar voices.

"I have to let her go, I have to let them go. Let them go and wish them happiness. I have to, but it's so unbearably hard."

Alex had already been writhing around in bed, unable to get to sleep, for half an hour. He'd tried everything he could think of. Television, melatonin, two glasses of Chianti Classico. Nothing.

Sport, news, science, news again, news that everyone would forget about tomorrow, someone had argued with someone else, someone had started sleeping with someone, a soccer team had lost again, changed its coach again, fashion. Fashion channel. Skinny girls on the catwalk, some of them almost bare-breasted. Some with veils over their breasts, which made them even sexier, just outlining the shapes of their beautiful female bodies.

Alex made himself comfortable and started to watch what was happening on the catwalk. A few minutes later he decided to try and find some quiet European film, but his gaze was caught by a beautiful model.

Thin, like all her colleagues, she was distinguished by the fact that her chest was almost entirely flat.

The model strutted back and forth on the catwalk, and something hit Alex inside. She reminded him – and yes, damn it, Alex had learned to always be honest with himself – she reminded him of Johnny.

Alex vividly recalled the day when Johnny, the young student writer, had been in his apartment. He saw Johnny's thin, shiny lips, it was as if he could feel his tender

skin under his fingers. To this day he clearly remembered him from that innocent midday.

His erection appeared almost instantly. Alex closed his eyes and began tenderly massaging his cock. He passed his other hand over his entire body, his stomach, his thighs. His arousal was growing.

Alex wetted his right palm and began to move his moist hand up and down the head of his cock. He closed his eyes and lay back on the pillow. Two people appeared in his imagination – Johnny and the model from the catwalk. The model was dressed as he'd seen on the television screen, while Johnny was only wearing jeans.

Alex imagined that he was caressing them both, the model kissing his chest, Johnny standing close by, barely touching his shoulder.

Alex's hand started to dry out. He wetted it down again. He screwed his eyes shut tight. As if receding into himself. He continued to imagine.

The model began kissing Alex on the chest. Her tender, soft tongue slowly touched Alex's nipples, forcing Alex to groan. Johnny carried on standing in his jeans, tenderly holding Alex by the shoulder, his touch sending Alex's head spinning.

The model didn't touch Alex's cock. She passed her small, beautiful palm along the inner surface of Alex's thighs. Johnny carried on standing nearby. He looked at Alex with his innocent eyes.

Alex wasn't sure what he wanted or who he wanted. Or how. He didn't understand and he didn't want to understand. That was no longer important to him.

Eyes shut, squeezed shut to the point of pain, continuing to separate him off from reality, carrying him off into his own, internal world.

Everything was resolved almost instantly. Johnny took Alex's hand and placed its palm on the base of his cock. Then, with his mouth, lips and tongue, Alex sensed Johnny's beautiful, taut nipple, just as he had sensed the taste of the girl's breast, and he yelped in joy. He fastened on to it, taking Johnny's second nipple with his left hand.

Alex greedily licked Johnny's breast, his hand gliding back and forth, and his arousal reached a peak. Johnny placed his hand on Alex's head, just put his hand on his head, which aroused Alex to the limit. The feeling was like none other and Alex groaned loudly.

The model lowered herself down and quickly took Alex's cock in her mouth. Her fine, tender, warm lips enveloped his swollen member.

Alex imagined this picture, groaned, his hand, his already dry hand moving up and down.

Johnny raised Alex's head sharply and locked their lips together. The model squeezed on Alex's cock ever tighter with her hand, moving it back and forth ever faster, taking its head into her mouth. Again, again, again, his head spinning, the music from the catwalk blurring with the music in his head.

The wave reached its uppermost point, yes! Yes, yes, yes, and then quieter. Quieter. Quieter.

Alex lay on his back and slowly, very slowly, moved his hand up and down his cock. Up and down his cock, wet with sperm, calming it, lulling himself to sleep, and slowly, soundlessly shutting the door on the room of sins which only he could enter, alone with his secret desires, fears and feelings that only he could recognize. He closed the door behind him. Alex tightened on the lid of his own Pandora's box that only he could see.

Alex fell asleep. He drifted off into a world of dreams, accompanied by the monotonous electronic rhythm of an alien catwalk.

August 2018

Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon

Hearing the fat guy's quivering voice, the guard immediately perked up, turning in Leon's direction, leaving Alex directly behind his back. At the distance of an outstretched arm.

"There it is!" flashed through Alex's thoughts. His mind and body appeared to divide. It all happened incredibly quickly. It was as if Alex heard his inner voice: "Stop! Don't do it! Run! Grab Vickey and run!"

But his body, for some reason that he couldn't comprehend, was already doing its job. The right hand had already taken the metal pipe out from beneath his arm pit. The left hand grabbed it in the middle, the left hand lowered it towards the floor, the right hand grabbed it by the other end, all in a fraction of a second, almost instantaneously. The guard slowly turned in Leon's direction, leaving the back of his head bare.

The blow caught the guard entirely unawares. Alex hit the intersection of the neck and the back of the head. Just the way Max had taught him. As he'd done in the bowling club in East Finchley. A short, powerful, sharp blow. The guard, giving out a muffled sound from deep within his chest, fell to the ground.

What followed was like something from a Hollywood film. The girl standing next to the guard didn't have time to shout before Greg leapt up on the cashier's desk, took out his gun and aimed it at the cashiers sitting in their seats.

"This is a robbery! Hands up everyone! You press the button and you're dead! Hands up, I said!" Greg's voice rang out in the space, loud and authoritative.

The four cashiers were horrified – glued to their seats, it was as if, in an instant, they'd forgotten all their training sessions on security. They stared at Greg and his gun, raising their hands slowly, frightened of making a move. One of them grabbed onto her head with her hands without taking her eyes off Greg for a moment.

"Customers – lie down on the floor! Fast!" shouted Alex. He kept his hand in the pocket of his coat in order to give the impression that he also had a gun in there.

"Don't shoot! We'll get down!" Leon shouted, pretending that he was just another one of the bank's customers. He got down on his knees, holding his hands over his head, and then lay down, setting an example for the rest.

Within seconds, the rest of the customers, one after another, began lying down on the floor.

"Everyone lie down!" shouted Greg. "Nobody's going to get hurt! Just do what you're told and we'll be gone soon. Just do what you're told!"

As Greg jumped up on the table, Max walked into the bank manager's office and aimed his handgun at him.

"Make a move in the direction of the alarm button and I'll blow your head off!" hissed Max. "You probably want to live to see your kid's wedding day, right, boss?"

The balding, 45-year-old boss of the bank, startled, slowly raised his hands, shaking his head in silence, trying in some way to express complete submission.

"Come out from behind the table!" ordered Max, and the boss obeyed his order.

In the meantime, Alex turned the lock on the entrance door so that no one could get into the bank and then pushed a brochure stand that stood nearby up against the door. That was just in case the nerves of one of the customers got the better of them and they tried to make a break for it.

Max took the boss out into the main room and ordered him down onto his knees. He ordered the other members of staff to lie down – trying not to even look in the direction of the robbers, they quickly lay face down on the floor. Alex stood by the entrance, indicating that the route to the bank's doors was blocked. Everything was going according to plan.

"Right!" shouted Greg. "It's very simple. We take the money and we disappear! If you do everything we say, it'll be over very quickly! Think about your parents and children! If anyone makes a mistake or disobeys, they'll be killed on the spot! And we'll also shoot whoever's closest to the hero. So keep an eye on one another!"

Greg left a pause in order to make sure that he was completely in control of the situation.

"Now," barked Greg, "all of the cashiers get up with your hands raised high above your head."

The women, trembling with fear, began to get up.

"You!" shouted Greg, pointing with his pistol at the first to have gotten up, a tall girl on high heels. "Take the bag! The rest of you – come out from behind the desk and get on the floor!" Greg quickly took out a bag that he'd had behind his back, hidden under his coat and fixed in place with scotch. He threw it to the girl. The cashiers obeyed his orders, came out from behind their desks, looking straight ahead the whole time, and lay down on the floor. The tall girl, her hands shaking, picked up the bag and, trying not to look directly at Greg, for some reason held it in her outstretched hands.

"What's your name?" Greg asked her.

"Sharon," she answered.

"Right, Sharon," ordered Greg, "Get all the money from the tills and put it in this bag! Then give it to that man over there by the door." He pointed at Alex. "Then lie down next to your girlfriends."

The girl nodded the whole time and then started opening up the tills and stuffing the bag with money.

"Only the notes!" Greg barked at her. "And if you hit the alarm button by mistake, I'll shoot you and all of your colleagues. Got it?" shouted Greg.

The girl nodded quickly as she started to carry out Greg's order.

"Now!" shouted Greg. "Slowly, with one hand, all of you take your mobiles out of your pockets. And put them right in front of you, by your heads. If some hero presses a button on their mobiles and makes a call, then that hero dies!" Greg left a pause that was full of malicious intent. "And I'll kill whoever's lying next to that smart ass – to their left and right!" Greg looked down triumphantly at the people lying on the floor. "So," he continued, "take out your mobiles and keep an eye on your neighbors if you value your life and you want to see your lovely children again, your mummies and daddies, who I'm sure love you very dearly."

All of the bank's customers and staff, trembling with fear, slowly took out their mobiles and placed them in front of themselves. Some of the bank's clients really did look from side to side to make sure that their neighbors were putting their mobiles in front of them.

The girl getting the money from the tills went up to Alex and placed the bag with the cash at his feet. She didn't take her eyes off Greg, waiting for further orders, standing still, afraid of making a move.

"Now, Sharon," Greg said, turning to her, "put all the mobiles in a wastepaper basket, put yours in there, and give them all to the man over by the door," said Greg,

pointing with his gun at Alex and glancing at his watch. Everything was going exactly according to plan.

The girl picked up a wastepaper basket not far from the entrance, took her mobile out of her trouser pocket and put it in. She walked through the room and quickly collected up the mobiles that were already on the floor. Then she went back to Alex and placed the basket at his feet.

"Lie down on the floor," Alex told her quietly, "and don't make a move."

He quickly pulled the bin liner with the phones out, tied it in a knot and threw it into the corner of the room. In the meantime, the girl lay down on the floor and put her hands on her head.

The first part of the robbery had gone smoothly. Complete control. Everyone was on the floor.

"You've all done very well," Greg said loudly. "We'll be finished soon. Stay calm, breathe deeply, keep quiet, and everything'll be all right. Freedom, your parents, your kids – they're all right here, just outside the door, you just have to be patient," Greg concluded sarcastically.

Max, who'd been standing gun in hand, controlling the situation, for the whole time, kicked the bank manager who was lying on the floor.

"Get up, boss," he said.

The bank manager quickly followed his order.

Greg went over to Leon, who was lying on the floor.

"And you get up, fatty," Greg said to Leon.

Leon, who'd been playing a bank client this whole time, also obediently got up.

Greg put the gun to Leon's head and Max put the barrel of his gun to the back of the bank manager's head.

"Let's go to the safe!" said Max. "And if you start telling me fairytales about not being able to open it up, you die, boss. Got it?" shouted Max. "You want to see your kid again, right?"

"Yes, yes, yes," the bank manager quickly nodded.

"And then I'll shoot this fatty," Max hissed into the bank manager's ear, nodding in Leon's direction. "Because I've got nothing to lose, boss."

"I'm begging you, do what they say," said Leon, staring down at the floor. "I've got two little children. I'm begging you!"

"And not far from your house at 35 Widmore Road, boss, there's a guy," Max hissed into the bank manager's ear, "and if I don't phone him in fifteen minutes, then someone at Widmore Road is never coming back out."

The bank manager's eyes widened into terrified circles of fear. Max and Greg had been following him for the best part of a month. A woman and a child who appeared to be his wife and kid, lived there, and a woman, probably his mother, frequently visited.

Greg hadn't sent anyone to Widmore Road. But it was a very good bluff.

"What's your kid called?" Greg asked the bank manager.

"What?" the manager asked, not having understood.

"What's your kid called, damn it?" Greg asked again, angrily.

"Billy. He's called Billy," the manager answered, stuttering in fear.

"All right, boss. Everything's fine. Just don't use any secret codes and you'll get Billy back. This evening. Got it?" asked Greg.

"Yes," the bank manager answered quickly.

"And this fatty," Greg said, nodding in Leon's direction, "won't die because of you and will be able to hug his kids again. You got that?"

"Yes, yes. I got it."

"Don't do anything stupid, boss."

"Ok, I got it, I got it!"

"Do what they say!" Leon begged him again.

The bank manager, staring blankly ahead nodded his assent quickly.

"Let's go!" ordered Greg. "And please, no secret codes on the lock. Think about little Billy, boss."

"Yes, all right, all right," the poor man jabbered.

The bank manager, accompanied by Max, walked up to the door behind the cash desk and opened it with his electronic key. The boss, and then Greg and Leon, followed him into a small space. Max remained at the open door in order to control who came in and out of the main room and what was going on in the section with the safe.

The bank manager, Greg's pistol poking into his neck, along with Greg and Leon, found himself in the center of a small room. There were two doors leading out of it – one normal door made of plastic leading to the room with safety deposit boxes and a second armored door leading to the main safe. The main door had an electronic pad that the entry code had to be tapped into.

Greg sneered on seeing that nothing had changed since he'd worked there.

"Open the door to the safety deposit boxes," he ordered the manager.

The manager quickly went up to the door and slotted his electronic key into the lock. The lock beeped and the door opened.

"Take off your boot and stick it in the door so it won't shut," Greg ordered and the bank manager quickly obeyed him.

"Well done," said Greg. "Not long now and we'll be off, and you and little Billy can live out the rest of your long and happy lives..."

Greg really did know how to make a person obey him fully. Despite the show of brutality, he weighed up every word. He ordered and threatened, but at the same time reminded his victims that, as long as they didn't do anything stupid, the unwilling witnesses of the robbery would be back with their nearest and dearest very soon.

"Now, boss, open up the main safe," he said to the bank manager. He pressed the barrel of his gun hard into the man's neck. "But think about it first – do you really want to use the code that opens the door but also calls the police in? Or do you want to tap in the right code, which simply opens the door to the money? Remember, it's not your money, it belongs to some fat cats who are currently relaxing in the Canary Islands, watching a film or playing roulette in fucking Cannes. Do you understand me?"

The boss again nodded that he'd be a good boy.

"And you'll tell the cops the truth – that we knew the code to open the door and call them in and we threatened to kill you. That will put you in the clear. You understand me?" Greg asked in a vicious but reassuring voice.

The manager started nodding again.

"Tell me calmly, which buttons you're about to press, Billy's daddy..." Greg said slowly.

"I'm ..." the manager began.

"The number, bitch," Greg hissed in a fury. "Tell me the numbers..."

"One, one, seventy-one, two, two, sixty-nine, seven, two," the manager blurted out.

"Well done," Greg said quietly. "And what's the code to open up and call the cops in?"

"It's the same, but it ends one, one, the same way it starts."

"Well done," said Greg and gave the manager a pat on the head with his free hand. "That's all there is to it. See? You've protected your family. You're a good boy. Now you just have to carefully open the door and wait a while."

The manager nodded again, staring straight ahead at a point on the door to the main safe.

"Go on!" Greg commanded dryly, pushing the manager with the gun pointed into his back.

The manager took a step towards the door. He took a long flat key out of his pocket and slipped it into a narrow slot in the electronic lock. The lock beeped and the keyboard lit up. Tense, Greg watched the manager's every movement. Leon stood with his mouth hanging open, for a moment having forgotten that he was actually a participant in the crime.

When the manager pressed the final button, the two, a loud click was heard coming from the other side of the door. He put both his hands on the round door handle and turned it slowly, using a lot of effort. The door slowly opened as he pulled it towards himself.

It revealed a picture that Leon, and perhaps Greg too, had only seen in films. A room full of money. A huge number of carefully stacked wads of notes on numerous shelves. All of the wads were in multicolored wrappers, the color appearing to correspond to the denomination of the bills within them.

"Is that it?" Greg asked the manager. "No more 'secret' gimmicks?"

"No, that's it," the manager answered, shaking his head. "That's it. I did it all. Like you asked."

"Thank you," Greg said dryly.

In a flash, Greg slammed the pistol grip into the back of the manager's head. Without emitting a sound, the manager slumped to the floor unconscious.

"Let's go, fatty," Greg said quickly. "Stick to the plan. You've got two minutes, bro."

Greg gave Leon a pat on the shoulder.

Leon suddenly remembered that his work wasn't yet done. He pulled himself together and seemed to be a different person. The fear instantly disappeared. Like a robot that had been reprogrammed, Leon started working according to the plan that they'd drawn up. He carefully took off his rucksack, took out two bags that had been folded up tight inside and passed them to Greg. Then he quickly entered the room with the safety deposit boxes.

Greg ran into the main safe room, opening up and laying out the two canvas bags. He took a quick look over the shelves, found the area with the 50-pound bank notes and, with a frenzied smile spread across his face, started sweeping the bundles into the bags. "Here's our dough! This is the life! Take that, you scum! It's all mine!" he chanted in an exultant rage.

In the neighboring room, Leon acted fast, deep in concentration. Many of his acquaintances wouldn't have recognized him. It was as if his usual lack of confidence and timidity had melted away in an instant. Leon slowly placed his rucksack on the floor. He carefully prized several packages wrapped in cellophane out of it, along with some sections of foam, and then, very cautiously took out the matrix – a carefully folded construction made of strong wire with a large number of squares spaced out on it, each squared linked by small loops.

Leon laid out the matrix, carefully unfolding it square by square, forming a light wire construction a yard wide and two yards long. In each square there were two diagonal lines that met in the middle where a small charge that looked like a bullet was attached. All of the charges were linked by wires carefully wrapped in duct tape and leading to a single point in the corner of the matrix. Leon lifted the matrix up and carried it over to the safety deposit boxes. Fairly large suckers were attached to the wire that ran along the top. Leon used them to attach the matrix to the top of safety deposit boxes, with each charge hanging over a single box. He'd got the positioning of the boxes to within a millimeter's accuracy. There were only a few different kinds of boxes – Greg had given him a photograph that his former girlfriend had given him. She'd worked in the bank and had taken a photo of herself in front of them. Leon had also rented several safety deposit boxes in various banks looking for just the same design. Then he'd simply had to measure the distance between the boxes without being noticed. Which is precisely what Leon had done.

When all the charges were over the locks, Leon attached additional suction pads at the sides and at the bottom in order to fasten the matrix in place. It all took under a minute.

Leon stopped for a second to wipe the sweat from his brow. Then he slowly took a battery from his rucksack and put it on the floor. He took the end of a thick wire that fanned out across the charges on the matrix, attached it to the battery and flicked the switch to ON. A light on the battery lit up. Leon looked at the light, then at the construction that he'd put together, picked the rucksack up from the floor, left the safety deposit box room and went back into the main safe room.

There he found Greg who, with the frenzied look of a victor, was finishing up scooping the wads of money into his bag.

"This is our dough, fatty. This is our dough!" Greg smiled savagely, without taking a second's break from swiping the cash into his bag.

"I'm detonating it!" Leon shouted.

"Do it!" Greg snapped back.

Leon took out a remote controller and pressed a red button on it. A muffled explosion was heard. Not even an explosion, more of a loud popping. Leon ran into the safety deposit box room and stopped.

For a few seconds, his face was consumed by a smile. Leon liked technical victories. All of the mini-explosions had worked very precisely – all of the locks had been blown off. Leon went to one of the boxes at the end of a line and carefully opened it. It contained money. Leon opened his rucksack and stuffed the money into it.

All of the customers and staff at the bank were still lying face down on the cold floor, too afraid to make a move. They were all waiting for this nightmare to be over. They were all dreaming of being free again as soon as possible. All of them. Except one.

The sporty looking black guy in the light brown coat who, by chance, had entered the bank right before Alex and Leon. The same guy who had checked out Vickey, and in so doing sparked up feelings of jealousy in Alex. Alex, in the corner of his eye, had noticed that the man had greeted one of the bank workers at the entrance, but hadn't really thought anything of it, because he couldn't imagine who this man, who looked like a normal client at the bank, might be.

David Rose. That was the name of the black man in the brown coat. Forty-two years old. He was from a children's home. A former special forces operative, an excellent marksman skilled with handguns and rifles, he'd earned distinction in

training and immediately applied to join the SAS, Britain's most elite force. Having qualified, he'd been hungry for an assignment. He wanted to kill. To kill legally. And to get medals, higher ranks and money for those kills. They were almost all like that in his detachment.

Having arrived at an operational unit, Rose found himself under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Fairbanks, who was distinguished by his unique approach to his subordinates. The Lieutenant Colonel "broke" his soldiers down in order to build them back up into machines that would carry out his orders. His first step in gaining total subordination was to send Rose out as a spotter – a soldier who would accompany a sniper, monitoring the wind speed, the distance to the target and any movement of the person in the firing line. There would be no chance of Rose using his handgun, despite his having come top in that discipline as a special forces trainee. So, one of the top gunmen had been given a minor role just so that the rookie would know who was the master in the house.

How did Rose feel about this? Hundreds, thousands of training sessions, 49 out of a possible 50 points with a rifle from a 100 feet, a 100-percent scorecard in pistol-shooting in enclosed spaces, and what was the result? Assistant to a sniper.

Of course, in time Rose would have got the job of sniper or member of an active team that he dreamed of, if he could put up with it. But the former children's home kid wasn't used to putting up with anything and he repeatedly expressed his discontent with the leadership. He'd met his match. In order to ensure that no one would discuss his orders and decisions as a commander, the Lieutenant Colonel indefinitely extended Rose's posting as a spotter to a sniper, which brought an end to his dreams of gaining promotion and insulted his dignity. Rose applied to be transferred to a different detachment but got nowhere. The Lieutenant Colonel knew how to take revenge: "An accusation of robbery, then military prison, son. That's if you're lucky."

Soon Rose found himself back in civvies and applying for a job with the police. His experience quickly had him recruited into an anti-terrorist unit and once again he was allowed to legally carry a firearm. And right now, the weapon, an Austrian Glock 17, was well hidden in his shoulder holster under his light brown coat.

"Here's my chance," Rose thought. All this time, lying on the floor, he'd been working out options. The way he'd been trained to do in the special forces. It was clear that one of the robbers, the guy at the door, was a complete loser. Rose had seen how he'd hit the guard with the piece of pipe – it was completely unprofessional and he was lucky the guard had gone down.

If Rose hadn't been a professional soldier who was very much at home in enclosed spaces, he'd have taken out his Glock 17 and done damage to the guy by the door. But the instincts he'd developed in thousands of training sessions had come into play. The guy had to have accomplices in the room, and Rose didn't know how many or where they were. He could immediately get caught in the crossfire, and that would have meant instant death.

So, Rose preferred not to make a move. He needed to work out what was going on and fully evaluate the situation. When another two guys appeared with guns, Rose realized that they were the main strike force. The visible strike force, at least. They were clearly professionals. That could be seen in their actions, the way they spoke, the way they took control of the situation at a stroke, and where they placed themselves in the room.

This robbery had been carefully planned – Rose had no doubt about that. The question that he asked himself as he lay on the floor was simple: were there more

accomplices in the room who hadn't yet revealed themselves. The wolf's instinct awoke in the gunman. An instinct that had been developed through all those training sessions. An instinct that had been ground down by the dirty, army boot, with its rough tread, of Lieutenant Colonel Fairbanks. Rose wanted blood and victory. Thousands of training sessions, but not a single eliminated live target in his life. Because of the whims of a sadistic commanding officer. Some got lucky with their military commanders, his friends from special forces training, for example. Some, but not him. Again, he'd been unlucky. As he had been in his childhood. He'd lain on the cold ground for months, then in the guardroom for disobeying his commanding officers, and then there was the shame of discharge. That's how it had all ended for this ambitious kid from a children's home. These were the gifts that fate had given him.

Rose lay on the ground and sized up the situation. So, the main thief had gone inside, taking hostages – the short, fat guy and the bank manager. The second thief was at the door that led into the bank. From his position he had a good view of the entire room. The handsome guy at the door probably didn't have a gun – if he did he would have pulled it out. The door was locked and the brochure stand had been pushed up against it, making escape difficult if one of the bank's clients panicked and tried to make a run for it. The client would immediately get a bullet in the back. The only option right now was to wait.

Rose decided that he should only get involved right at the end, when the whole gang would be at the entrance. Then they'd be one big target or, as they put it in the special forces, they'd all be in one firing line. True, the fact that there were clients and bank staff close to Rose was dangerous – they could get caught in the line of fire. But Rose didn't plan on giving the thieves a chance. He shot at an average rate of four bullets per second. That was enough for the two main thieves who were armed. A factor in favor of only shooting at the end was that Rose was lying furthest from the door, and so if he got up on one knee or crouched, then any shots returned, if the thieves got the chance, would go over the crowd lying on the floor and, accordingly, Rose would be putting the risks for the civilians at a minimum. He felt his Glock 17 against his body. The best handgun in the world for targeted fire and for fast, "instinctive" shooting.

And so, Rose took a very precise evaluation of the situation and made a decision. And that wasn't just because it was his duty to protect the clients and personnel of the bank in accordance with his post as a police officer. He had the right to bear arms and to use them if needed. He was on duty, which gave him the right to use his weapon in the situation that had arisen, although he'd actually only dropped in on the bank to pay his bills, even though he was on the clock.

It wasn't just a matter of his professional responsibilities. Rose knew that he would also be shooting because he'd been preparing for this all of his life. He'd made that choice when he signed the documents for the special forces. All that training, all that blood and sweat, and not a single live shootout, something that he'd dreamed of taking part in. A precise, considered squeeze on the trigger. Cold metal under the tip of his index finger on his right hand. A bullet piercing through the living flesh of an opponent, slicing through the enemy's body at a speed of one hundred and fifty meters per second. Rose never lied. He wanted to take an opponent's life. Like he'd had his childhood taken from him. And then his career.

David Rose. Forty-two years old. It was as if his age was branded into his forehead. Another five years and they'd appoint a younger guy to his post, and then what? Rose didn't know how to do anything else and he wasn't planning on going

back into education. But if this job came off, it would elevate him into a different caste. Into the police's highest ranks. The superiors loved people who'd proved themselves in action. And that would mean a different pay packet. Then he'd be able to meet up with his daughter Alisa, who he'd barely seen since the divorce, he could buy her beautiful dresses, toys, he could take her to the shows in the West End that she asked to go to whenever they met because her girlfriends at school often went there, he could take her to the kids' 3D movies at the cinema. He could take her Disneyland - that trip would set you back thousands, it all cost so much. Ideas fanned out through his mind. He could get transferred to management. It was a chance to become someone, to become a person who meant something in the eyes of his daughter, in the eyes of his elderly parents who'd adopted him, even in the eyes of his ex-wife.

Through the bank's large windows, the figures of people walking by could be made out, though they in turn couldn't see what was going on inside the bank, the matted glass blurring the view. Outside, Vickey was calmly explaining to the people who came up from time to time that there was a temporary service break, that the bank apologized for any inconvenience, and would they like to answer some questions for a poll? Those that came up, and there weren't many, waved her away and headed off.

Max, who'd been controlling the bank's main room for all this time, heard a noise behind him. A few seconds later, Greg appeared in the corridor, loaded down with two big bags, along with Leon, the rucksack on his back and several bags in his hands.

"It's all going to plan, bro!" Greg said excitedly.

"Let's go, let's go," Max hurried him, unable to conceal his joy, although they were already walking as fast as they could.

"Take these!" Greg handed the two bags over to Max.

Max threw the bags over his left shoulder, holding them in place with his left hand, still holding the gun in his right.

Strictly in keeping with the plan they'd memorized, Max headed to the door first, Greg walking fast after him. Leon was already setting up his bags around the room - inside there was foam that was supposed to make the bags look like bombs. All of the clients lay quietly on the floor, face down. In the ringing, nervous quiet, you could reach out and touch the air, or slice it into pieces.

Max and Greg reached the door where Alex was standing. The bag with the cash from the tills lay at his feet. Greg gave Alex a pat on the shoulder.

"And you were worried, smartass ..." grinned Greg.

Max threw his two bags onto the floor and Leon put his rucksack next to them. Greg hid his gun in his trouser pocket, then stuffed the bag with the cash from the tills into one of the larger bags with the money, picking both of them up in his left hand. Leon took a Dictaphone out of one of the external pockets of the rucksack. Alex moved the brochure stand away from the entrance, and then, in the tense silence, the loud and precise voice of the anti-terrorist police officer, Dave Rose, was heard:

"Everybody put your hands up! I'm a police officer! I'll shoot to kill!"

The third, last phrase was lost in the racket from Rose's shot. Greg had responded even before he'd managed to understand what was going on. Instinctively, he reached for his gun, which was precisely when the shot rang out.

The bullet fired by Rose's Glock 17, the finest handgun in the world for enclosed spaces, hit Greg in the stomach. Greg, knocking over the brochure stand, smashed

into the wall that he was standing next to. A shriek was heard. A tall girl, a cashier, lying on the floor near Alex, leapt to her feet, screaming, trying to run from the shot fired right over her head.

Greg, managing to stay on his feet, took out his gun. Losing his balance, he tried to aim, but was hit by another bullet in the stomach.

Rose, turning his gun to aim at Max, out of the corner of his eye, noticed Greg's gun flying out of his hand, and at that moment, the girl who'd made a break to get out of the line of fire found herself directly between Rose and Max – for an instant she became a shield for Max.

Rose tried to shift to the side, increasing the angle of attack between him and Max, and his shot was delayed by a fraction of a second – it was in that fraction of a second that another shot rang out. Rose felt a powerful blow to his chest. It was as if he'd been whacked with the blunt end of a hammer. The blow hit him right in the center of the chest. Gasping for air, he collapsed to the floor.

A plume of smoke, barely noticeable, came from the barrel of the 7.62-millimeter caliber Walther pistol in Max's hand. Max, who'd been an excellent marksman in the past, didn't miss. He had crossed the line that he'd feared for his entire life. He'd shot a living person. He'd shot without thinking about it. Instinctively, to save his life. A thought flashed through his mind: "That's it."

Wounded, Rose lay on the floor, leaking blood. His gun had fallen a few yards from him. Blood and a painful wheezing came from Rose's throat. His legs kicked out convulsively as he tried to press his right hand onto his wound.

Max moved in Rose's direction in order to finish him. He already knew that there was no way back.

"Where are you going?" croaked Greg. "Leave him!"

Max stopped, looking back and forth between Greg and the wounded man. Leon froze, not knowing what to do. Alex couldn't move a muscle either, looking in fright at the man lying on the ground, losing blood – it flowed across the floor, forming a shining red puddle.

Greg's voice, the roar of a wounded beast, again brought them all back to reality.

"What are you standing around for, you idiots! Stick to the plan!" shouted Greg, writhing in pain and pressing his hands to his wound. "Come on, help me!" he shouted to Max.

Max rushed over to Greg, putting an arm round him. Alex turned the lock and opened the door – he immediately saw Vickey's very pale face.

"Everything's going to be all right, kid," Alex said to Vickey. "Just keep calm."

"Give me the bags!" Max shouted at Alex roughly.

Alex hurried over to the bags with the money, picked them up and gave them to Max. Max threw both of them over his left shoulder. Holding them with his left hand, he held on tight to Greg with his right.

"Keep pressing on the wound," Max said to Greg. "Press on the fucking wound!"

"We'll make it, bro, we'll make it," wheezed Greg. "Get me to the car."

"Let's go!" said Max. Then to Alex: "The rucksack!"

"Motherfucker!" hissed Greg, trying to bundle up his shirt and press it down on his bloody wound.

"Hit it, fatty!" Max snapped to Leon.

Leon hit the play button on the Dictaphone.

"Attention all clients and personnel in the bank!" The metallic voice from the Dictaphone sounded out through the room. "The robbers will now leave the bank

and, by radio, activate four bombs placed in the banking hall. For the first three minutes after the thieves have left, those bombs will be detonated by the slightest movement in the bank. So, keep calm, remain lying on the floor, don't move, and you'll survive. We don't want any needless victims. Nobody should be hurt."

There was no one by the door to the bank. Vickey, shocked, watched as Max struggled to prop Greg up as he came out into the street. He dragged Greg a few yards to the stairway down to the carpark. They disappeared through the door that led downwards.

March 2018

Vickey

When Diana left, Vickey stayed in what had become their apartment in Camden. Diana made a short phone call, informing her that she was moving back in with her parents in Hampstead, and asking that she send her personal stuff that had already been packed for the trip to Africa. She said that she'd be flying to Uganda as soon as she could. Then she got called into the operating theater and she hung up.

Vickey tried to phone a couple of times, hoping to speak to Diana before her flight, but Diana's phone at first remained silent, and then informed her that the number wasn't in service. Vickey assumed that Diana had already left.

Unexpectedly for Vickey, it all became very quiet around her. The silence appeared from nowhere, and it was all that she had left.

Vickey took her breakup with Diana very, very badly. Out of work, she stayed in, slowly burning through the money that she'd set aside for the trip, watching American tv shows for days on end. She laughed at Santa Clarita Diet, a comedy about zombies and family values with Drew Barrymore in the main role. She was terrified by American Horror Story, unable to get to sleep at night. She cried at Gray's Anatomy – a silly series about surgeons, because it was about surgeons.

She hoped that Diana would call and kept close to the landline, even though it probably hadn't been used since before she was born. She just stayed in and waited. No one was better than Vickey at waiting.

Vickey didn't go to Alex the next day, the next week or the next month. Vickey had already got used to living without Alex, but she hadn't got used to living without Diana. She couldn't get used to it. Everything around her reminded her of her lover, of them together, of their former life, so carefree, so happy.

That morning, Vickey woke up unusually early. Without getting out of bed, she reached out for her laptop and turned on an episode of Gray's Anatomy that she hadn't finished watching the night before. Then she tried to get back to sleep to the voices and figures flitting on the screen, but sleep wouldn't come to her.

At eight in the morning her mobile rang. Vickey looked around for it without getting up. A superstitious fear hit her: "Something's happened! It's bad news. A phone call this early can't be anything good."

"Sophie", Diana's mother, flashed up on the screen. Vickey felt a wave of relief. She hadn't talked with Sophie since she'd split up with Diana, she'd really missed her and was pleased to get a call from her, even this early in the morning. On top of all that, eight in the morning, for a surgeon, was the middle of the working day.

Somewhere deep in Vickey's soul there was even a faint hope that perhaps it was Diana, that she'd come back to London and was calling from her mother's phone as she hadn't yet had a chance to get her mobile running again.

Her heart started beating fretfully. Her hands fumbled as she answered the call. There was silence at the other end of the line, apart from someone breathing heavily.

Eventually a voice was heard, familiar, but she couldn't identify it. "Vickey, my dear..." Then the voice broke off.

Vickey's heart sank.

"Vickey, I'm phoning you to say..." said Sophie. She was always so cheerful, but not now. "Vickey, listen – Diana, my girl, my beauty..." There was an oppressive silence, and then, "She died."

It was as if an avalanche of icy snow had swept over Vickey. Soundlessly.

"She caught an unidentified fever on her fifth day at work. They couldn't save her," Diana's mother said quietly, and then she began to gabble her words in a dark, quiet, detached voice, as if she was speaking them for the thousandth time. "They'll bring her body back to us in a month, back to her homeland. In a zinc coffin. We decided to bury her at Highgate Cemetery, at the family plot, alongside her famous forebears. She would like that."

Vickey thought that Diana's mother appeared to be talking to herself. Vickey tried to understand, to say something, but she couldn't get the words out.

No.

"Diana, my tender, subtle, beautiful Diana – in a zinc coffin! It's impossible. It's simply impossible to imagine! It's impossible! It can't be."

"She would've liked to die that way in old age," Sophie said, as if hypnotized, slowly stretching out the words. "She would've been proud of her body and her sickness being studied for the good of science and for future lives. But in old age, in old age, Vickey! That was so far off. My beautiful daughter is dead. It's so unfair. She died, Vickey."

The silent avalanche of snow that covered Vickey was finishing her off, it didn't let up for a second. Her head was pierced by a monotone howl. Vickey still couldn't pull herself together to say something.

"Died, died, died. No, it's a mistake, it's absolutely definitely a mistake."

"Vickey," Sophie said suddenly, pulling her out of her stupor, "I won't invite you to the burial, you shouldn't see that. I ask that you don't come, dear. Later." She muttered something incomprehensibly. "Later."

An explosion.

Vickey again thought that Sophie was talking to herself.

"Sophie," Vickey whispered quickly, before the tears welling up could drown out her words. "Sophie! I'm to blame. She left early because of me. She got sick and died because of me."

Now she burst into tears. She wanted to explain that if they hadn't argued Diana wouldn't have left early, before she'd done her vaccinations. Which was probably the cause of her death. But she couldn't.

She heard Diana's mother's stern voice. It seemed to Vickey that she was summoning up her remaining strength just to speak calmly. "Vickey, dear, as her mother I'd love to blame someone else for her death, but you're not to blame."

"I just..." Vickey began.

"I know my daughter and know what happened between you, dear," Sophie interrupted her.

"She wanted to leave as fast as she could," Vickey said through her tears, "and she didn't finish her vaccinations."

"She did all her vaccinations," Sophie said very quietly. "They don't really know over there what happened. She got a cut and her blood got infected, maybe something else. They don't know. They don't know."

Vickey didn't know what she was meant to tell Diana's mother. Who were "they"? It wasn't true.

"Diana dreamed of helping sick children, she was a surgeon," said Sophie. "She went to Africa knowing that she had no guarantee against falling sick or dying. She took that risk voluntarily. And I didn't have the right to stop her. That was the way I brought her up. To be free. God, what am I saying?" Sophie said, again whispering.

Vickey couldn't hold the tears back. She sobbed into the phone, helplessly shaking her head from side to side, denying it all or just trying to drive her thoughts away.

"Come later! Diana loved you. We all loved you."

"Yes." That was all Vickey could bring herself to say.

"She sent you a letter before she died. They said it was addressed to you. It will arrive along with the body at the end of March, Vickey, my dear," said Sophie, almost whispering, and then hung up.

August 2018 **Greg, Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon**

Slowly going down two flights of stairs, Max and Greg found themselves in the carpark. As soon as Max and Greg, racked by pain, appeared in the doorway leading into the carpark they heard the sound of a car's engine roaring to life. A white Solaris pulled up in front of them and a young, skinny guy with blond hair leapt out.

"What happened?" asked the guy, frightened.

"Later, later!" roared Greg, overcoming the vicious pain that had already begun fettering his body.

The blond opened the back door and Max pushed Greg, groaning, in. Then Max quickly got in the front seat, the blond jumped behind the wheel and the car hurtled off. The Solaris arched its way around the carpark and drove outside.

"Don't rush!" Max told the driver.

The guy immediately slowed down.

"Keep it calm, don't attract any attention!" Max ordered again. "Open your window, turn the radio up loud."

The blond obeyed unquestioningly.

"How are you?" Max asked, turning to Greg.

"One went straight through the side, that's ok, but the second one got me in the stomach," whispered Greg.

Max turned round and looked at the car's rear window. Behind them it was all calm. They were approaching the gates. As they'd planned, no one was on guard and they were able to calmly drive off the Design School's territory without attracting any attention.

Greg slumped right across the back seat of the car and gave no signs of life.

"Greg!" Max shouted at him, climbing into the back and slapping Greg around the face.

Greg, coming back to his senses, opened his eyes.

"Max," whispered Greg.

Max didn't answer. He quickly looked in the direction of the approaching gates.

"Drive calmly," he told the blond. Max realized immediately that this guy was just a pawn and taking control of him wouldn't be difficult. "Greg must have promised the blond ten grand, no more. That would have been more than enough for this runny-nosed kid to do a simple job – all he had to do was drive for a couple of miles. But Greg would have taken a full cut of the loot from us for that," Max thought to himself.

"I don't want to die, Max," Greg wheezed from the back. Max didn't answer.

The Solaris drove up to the gates. They were open. The blond calmly drove over the speed control bumps and off the School's territory.

"Turn right, but calmly. Calmly – you got that?" hissed Max.

"Yes, yes," the guy answered quickly.

Max looked at him.

"You got a gun?" he asked.

"No," the blond answered.

"Take the second on the left," ordered Max.

The blond obeyed. The Solaris slowly turned down a small alley.

"Now the third on the left and the first on the right," commanded Max.

Years of experience in the police force, dirty work with Greg, the continual fear of being caught, a fear that was covered up with bravado, criminal slang, drinking, a faked brutality, a hatred for anyone who studied, worked, achieved anything, wore clean, ironed shirts, looked good and had good relationships – all this, this entire symbiosis of feelings, the main component of which was fear, was now hammering away inside Max's head.

He didn't think through his future actions. He simply knew what he would do now. If it hadn't been for that last red line, if he hadn't crossed his own, personal Rubicon by shooting that man and probably killing him, if it hadn't been for that last straw, there would have been a chance that Max might have done something for Greg, he might have tried to save him. But he'd crossed that invisible red line. When his finger pulled on the trigger of that unregistered Walther that Greg had given him just before they went on the job.

"Take my money," wheezed Greg. "Max. Brother."

Max didn't answer him. Greg understood everything. He knew what Max was about to do. He understood that he would do the same in Max's shoes. Greg was still fighting for his life, begging Max to help him, although with what remained of his consciousness as it seeped away, he understood that it was no use. He understood that he was losing his dignity, helplessly trying to cling on to life, a life that was now just a few coarse daubs running before his eyes. Just a few daubs because his life hadn't amounted to much. He hadn't achieved anything in normal life, and having set out on the path of crime he hadn't achieved anything of any significance there either.

He had hoped that this job, which he'd nurtured for so many years, would raise him up in the criminal world, it was the main job that he'd cherished and kept in mind every day when going through the humiliations of being a security guard, following all those menial orders, feeling, seeing that he was being treated like a second or even a third class citizen, even those young girls on the till, young, sweet, who didn't see him as a man in that dirty, rumpled security guard uniform, girls he dreamed about at night, falling asleep on a cheap, creaking IKEA bed.

The Solaris drove down the quiet alley and stopped at building number four.

"Drive into the courtyard. Here," Max ordered the driver.

"Yes, yes, I know, he showed me," the guy said quickly, nodding in Greg's direction.

The Solaris drove into a small, empty courtyard and stopped by two motor scooters protected from the rain by dirty coverings. A few yards away from them stood a short young guy. As soon as the guy saw the car with the blond sitting at the wheel he turned round and calmly walked off in the direction of the exit from the courtyard. Greg put him here to guard the scooters, a neat move, thought Max.

"I've got the keys to the locks," said the blond.

Greg tried to say something from the backseat, but only managed a spluttering wheeze instead of words.

"Unchain the scooters," Max ordered the guy.

The blond obeyed him. He jumped out of the car and started pulling the coverings off the scooters. Then he took some keys from the pocket of his jeans, opened the locks on their chains and started to pull them out from between the wheels.

Max turned round in his seat and looked at Greg. Tears had appeared in Greg's eyes. He spat blood, wheezing, helplessly trying to stem the flow of blood from his wound.

"Take the money, bro. All of it. Mine and all the rest," whispered Greg.

Max looked at Greg in silence, not answering him.

"The blond will take me to the emergency room, Max," begged Greg. Tears were rolling down his coarse cheeks. Each word brought him unbearable pain.

Max took his handgun from his trouser pocket.

"Bro, I won't rat you out," Greg begged in a whisper. "I'll do my time, I won't rat you out, I'll up my standing and ..." Greg coughed up some blood and groaned loudly.

Max took a look around. There was still no one in the corner of the yard where they'd stopped. The blond unlocked the scooters and took food delivery cases, the kind used by couriers, out of the boot of the car. He straightened them out and set them up on the back seats of the mopeds.

Yes, that was a brilliant idea on Greg's part. There were thousands of food delivery couriers in London, and nobody paid them any attention. The cops, who would've been alerted by now, would never suspect some young guys on cheap scooters out delivering pizzas.

"Max," Greg groaned. "I swear on my mother's grave: I'll do my time and come out and start over. Max..."

Max was in a stupor. He felt no pity for Greg. They were both experienced in their work, they both understood the risks and they'd known what they were getting into.

An image of what had happened to them just five minutes ago flashed up before Max's eyes. His accurate shot that took down the bank guard. The guy had clearly been a very good shot. He'd aimed at Greg's chest, the biggest area of the body. He'd done it all right, that's the way you should aim – at the largest area if the target's in motion, especially if he's surrounded by hostages.

Max's thoughts flashed through his consciousness. So, Greg had made a mistake. Or he simply hadn't known that there was a hidden shooter in the bank. Max suddenly sensed, or rather, again sensed the cold of the trigger on his handgun. From his memory bank, Max pulled out the fraction of a second after which he'd squeezed the trigger of his Walther.

That was it. Now he was an outcast. Forever. From that day onwards he'd shudder at every knock at the door. Now he'd be scared that they were coming for him. Now he was on the other side of the line. That line that separates people from outcasts. Max's right hand squeezed the Walther.

Greg's barely audible words, his begging, again began to get through to Max.

"Max," whispered Greg, "take it all and go..."

He made the necessary movement before he could even recognize his action. Max thrust his left hand forward, grabbing Greg by the throat, and held him tight up against the seat. He pressed the gun to Greg's heart, pushed the barrel in as hard as he could, and pulled the trigger.

The shot seemed to him to be quieter than he'd expected. As if the blunt side of an axe had fallen on a log and not even bounced back. It just lay flat on the piece of wood under the force of its own weight.

In an instant, Greg was transformed into a big, gray patch with a crimson liquid flowing from it.

Max could feel someone's gaze on him. He looked round sharply, at the same time thrusting the hand holding the gun forward.

The blond was at the door to the car, afraid to make a move.

"Get in," Max ordered the guy, who obeyed him in silence.

The blond wanted to say something, but Max beat him to it.

"Don't make a sound!" ordered Max. He took a look around. There wasn't a soul in the courtyard. Greg had chosen the ideal spot.

Max suddenly remembered that the guy hadn't seen his face because he still had his disguise on. So he couldn't identify him. The only trail that led to Max from Greg was Greg himself. And now that trail had been blocked. By a corpse. A corpse, now growing cold, that meant nothing and nobody needed.

Max had to make sure that the blond wouldn't lead the police to him. He had to ask the guy a few questions. It would take a few seconds. There was enough time.

Thoughts pounded through Max's head. "Ok, ok, I won't kill him. I shouldn't. I'm not a killer, after all. I was protecting myself against the shooter in the bank. And Greg signed his own death sentence. Time, time... It's good that we're not riding on the scooters down the main street. They'll be blocking it right now because the guards will have told the cops that the car left the Design School's territory. First, they'll block the surrounding streets. They'll work out the time and stop everyone a few miles from here. But we'll go on the scooters through the courtyards and stay in this neighborhood. Better still, we won't go anywhere for a few minutes, we'll just stay in this quiet courtyard."

The shock from the first two murders he'd ever committed, one after another, was starting to die down, but his head wasn't any better for that. On the contrary, with each passing minute Max became increasingly aware of the position that he was in.

"You mustn't delay though," pounded in his head. "Some old woman could walk into the courtyard at any moment. You have to calmly and quickly sort out the blond and then disappear. From this courtyard, and then from this city."

"I won't kill you," said Max. "But answer quickly. How do you know Greg?"

"He rented a room in my apartment in Streatham for a while a couple of years ago," the guy answered quickly.

"When he was hiding out after doing a job?" asked Max.

"Yes. Probably," the blond answered.

"All right – what was going on between you?" Max asked quickly.

"We watched football together, had a drink sometimes. We were just friendly," said the blond, as if justifying himself.

"All right," said Max. "Then what?"

"He popped up again recently and offered me this driving job," the guy stuttered. "He said there was no risk involved. If anything happened, I'd just say I knew nothing. I don't have a record, so they'd believe me. And he promised me ten grand."

"Bastard," thought Max, remembering that Greg had said that he'd give the driver an even cut. He sneered at his former comrade's greediness. "So, no one's seen you two together recently?" asked Max.

"No," the guy answered. "He phoned and we met up in Streatham. And that's it."

"What's my name?" Max asked sharply.

"I don't know," he answered immediately. "Greg didn't tell me anything and he told me to leave town for a month straight afterwards. That was a condition."

Max noticed that the blond's leg couldn't stop shaking.

"Can you ride a scooter?" asked Max.

"Yes, yes," the guy answered, looking at Max plaintively.

"All right," said Max, "I'll let you have your life, but you're going to have to earn it. Stick the car right in the corner of the yard and put the cover that's in the trunk over it. I'll put the bags in the delivery boxes on the scooters. We'll go through the courtyards. You stay right next to me, and just a little in front until we get to the other car. I'll let you go there. I'll give you some money, but basically you've been reborn, you're getting a second life."

"Thank you," the guy said, barely audibly.

"If you ever get in trouble with the cops and this deal comes up, you tell them I'm tall and fat, got it?"

The blond nodded quickly.

"And if you try to make a break for it on the scooter I'll shoot you on the spot," said Max. "I've got nothing to lose. You saw that."

"I got it. I won't let you down," said the blond, shaking in fear.

"Wipe the prints off the steering wheel and everything else," ordered Max.

There were no more threads leading to Max from Greg. Only his cousin Leon, his childhood friend Alex and Vickey – all of them, despite the shootout in the bank, had acted in strict keeping with the plan.

Vickey, who'd managed her part in the plan well, was standing with her back to the door into the bank when she heard the first shot, and then the second. She shuddered. Then there was a third shot. Not knowing what to do, intuitively Vickey decided to stay where she was. She turned her head from side to side. There was no one around. Greg had planned everything perfectly. There were lectures going on in the School.

Vickey thought that fifteen minutes had passed when the bank's door opened and Alex looked out, although only a minute had passed since the shooting.

"Everything's going to be all right, kid. Just keep calm."

It was as if everything that followed wasn't happening to her. She remembered how Max came out of the bank, propping up Greg, how they went through the door to the stairway down to the underground carpark. She thought an eternity passed before Alex appeared, pushing Leon, who'd suddenly gone limp again, forward.

"There's no one around," Vickey said for some reason, although Alex could see that for himself.

"Walk calmly, don't attract attention," Alex said dryly.

Alex understood that only he could take on the main role now. In order to somehow get them out. In order to stand a chance. To survive. He suddenly understood how much he loved life. At times, strange and upsetting. With a heap of

problems and misunderstandings between the people who you would think were the closest to one another. He suddenly wanted to cry. Like he had once with his psychiatrist when he'd spoken about his relationship with his mother. His eyes became heavy, as if a leaden dust had covered his eyelids with a cold, icy weight.

Alex suddenly noticed that he was supporting Leon under his forearm and immediately let him go.

"Are you all right, Leon?" Alex asked quickly.

"Yes," Leon answered sharply.

"Vickey?" Alex asked, looking at her.

"Yes, yes," Vickey answered just as quickly. "I'm fine, I'm fine. Don't worry."

They walked towards a little square at the end of which – they knew this for certain – lay salvation, a turnstile that only let people out into the street beyond.

Vickey was still carrying her file of questionnaires, hugging it to her chest. She looked just like a student. It was only now that Alex noticed that Leon had his rucksack on over his back. A thought briefly occurred to Alex: "So, Leon didn't forget to take everything that was in the safety deposit boxes."

Vickey and Leon looked straight ahead, as if turning their heads was forbidden by law. Alex drove away the fears that were circling him. He drove out the shivers, he refused to feel sorry for himself, he refused to break down in tears, to run away, to cry out at the top of his voice, asking for the clock to be turned back to the first time he met that vile Greg, so that he could have taken a different turn on that day.

They reached the square. In strict accordance with Greg's plan. That meant they were nearly done. A twenty-five second walk at a calm pace to the gates.

Alex took a look around. No one was running after them. Students were sitting on a few of the benches, but they weren't paying them any attention. That meant that the shot wasn't heard on the other side of the heavy doors to the bank. That meant they'd got lucky. Now they'd turn down a path and they'd see the gates, their salvation.

Alex carefully turned round and looked back. The doors to the bank were still shut. The plan had worked. The bluff had held up. The clients and bank staff were still lying on the floor, scared of making a move.

A fat woman came from the direction of the doors to the carpark that Greg and Max had just entered. She walked in the direction of the bank. She reached her arm out to the door. Alex's heart froze. The woman was about to open the door, but then she seemed to have seen the sign saying "Service break" that Vickey had stuck up on it.

As they turned onto the pathway leading to the gates, Alex saw the fat woman shrugging her shoulders, turning round and walking away from the bank. "Greg was right," thought Alex. "Through the toned glass of the bank's windows and the adverts glued onto them you can't see what's going on inside the bank. So, everything's going to be all right."

"It's all working out, guys. Everything will be fine," said Alex. "Max will sort Greg out. He's got a doctor in the city that owes him. Everything will be ok."

He didn't know why he was saying these words, but he felt that he had to say something in order to somehow cheer up the guys who were clearly growing despondent.

"In the dead zone, like we agreed, we'll take off our disguises and change our clothing," ordered Alex. "But then we'll change the plan and go on together."

Vickey nodded to him. According to the plan, he was to walk with Vickey to the florist's and buy a bunch of flowers, acting as if they were lovers, and Leon was

supposed to make his own way to Shoreditch. After what had happened, however, it made more sense for them to stick together, so that they could keep an eye on one another, so no one would do anything stupid and attract attention. Alex was worried about Leon most of all.

"Leon, give me the rucksack. The witnesses saw a fat guy with a rucksack," said Alex.

Leon quickly took the rucksack off and gave it to Alex. Alex felt the heavy load in his hand. "That means Leon managed to open all the deposit boxes," he thought.

They approached the turnstiles. On the right side, ahead of them, a long-haired guy entered the turnstile. He was pulling a small box on wheels for documents behind him. Having entered the turnstile he pushed on it with his hand so that it would turn with him inside, but he didn't manage to get his heavy box in. The gates turned and got stuck. The guy, not noticing what had happened or why he'd got stuck in the gates, tried to push harder and resolve the problem with force.

Alex could feel his heart pounding right up to his Adam's apple, hampering his breathing.

"Hey, you!" Leon started shouting, pointing the guy in the direction of his box which had got stuck.

Alex grabbed Leon by the arm.

"I'll do it," he said sharply.

When Alex got to the gates to help the guy with the box, out of the corner of his eye he noticed Vickey's face, absolutely pale white. "I hope she holds up," he thought.

"Your box has got stuck," Alex shouted loudly to the guy and hurried over to the gates.

A few more people had come up to the gates in the meantime. Vickey felt like a huge crowd had gathered around her. She turned her head in Leon's direction – he was standing there, rooted to the ground, staring at a single point in the distance.

Alex pulled the gate towards himself and pushed the box with its documents through.

"You can go through now," he said to the long-haired guy and tried to smile.

"Oh!" the guy smiled in answer. "Thank you." He picked up the box, pushed on the turnstile and passed through into the street.

"Guys!" Alex said loudly, looking at Vickey and Leon and reaching a hand in their direction.

Vickey pulled herself together and tugged at Leon's sleeve as he stood on the spot, dawdling, not moving forward.

Alex let the students standing behind them pass and went up to Leon. The students went into the turnstile and out into the street.

"Leon!" Alex hissed in his ear. "Let's go!" Then he turned to Vickey, "Go on!"

Vickey went through the turnstile and into the street. Alex, pushing Leon forward, reached the turnstile, pushed him in and followed him.

Finding themselves outside in the street, beyond the gates, Alex took in a deep breath of air as if he'd made a successful prison break. Vickey also cheered up. Only Leon was continuing to shiver with fright, only moving his legs with difficulty.

Trying to walk as fast as they could, but without running, they turned into a courtyard. This was the route that had been planned for Alex and Vickey, though there were three of them using it now.

In the corner of the yard was a small metal construction for garbage skips. Beyond that there was a small building, the local boiler house. The friends nipped

into the space between the skips and the wall. All three of them took off their wigs. Alex and Leon ripped off their beards and moustaches. Alex took out a grey Nike sports bag that had been hidden in advance between the garbage skips, tipping the contents of Leon's rucksack into it.

They took off their light coats and dumped them on the floor. In advance, they'd put tears in their jeans and then lightly stitched them up. In a few seconds they'd torn the cuts open again, and now they were standing in trendy, ripped jeans. They pulled strips of masking tape off their trainers, totally changing their appearance – now their footwear couldn't be used to spot them. They stuffed their upper garments, wigs, the strips from their trainers and the emptied rucksack into a big Zara shopping bag and stuffed it deep down into one of the garbage skips. All of this took just thirty seconds. Repeated training had done its work. They were now unrecognizable.

In silence, they walked to a café. That took another four minutes, although to them it felt like an eternity.

A police car hurtled down a street that ran parallel to them.

"Just keep calm," Alex said firmly. "Everything will be ok."

Alex squeezed Vickey's hand, never letting it go right up until they reached the café.

"Yes," Leon said quietly.

Alex looked at Leon. He was starting to get a grip on himself, but still quivering all the same.

"Leon," said Alex, "if they catch us because of your face being as white as a sheet I'll throttle you..."

Leon looked at Alex pitifully and unexpectedly broke out into something that almost verged on a smile.

"That's better," said Alex. "We knew what we were getting into. What's done is done. Now we have to get out of this sheet. Don't speed up. We're taking a calm stroll."

Leon nodded. Alex looked at Vickey. She was behaving strictly in accordance with the plan. She wasn't looking round, she was holding Alex's hand, she wasn't panicking.

"Come on, pull yourself together, fatty," smiled Alex. "We're going to buy you an apartment in Docklands."

Leon unexpectedly beamed a smile.

Four minutes later they entered the cafe. They took a table right by the display case of cakes and ordered coffees and a slice of cake each.

There was no howling of police sirens, outside it was peaceful and calm. People walked past the café, cars drove down the street. "Greg planned everything well," thought Alex. It was a quarter of a mile to the tube station from the café where they were sitting and eating French cakes. But the police would have sent their forces to the tube station. Because that would be the easiest place to get lost in a crowd. And nobody would be looking for a bag of disguises and clothing in a garbage skip. Greg really had thought everything through, down to the smallest detail.

Vickey and Leon were staring at their smartphones, looking at their Instagram and Facebook pages. After about ten minutes, Alex took out his mobile, opened a car service app and ordered an expensive Mercedes. Alex smiled to himself. An ideal plan. No one would think of stopping an expensive Merc. Bank robbers don't make off in that kind of car.

"The car will arrive in six minutes," popped up on the screen.

"How much?" Alex asked the girl at the till.

"Seventeen pounds fifty," she answered. "Card or cash?"

"Cash," Alex answered. Then he called out loudly to his friends, so that the waitress would hear: "Mom said if we're not back in time for lunch she'll give us a hiding."

The waitress didn't pay them any attention.

Alex looked at Vickey and Leon. Hot coffee and cake had clearly cheered them up. He really wanted to say something supportive, but Greg had strictly banned them from talking about the job anywhere public. Neither before, nor after the "main blow."

The Mercedes took them to Shoreditch. As Greg had insisted, Alex had to pretend for the whole journey that he was talking to his mother on his mobile. He pretended that he was the son of rich parents.

"Yes, yes, Mom, we'll eat at home ... Yes, there'll be three of us No, we'll have to delay the trip to the Maldives by a week, Mary can't go right now ... Yes ... All right, kisses ... Do you want us to buy something on the way? Love you..."

They got out and went into a delicatessen and bought three bottles of Red Label and a big bottle of Coca-Cola. Greg had insisted that when Alex went through the entrance the bottles had to be clanking in the bag. "There are no details too minor in our business," he'd said. "Nothing left to chance. If some old granny goes past you, she can go off thinking that you're a loser wasting your life, but she mustn't suspect a thing."

When they entered Alex's apartment and slammed the door behind them, Vickey hugged Alex, hanging off him. She began to cry. Vickey hugged him as if she was afraid, even for a moment, of losing him. She sobbed quietly. All of her resolve disappeared in that moment. She turned into herself, into a beautiful, weak girl who was desperately in love and afraid of losing what she cherished more than anything else.

Alex hugged Vickey, quietly calming her. He looked round to Leon, but didn't immediately find him. Leon had slumped down against the wall onto the floor. He sat there, looking at the opposing wall in silence.

"That's it," thought Alex. "It's all over. All of it."

March 2018

Vickey, Alex

Vickey went to Diana's parents' house. Where they loved guests and received them warmly and often. In their old life. When Diana was alive.

Vickey was slightly surprised when she entered the living room. The vast dining room, which had occupied half the room, had been dismantled, packed up and put in another room. The rest of the furniture had also been removed or put up against the wall.

There were numerous chairs on the large, woolen carpet that had suddenly become more visible. There were bottles, glasses and snacks on small tables along the walls.

People were talking to one another quietly, it almost seemed as if they were quietly laughing, sometimes crying and wailing could be heard, but then Sophie, speaking loudly, would tell a funny story about Diana. You could see that she had to make an effort to do it. To stop herself crying the whole time.

There had always been a lot of funny stories about Diana. Diana herself was a funny, cheerful person. Was.

Vickey circled round, saying hello to everyone and expressing her condolences to those sitting down. There were some she knew, some she didn't. People came and went. Finally, she went up to hug Sophie.

Vickey had cried for a month since her call, she'd cried her eyes out, she thought there could be nothing left inside. But as she approached Diana's mother, who was so like her, she sensed her legs giving out.

"I'll get up and stretch my legs," Diana's mother said, "I might be needing them."

Vickey found herself right in front of Sophie.

"Vickey, my girl," she said, smiling and taking Vickey in her embrace, "it's wonderful that you came! We were just talking about you."

Sophie's face approached hers. Vickey could see that she'd aged, that there were more gray hairs in her thick black shock of hair, how sleepless nights had left circles round her eyes, how her face had become drawn and she'd lost weight. But Sophie was smiling, and Vickey smiled back at her.

"Ronnie was just telling a story about how the three of you went skiing at the Sheregesh resort," said Sophie, releasing Vickey from a prolonged embrace.

"No, there were four of us, Mom," Ronnie interrupted her, drawing out his words in a mannered style. "I was there with my boyfriend, he works as a medic in an ambulance, a decent guy, the sort you could take on holiday. It was a wonderful holiday!"

"Wonderful, of course! Vickey, remind me – why did Diana say it was the worst vacation in her life?" Diana's mother asked sorrowfully. "Sit down next to me, there's a free seat now. I'll stand for a bit and then sit down – you know, with me at just over five feet it's nice to tower over you all once in a while."

It seemed to Vickey that they were all avoiding the word "death" on purpose. She didn't judge them, but she couldn't understand why they were talking about such banal things and events. From their previous life. Perhaps it had to be that way. So you wouldn't go mad. A mother and father were mourning for their daughter. It should be the other way round.

Vickey sat down on the seat that had been offered to her. Everyone was looking at her. She shook her head and spoke quietly.

"Because Ronnie's 'decent' guy couldn't spell 'wonderful' or 'chocolate'. You'd better not ask why Diana had to enter into a correspondence with him. But she had to spend hours of her time doing it and it made her really angry. And you, no doubt, know what surgeons think about wasted seconds of their time."

Vickey looked up – everyone was smiling and listening to her attentively.

Vickey forced herself to continue. "And that guy was drinking the whole time and getting into trouble. Literally every day. Many times a day. Diana had to babysit him the whole time. He was indignant about it because he was older than her and wouldn't listen to her. He only cheered her up right at the end when he ended up on an operating table with an open fracture and was begging Diana to operate on him."

Everyone laughed quietly, as if forcing themselves.

Vickey looked round for Alex. And found him.

He was sitting in the part of the room that Vickey hadn't got to yet. And he was watching her. Vickey couldn't understand what he was thinking about. About Diana, about her, about his own affairs?

Her heart pounded in her chest. She sat there looking at Alex. Alex looked at her too, but without revealing his feelings. Her heart pounded harder and harder.

They didn't take part in the general conversation, but they didn't talk to one another either. It seemed like an hour had already passed.

They looked one another in the eye, like two victims of a horrifying shipwreck sailing in a lonely rowing boat, on salt water and under a blazing sun, week after week, until they were saved.

Diana's mother bent down to Vickey and gave her an envelope.

Vickey's heart skipped a beat. She opened the envelope and saw Vickey's handwriting, messy like the handwriting of all doctors. In places, the words broke off. It must have been hard for her to write. The piece of paper shook in her hand and she read with difficulty.

"Vickey!

Damn! We can't work out what happened.

My beloved girl!

A bird flew into the room last night and got caught under the ceiling, small, gray, a local version of our sparrows, but I couldn't really make it out. I lay in bed and watched it helplessly fluttering about over my head. There was no way I could reach it. So I just lay there, waiting for it to run out of strength. Exactly forty minutes later it will fluff a turn and collapse behind the little bedside table you get in hospitals, and I'll pick it up with a soft towel. I'd like to pick her up, at least. I have trouble moving my hands.

I lay there thinking about you. How glad I was that you didn't come with me. I thank the heavens that you're sitting there at home in London, safe, healthy, with nothing threatening your life.

I love you, my dear Vickey, I love you. I want you to live. Live.

I love you, it's painful for me to part with you, but it seems it's time. It's strange, but I'm not frightened at all.

Your Diana, only yours."

Below there was a postscript.

"PS – Tell Alex that I always loved him. It should work out for you two. Whatever happens, always be grateful to fate for everything.

I'll see you from the heavens. Or in the body of another person. You'll be sitting in an open air café with a couple of fun little guys. We won't approach one another. We'll just exchange glances. But I'll know that you've both worked it all out."

Vickey pulled herself away from the letter, tears filling her eyes. Sophie tenderly hugged her round the shoulders, pressing her to her chest. She whispered to Vickey. "Shhhh, hush my girl, hush, don't cry, my dear, don't cry so bitterly."

Vickey looked up at Diana's mother and asked for permission to go home. Sophie nodded with understanding and let her go without any more words, simply whispering to her. "You have to live for her too now. You have to blaze for two."

Vickey only began to pull herself together when the door to the building shut behind her on her way out.

Alex caught up with Vickey out in the street. He hugged her, holding her for a long time, not saying a word. Finally he broke free and looked at her.

Outside, it was a deceptively warm March evening. The streetlamps were on and there weren't many people out on walks, and even fewer had strayed this far from Hampstead Heath.

"Vickey," Alex finally said, wiping the tears away from her cheeks with the palm of his hand. "Vickey, Vickey..."

Alex repeated her name. She looked into his eyes. The streetlamps were reflected in his amber eyes, lighting them from within. It seemed to her that he was crying too.

"You phoned me in December. It was at night. You were very drunk. You asked for help," Vickey suddenly said very directly. "I'd like to help you. Now, when I can, in memory of Diana."

Alex immediately understood which night Vickey was talking about. Unexpectedly, he remembered a lot of what he'd said and done on that December evening. Blood started flowing to his ears, turning them crimson.

"So, how can I help?" Vickey asked sincerely.

"I'm planning on robbing a bank," Alex answered to his own surprise.

Time stretched on, flowing to an indistinct rhythm.

Alex walked, telling Vickey what he knew. Vickey wasn't horrified, wasn't shocked, simply walking on in silence next to him and listening.

Finally, she interrupted him.

"I agree. I'll help. But on one condition."

Alex looked Vickey in the eye.

"If I don't get killed, my share has to be donated to the Surgeons of Europe International Association, I want Diana's work to be continued, I want her wish to be fulfilled," Vickey said quietly, but firmly. "An anonymous donation. Everything, down to the last penny."

"Yes," answered Alex. "And then, can I take you a long way away?"

Vickey didn't answer.

They stood hugging each other for a long time. An unimaginably long time. Vickey was lost in time. And Alex was too.

"I want to be with you," he told her. "Always with you."

She remained silent, looking at him.

"Forgive me, if you can," he said. Tears were rolling down his cheeks.

Instead of an answer, she gave him Diana's last letter.

August 2018

Maxim, Alex, Vickey, Leon

According to Greg's plan, Max was only supposed to meet up with Leon to count the haul from the safety deposit boxes three days after the robbery.

Greg said that they would never meet up again as a group. Greg, having taken his cut and the driver's share, was supposed to leave town. Max was only supposed to go to Alex's on the fifth day.

On the second day after the robbery, Alex and Vickey were alone at Alex's apartment. Leon had said that his mother might start to worry and phone the police, so he went home. Leon had pulled himself together and was behaving normally, so Alex and Vickey were prepared to let him go, although they insisted that he stay in contact.

Vickey was out of work. Alex wasn't working on any projects either. So no one was waiting for them or trying to find them.

It was about two in the afternoon when someone called Alex's apartment on the entry phone. Alex quickly went over to the display and saw Max's face on the little screen.

"Open up, bro!" said Max, looking straight into the camera.

Alex knew Max well enough to understand immediately that Max was drunk. Alex pressed a button on the intercom, hearing the sound of the door clicking open.

Alex left the door to the apartment slightly ajar so that Max could get in.

"Who is it?" came Vickey's voice from behind him, alarmed.

"It's Max," answered Alex. "Stay in the bedroom while we're talking. I think he's drunk. I know how to handle him."

"All right," said Vickey. There was fear in her eyes. "Just be careful, please."

"All right, all right," said Alex. "Wait in the bedroom."

Vickey went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

A few seconds later, the front door opened wide and Max appeared in the doorway. One look at him was enough to understand that he was wrecked.

"Well, hello, pal," said Max.

"Hi, Max," answered Alex. "Come in."

Max threw off his trainers in the corridor and walked through into the living room.

"Is Vickey home?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Alex. "She's asleep in the bedroom. Keep the noise down if you can."

"Come off it, don't be a softie," laughed Max.

Alex decided not to pay attention to Max's unpleasant behavior. He remembered how badly things had worked out a few times when Max was in this state. Once he even had to ask his former colleagues in the police force to cover up for him when Max got into a serious fight and several people were seriously injured.

"Max, why did you get hammered? This isn't the best time to lose control of yourself," said Alex. "You reek of alcohol."

"Don't start lecturing me," Max said, interrupting him rudely. "We've got ourselves a wise guy here. You think you're tough because you've done one job? Smacked some fool over the back of the head and that's it, now you're Rambo?!?"

Alex was at a loss. He didn't know what to do. He had to find out what was going on with Greg, when they would get their cut and what they were all going to do next. He stood there, looking at his friend in silence.

"You'd be better off pouring me a drink," said Max with a commanding tone in his voice as he sat down on one of the chairs.

Max was nothing like his normal self. Not even like his drunken self. Alex decided not to make things any worse. He went up to the shelf of alcohol and took down a bottle of whisky and a couple of glasses. He poured drinks for both of them, put the glasses and the bottle on the table and sat down in front of Max.

Max drained the glass thirstily and then gave a loud sigh.

"So, Al, everything's changed," Max said, looking Alex in the eye. "This is the last time we're ever going to see each other."

Max looked at Alex. Alex remained silent. He already knew what Max was going to tell him now.

For the last few days, Alex had been paying close attention to the London news on various sites and there had been no word of an injured or killed criminal. All the news wires had reported the audacious bank robbery, that security standards had been low at the Trust Bank branch because it was on the territory of an educational institution, that a policeman had been wounded and later died in hospital, and that another, who'd been hit over the back of the head with a pipe, had survived. They'd also reported that the thieves had got away with about five million pounds.

But there wasn't a single mention in the mass media of one of the participants in the robbery having been injured or having been killed.

"Basically, it turned out that there was a lot less money than Greg had planned," said Max. "I read in the news that nowadays they pay everyone online, rather than in cash, the bastards. Credit, debit cards, and all that shit," sneered Max.

Alex understood where Max was heading with this.

"So I can't give you the money," Max smirked angrily. "Whatever's in the rucksack – that's for you three. And as far as the rest goes, just sit tight and keep your mouth shut, unless you want Death to pay you a final visit."

Alex kept silent. He realized that Max had come to tell him that he was keeping all the money for himself.

"On top of all that," continued Max, "I got rid of Greg."

He left a pause and, narrowing his eyes to dig his stare into Alex, he added:

"You probably worked it out for yourself that a wounded Greg was the last thing we needed."

Alex answered by looking back at Max in silence. Inside, Alex was seething with fury and hurt. He listened and didn't listen to what his former friend was saying, he believed and didn't believe what he was hearing in those seconds from a person he'd known since childhood and who'd changed in a moment, without warning.

Alex's breathing went awry, his veins, swelling up, pulsated, a wooden pounding in his head. His thoughts grew confused and he didn't know what to do. Max's face turned into a blurred patch.

"Taking out a piece of shit like Greg," Max continued, "costs a lot. He'd have roped us all into the slammer. He'd have tied us up and dragged us down," sneered Max. "So I saved the lot of you."

"The man in the bank, the shooter – he died," said Alex.

"I know, I know," said Max, nodding. "I saved you all there too. If it wasn't for me, we'd all be lying on cold sheets right now! Or in the slammer eating porridge, instead of drinking this delicious whisky." Max smirked and took another gulp. "I took out a sharpshooter! You got it, pal?" Suddenly he looked at Alex, angry. "Now I'm cursed."

Alex realized that this was a disaster. He realized that Max was about to leave for good, taking Alex's dreams of money, dreams of a new life with him. There was money in the rucksack, of course. But the real haul had been in those two bags that Max had taken.

Alex didn't know if Max had met with Leon before he came to the apartment. Another idea shot through his head like a sharp arrow. Max, of course, had hidden the money well, but most likely he'd start drinking a lot, or, rather, he'd already fallen off the wagon and it was by no means a certainty that he'd stick to Greg's original plan, which was that for the first six months after the job they'd all live their lives normally, keeping the fact that they had a lot of cash quiet. "They'll spot him, they'll definitely spot him," thought Alex, and then he'll make a deal with the cops so that he, as a former cop, won't wind up in a cell with the other convicts. And then they'd come for him. And for Vickey."

Alex's entire body flinched when he remembered Vickey, and at just that moment he heard her voice.

"Max, it's not right!" Vickey was standing in the doorway into the living room and looking at Max. "You can't do that to us. We all took the risk together. You're Alex's friend."

Max turned in Vickey's direction.

"Who's this Chatty Kathie we've got here?!" Max laughed insultingly. "A sweet little girl who couldn't hold some drunk students back at the door of the chemist's? And now she thinks she's a hardened criminal?!" Max was roaring with laughter now.

Alex got up from behind the table sharply. Max also got up. He went up real close to Alex. A sharp stench of alcohol came off him.

"What is it, mommy's boy – you got something to say?" Max asked insolently.

The reference to his mother, right at that moment, almost floored him. His breathing wasn't coping with what was happening. His arms and body were shaking with hatred and helplessness. At his hopes having been killed off in an instant. At the awareness that everything would be as it was before, and that all those sacrifices – his, Vickey's, those of the two dead men – had all been in vain. All that money would be going to one person, to this drunk wolf in human clothing, his former friend who'd betrayed him, so dirtily, and so cheaply. "Mommy's boy". Alex knew what Max was talking about. He was talking about having defended him in the yard when the others were hitting him. "Mommy's". His mother's face flashed up before him. Max, of course, was hinting at the beatings his mother had given him. Alex's mind began clouding over.

"Beast!" Vickey said loud and clear.

"What?" drawled Max, turning to look at her. "You cheap slut..."

A blow struck Max in the cheek bone right at that moment. Alex didn't have time to prepare the blow. There was almost no swing to it. He impulsively raised his hand and threw his fist right from his chest. Not to knock Max off his feet. But to protect Vickey. To stand up for her honor.

Max barely managed to stay on his feet – he was rocked, taking a step backwards. Alex, not knowing what to do, carried on attacking Max. He reached forward with his left, trying to grab Max by the neck, and pulled his right back for another punch.

Max stretched his neck backwards. The fingers of Alex's left hand just scraped his neck and Adam's apple, and the second punch hit the jaw, glancing off. Max, taking a couple of steps back, managed to stay on his feet.

"Bitch," Max hissed furiously as he wiped his nose with his sleeve.

"Maybe there's still a chance," thought Alex. While Max was coming round from Alex's two punches. Try and attack him, pin him to the ground, win, and then ... Alex didn't know what would come after that. He understood in that moment, however, that if he didn't finish him off, Max would simply kill him like he'd killed Greg, like he'd killed the guard in the bank, or the cops would simply come after them because of this scum. Otherwise, it was all finished.

A thought shot through Alex's mind like lightning: "Vickey's in the room. She won't be able to run away in time if I make a break for the street. And what's out there in the street for her anyway?" Running away from a drunken Max, passersby shouting out, and then their whole can of worms would be opened up. All these thoughts clattered through his mind in an uninterrupted line as he approached Max, having curled up like a tightly wound spring.

Alex spiked his left hand forward, trying to grab his opponent's head; he tried to get his main hold with his right, just as he'd learned to do as a wrestler. Max dodged it, pulling his head back sharply and crouching a little. Alex's hand swiped over Max's head and Alex's body fell forward slightly. Max, straightening up his body, landed a right in the region of Alex's liver.

Max knew where he was punching. A vicious pain pierced Alex's body. He barely managed to stay on his feet. Alex raised his head and looked at Max.

Max stood there getting his breath back. If he hadn't been blind drunk he would've have thrown himself on Alex to finish him off.

"Your mother didn't use the belt on you enough," Max said viciously.

Alex emitted a brutal, animal shriek. And suddenly, to his own surprise, he sensed that his fear had disappeared. For perhaps the first time in his life he was no longer afraid. He wasn't drunk, he wasn't under the influence of marijuana enveloping his body. He was simply ready to fight.

Max spat on the floor and moved towards Alex.

They came together, trying to hit one another whilst also covering up, like boxers, their fists raised, their forearms protecting them from the blows of their opponents. It seemed to Alex that Max's left side had opened up, he swung with his right, aiming at Max's throat, rather than his chin. He'd seen nasty tricks like that in the yard when he fought with the local bullies, he'd seen them aim for the Adam's apple. If you hit your target, victory was yours. "Smash the Adam's apple into the throat," they'd said in the yard.

But Max again managed to dodge out of the way, pulling his head back. Alex's fist merely slipped along Max's chest. With a wild grimace full of hatred, Max again hit him with the right. This time he struck him under his ribs. It was a very precise, brutal blow.

Alex, gasping for air, his eyes widening, fell to his knees. Max, sneering angrily, leapt forward and struck Alex on his temple with his fist.

Alex fell to the floor, hitting his head on the ground. Alex felt the living room spinning around him, but he managed to cling on to consciousness. Then there was a wild shriek from Vickie that fully brought him back to reality.

"Shut up, whore!" Max shouted at her and again turned in the direction of Alex who was lying on the floor.

That pause lasting seconds was enough time for Alex to pull both knees up to his chest and prepare to pounce. "If I don't, he'll kill her, he'll kill her," pounded in his head. Alex looked around for something heavy, but there was nothing close to hand.

Alex saw Max slowly approaching him to finish him off. Max stepped forward with his left leg, pulled his right leg back and then launched it, aiming at Alex's head. This time, however, Alex pulled his left shoulder back and, fully arching, stuck his heel forward.

He hit Max where he was aiming for, right in the shin. Jackknifing in pain, Max clutched the point that was giving him pain with his hand, balancing on one leg. Alex, still on the floor, kicked Max in the calf of his other leg, knocking him off balance. Max fell right onto Alex. Alex tried to turn away at the last moment but didn't manage it in time. Falling, Max smacked his forehead into the bridge of Alex's nose. Alex's consciousness blurred for an instant and he suddenly felt Max's powerful hands around his neck.

Max tried to strangle him. Alex grabbed Max's wrists but it didn't help. Max's dirty, sweaty hands dug deeper into his neck. Alex tried to press on Max's hands with his chin as he pulled his neck back, but nothing was working.

"I don't like death," hissed Max, smiling angrily. "It's got a nasty smell."

There was less and less oxygen in Alex's lungs.

"At least before your death, you brat, you became a man," Max said through gritted teeth, horrible gobs of spit flying out.

With his last remaining strength, Alex tried to lift Max with his left hip in order to hit him in the crotch with his right knee, but again he couldn't manage it. His

consciousness began to blur, but suddenly there was a dull thump. And then another two.

Alex didn't immediately realize what had happened. Max's hands were still around his neck, but they'd stopped gripping him. Max collapsed on him.

Alex suddenly saw Vickey. She stood there, her entire body shaking, holding a whiskey bottle to her chest. Alex understood everything. Still trying to catch his breath, he managed to heft Max's heavy body off himself.

"Have I killed him?" Vickey asked, her whole body shaking.

"I don't know," said Alex.

Still getting his breath back after a tough fight, he leant over Max and put his fingers to his throat. Trying to feel for his pulse, he slowly moved his fingers along Max's neck, but he couldn't find it. Alex straightened up sharply. He took several deep breaths. Then he took Max's hand and put his index and middle finger on his wrist. He still couldn't find the pulse.

"I killed him?" asked Vickey.

Instead of an answer, Alex put his ear to Max's heart, but again he couldn't hear anything. He turned Max over onto his stomach and bent his head down over him. At the top of the neck there was a large swelling, a blue-violet patch that looked like it was ready to burst and release a fountain of blood.

Alex placed his fingers on Max's throat again. He again felt for the pulse. Alex stood up and looked at Vickey.

"We've killed him," he said in a calm voice. He said it so calmly that he even surprised himself. The events of the last few days, months even, had turned him into a different person.

He didn't feel sorry for Max. Not just because he'd wanted to kill him a few moments before, but also because Max had turned out to be a traitor and now he was dead. And that meant that the last thread linking Vickey, Leon and himself to the crimes and the murders had been cut.

"We need to get rid of the body before Leon comes round," said Alex.

Vickey was still standing motionless, hugging the whisky bottle.

"Vickey!" Alex said loudly.

Vickey looked at Alex, frightened.

"Everything's all right," said Alex. "We were defending ourselves."

He walked up to her, gently took the bottle, placed it on the table, turned back to her and hugged her. Vickey's entire body was shaking.

"You saved my life," said Alex.

His words appeared to bring Vickey back to reality.

"I told you I could kill for you," she whispered very quietly.

Alex was amazed that he could think calmly and soberly in this situation. What had happened over the last few days and months that made it possible for him to stand over a corpse and calmly consider what should be done next? He was amazed but also, however insane it might sound in these circumstances, overjoyed by his state, the state of a man that has to get out of any situation, even a horrifying one like this one, who has to take care of his woman.

"I'll phone Leon and say that we've been invited to a party and we're going, so that we carry on behaving as normal, and then in the evening we'll pick him up on the way back.

Alex remembered everything that happened after Max's murder as a blur of events following on from one another. As if shots from a black-and-white film were flashing up before his eyes. Not fast, not as people describe the moments just

before death, but events slowly taking place, to an even rhythm, as if chess pieces were being slowly moved around the board by an experienced chess master.

Max had once described how, back in the 1990s, his friend had got rid of a corpse. He waited until eleven in the evening, when there were still people out in the street, but not many. The friend had tied the body to himself with a rope, side by side, and tied his right ankle to the corpse's left ankle, allowing him to walk whilst supporting the dead man – it looked like a sober man was helping his drunk friend to get home. He'd put a raincoat over the corpse with a strip cut out of it to let the rope through.

That is how Alex got Max to a rented car that Vickey drove up to the entrance. Just in case, Alex pretended that he was asking his drunken friend to behave and not to drink any more. They again got lucky and they didn't meet any of the neighbors inside the building or out in the street.

Vickey rented an inconspicuous, non-descript, generic South Korean car, there are thousands of them in London. She didn't rent it from a car-sharing service because those cars have GPS trackers fitted and you have to pay with a credit card. Instead, she got it from a standard car-hire firm.

Vickey stayed behind the wheel and Alex sat in the back with Max's corpse tied to him.

Slowly, without breaking any rules, they drove to East Finchley. Alex knew this neighborhood well because he'd studied these streets for a long time with Leon in the lead-up to robbing the bowling club. Leon had shown Alex the dead zones, the sections of streets that weren't observed by cameras. Vickey stopped the car a few streets before reaching their destination. She got out and pretended that she was digging around in the trunk – in the process she taped over the number plate. Then she stopped again and taped over the number plate at the front.

Then they drove to the alley they were looking for. It led off the high street. Vickey got out of the car and took a look round. There was no one there. She gave a signal to Alex.

Alex cut through all the ropes that were holding Max's body to him, opened Max's mouth and poured some gin in from a small bottle that he'd brought with him especially. Then he splashed some gin on Max's clothing. He bent over the corpse, opened the door and pushed it out into the street.

It was another trick from the 1990s that Max had told him about. Everything had to look like he'd been hit by a car – he fell on the pavement and cracked his head. "The cops won't go looking for the relatives of some drunken tramp. And no one is going to report him having gone missing," Max had said. "There are millions of people in this city, so who's going to worry about some tramp who's drunk himself to death? They fill out some form back at the police station and send the paperwork to the archives. And that'll be the end of it."

With Leon, everything worked out even easier than Alex had thought. Leon was keeping himself together brilliantly. He'd somehow matured fast and had a very levelheaded take on everything that had happened. There were no signs of panic.

He calmly listened to Alex's story about what had happened to Max and Greg and, it seemed, wasn't even surprised. He just shook his head sorrowfully and said "Oh, Max, Max..."

It even seemed to Alex that Leon was relieved at the news.

It turned out that there was a lot more money in the bag from the robbery than Alex had expected. Unexpectedly, it became clear that a lot of Londoners keep cash

in various currencies in their safety deposit boxes. In sterling, it worked out at about two million, a third of which was Leon's cut.

They went to Leon's father's old garage in Balham, created a secret hiding place there under the rusting cupboards, and hid the rucksack there. Over the last ten years, nobody had robbed these garages because they'd been lifeless for ages, apart from the rusting of cars that'd been wrecked. The owners of the garages were waiting for them to be demolished so that they could get some compensation. That meant that people rarely went there. Leon shuddered when he saw the old, rusted car that had been the cause of his father's death. But he quickly pulled himself back together. "The car that changed my life for the worse is now protecting what should get my life back on track," he said to Alex, and didn't return to the subject.

Alex asked Leon to get a job where he would be officially paid. At his level, Leon could easily get a monthly wage of five or six thousand pounds, and that would let him get a mortgage, allowing him to buy an apartment without attracting attention. That's exactly what Leon did. Then he hired a woman – for a small amount of money and a room in the flat she would look after him and his mother.

As he'd promised, Alex helped Vicky to carry out her condition. His old friend Arthur was slightly surprised by their request for help, but he agreed without any qualms or questions. His lawyers helped them make the anonymous donation.

Alex, as he'd planned, sold his apartment in Shoreditch. Firstly, just in case there were any questions as to where the money came from. Secondly, and most importantly, so that he could start a new life.

December 2018

Alex, Vicky

They had already been standing on the top of Parliament Hill, with its great view out over London, for a long time. They stood there, hugging, surrounded by the milky softness of a departing London day, without saying a word. Below them lay their beautiful, beloved city.

Alex spoke without interruption. He told her everything. It was as if he was turning himself inside out.

Vicky stood there, hugging up to Alex, and listened to him in silence. She wasn't silent because she was afraid of interrupting the sequence of his thoughts. She was silent simply because she wanted to be silent. But Alex talked and talked, laying himself bare before her.

"When I tell you all this, it's as if the angels are speaking for me," he said quietly. "It's just I don't know if they're angels of good or evil."

"In every person there's a void, my love," said Vicky. "The real question is, how are you going to fill that void?" She looked at him attentively. "I think it would be right if everything that's happened, that whole story, quietly fell asleep today. And awoke in forty years' time. As a memory."

"Yes," said Alex. "Unlike them, for us the robbery wasn't an act of revenge on life. It was fate."

Vicky was silent. She never wanted to speak about this subject ever again.

Despite the inconceivable chaos that they'd gone through, despite the victims whose blood they had daubed on them, despite everything, Alex was now calm. He was embracing the woman he loved. He knew for certain what he wanted in his life. He was sure that he knew what was right and what was wrong, what was

permissible, what was forbidden, and where the line was that you should never cross.

"Time is an incredible thing," said Vickey. "Time heals." She thought for a while, and then added: "It really does heal. You just have to wait a little. To give yourself time, my love."

"Yes," Alex said quietly. He was silent, and then continued just as quietly. "In this whole insane story, which I hope is over, I won you."

Vickey turned round and looked him in the eye.

"In this whole insane story you won yourself," Vickey said quietly.

It seemed to him that they could stand there forever.

Vickey, as if for the first time, looked out at London which lay in the distance below them, examining it and recognizing elements within the city. Then she looked up to the sky. Right over the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral, a black cloud was moving towards them. A cold wind began to blow.

"A storm is coming," said Vickey.

Alex looked into the distance, to the black clouds slowly crawling across the pale grey sky. Then he looked at Vickey. He looked her in the eye and was overcome by a wave of love for this extraordinary girl. Love, supported on different sides by gratitude, respect and trust. He looked at her as if he was seeing her for the first time. He wanted to join her as one forever after, to become one great love with her.

"We have to go, my love. There's a storm coming," Vickey repeated.

Alex hugged Vickey close. He spoke quietly.

"We've still got time."

Alex placed his hand on Vickey's stomach. Vickey beamed a huge smile and placed her hand on Alex's. A month ago, she'd told him that she was pregnant and she'd seen the smile of a happy man. She'd never seen him so happy. They both smiled and cried with joy.

"I will protect you both for the whole of my life," Alex said quietly, hugging Vickey. "Protect and love."