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ANONYMOUS KILLERS

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Part 1 - Sean Parker

Ethan was running out of breath as he rushed up the stairs to the rooftop of the skyscraper. He was short of breath and his heart was racing as if it was going to break through his chest and fall into his feet. “Can’t stop now, fool, I’ve got to end this sad story.” His thoughts were flashing in and out of his hysterical wits. Non-stop. “I’ve got to jump. I have no choice.”

All exhausted, he slowed down, then ran again, then leaned to the wall, rested, then... He was short of breath, but pushed himself up the stairs; they seem endless – those steps to infinity. Barely, he dragged himself all the way to the top and all feeble, he crashed on the very top of the stairway. A few more footsteps would do it, so he slowly crawled up and stopped again. The rooftop door was getting closer, so was his agony. Once he pushed the door open, the stream of the fresh cool air awakened his senses.

Silence felt golden. Away from the busy streets, the madness of the city, the insanity of his life; things just seemed humble and simple here. Problems? What problems? Why is he even here? The deep blue sky above pulled him back to his senses and he trembled. One hundred twenty floors – Ethan finally got to edge of the roof, looked down, then up, closed his eyes, and...

“That’s the hardest one,” the voice slurred from the behind.



A tall man in his mid-fifties wearing a wrinkly and tainted outfit was facing the wall. His face was pale and sullen, hands shaking and getting ready to grab another bottle of beer. A few empty bottles of whiskey laying around, lifeless eyes, droopy and pale lips - all that made the picture complete.

The stranger continued, “I have a theory: there are two kinds of suicides, who prefer the gun or hang themselves, are the ones with personal issues – could be love, guilt, betrayal, hmm, other bull shit. Those who consider themselves the victims of injustice jump off the buildings. Yeah, man, that is it. That’s my theory, what you say?”

Ethan stepped toward the stranger, then stepped back to the edge, looked down, then loosely mumbled, “I’d say your theory is a bunch of crap,”

“Your first time, right?” the man asked.

Ethan kept quiet, leaned forward and closed his eyes.

“Wait, please!” the stranger cried out.

His anxious voice made Ethan open his eyes. He stretched his arms to keep the balance and sharply turned around.

“Stoop your nonsense. I need to focus.”

“I am not even trying, man. You think I want to talk you out of it? Nah. I was just thinking you could help me, man.”

Ethan looked confused. “Help you? Do I look like someone who can help you?”

“Absolutely. I can’t even end my misery, man. I’ve been trying hard to end this nasty adventure called life. No luck. Even dying is on me, everything is always on me alone. Can’t get any help from anyone, man. So, I thought, since we are on the same page, maybe you can give me a hand. What you say?”



“Stop asking my opinion, will you? What you say man, what you say man. I don’t say shit, I am fuckin’ tired of you being in my face. Get out of here.”

“Hey, can’t kick me out of here, okay. That is my corner. I live here. I’ve been here for more than a week now, so chill. Better get me some cigarettes, I ran out.”

Ethan suddenly grinned, and started to dig all his pockets.

“There you go,” he said and handed a man a pack of cigarettes.

“Thank you, buddy. You got a lighter, too? Mine is broken.”

Ethan silently turned his back to a man, and walked to the edge of the roof once more. He cautiously looked down and felt as strong as never before. He was going to jump, and that was final.

“My son would’ve turned nine today,” the stranger talked again. “A murder. A hell of a murder, man. I bet you don’t know how it feels, when your baby is gone, gone for nothing, man. My wife was murdered too... along with him. But why do you care? Nobody cares.”

Silence. Ethan looked up again.

“I’ve got some Scotch here. Care to join me?” the man continued.

“I don’t think you’re getting it. You can’t stop me; it’s just, ugh, I don’t know why I’m still talking to you.”

“Shut up. Have a shot with me, then do whatever.”

“Fine,” Ethan blurted, turned around and walked toward the stranger. “I’ll take the big one, give me the big one.” He drew the big plastic cup towards him.

“I am Sean. If you care of course – I am Sean Parker.”

“Ethan,” Ethan mumbled and lit Sean’s cigarette.

The whiskey had rushed to his head and pleasantly blurred his mind.



“After this, it’s your turn to talk me into jumping. You have to do it, though. You must,” Sean requested.

“I don’t think so.”

“Really? It’s not like I’m asking you to kill me. Just tell me, I can do it. You know why? Because I can. I know, I can. Don’t underestimate me, Ethan. I am Sean Parker and I can do anything I want. Almost.”

“No, Sean,” Ethan replied, “I’m only responsible for my own life.”

“Fine, okay, be like that. Then why do you wanna go? What’s up with you?”

“My family needs it. I fucked all up. I need to get them out of the troubles I created for them.”

“I see.”

“I lost everything. Bankrupt. If I die, my life insurance will cover my debts for me, so my kids will have a place to live. Otherwise, we’re all homeless...at least for now.”

Nodding, Sean began to look for something in his little, brown bag. He stopped listening to Ethan, and got busy shaking every little pocket in his bag.

“I can’t do much, man, but here you go,” Sean handed Ethan a plastic card. “There’s around ten grand on this card. Not much, but might help.”

Ethan smiled. “Not gonna do it, but thanks.”

“How much will do?” Sean asked.

“About three million.”

“Three million? You are screwed, man.”

“I gambled all I had. Stock market. The devil.”

“Damn it.”



“Sean,” Ethan whispered.

“What?”

“There is a reason you’re still alive. The Highest One in heavens has plans for you. Ask him about it.”

“Hah, I like that. Call the heavens from the hell on earth. What’s up there for me in the heaven? Ha-ha, I like that. You made me laugh, man...I haven’t laughed for years.”

Suddenly, Sean got serious, frowned, and looked away. “If there was God, my kid and my wife would be with me. I know, I sound stupid, but, man, I am worthless without them. My heart is a void, Ethan, a big black hole, waiting to be filled with death.”

Slowly, Ethan got up and unhurriedly walked to the edge of the roof.

“Have you ever faced death?” Sean uttered loudly.

“Many times. I served in Iraq.” Ethan responded.

“You killed people?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Great, kill me then. Pull the trigger. I have a good one.” Sean approached him with a gun in his hand.

“Get out of here. You don’t even want to die.”

“Yes, I do, and you know why? Cause I am a worthless bastard, that’s why. Years ago, I witnessed a murder of a gang member and his pregnant wife by one of the well-known gangster Danny Morales or Danny-M. as they called him. I testified in court against him, was very proud of myself, the crook got a life-sentence, but was released somehow. Meanwhile, I got married, my son was born; I became successful, my wife did it for me – supported me the world, and I was the happiest man ever.”

“Did Danny-M...”



Sean interrupted, “Yes, he did. He got a deal with police, I guess, turned in some major drug cartels, and got out sooner than expected. Little I knew the son of a bitch was going to come after me. He did not forget my face. He followed me, he came at night, when we were all in bed, he shot them bad, man, ugh...he skipped me, can you imagine! I begged him to shoot me, I begged him. He didn’t. Son of a bitch. He despised my guts; he looked at me as if I wasn’t even there. He gave me that same shitty look in the court, during the trial. Not even hating me, imagine? How come? I don’t understand, what was he thinking, man.”

Ethan grabbed Sean’s gun and towed it on the ground.

Sean seemed not to care and went on, “After he shot my son and my wife, he tied me to the chair, spit on my face, and left me. When I finally freed myself, I called the police. Too late, though. He was long gone, no trace at all.”

“Did they find him then?” Ethan asked.

“Yes, they did, but there was no evidence of him murdering my family. Nothing valid was found, no fingerprints, nothing. So, it was my word against his, and the crook got released.”

“Shit!”

“Oh yeah, this life is full of shit, man. I wasted my time appealing the court decision, then I’ve decided to go on my own. I followed his ass everywhere. He was never alone, always fenced by his gang. And when I got my chance, I couldn’t do it. He was talking on the phone by his car, all alone. I put the gun to his nasty head and froze...just could not kill the bastard. The fear of death...doesn’t matter who. I fucked it up, Ethan, big time.”

“Don’t blame yourself for not being able to kill. You stayed a human after all.”

“After all,” Sean beamed, “you’re a good man, after all. It’s just I don’t think you can be of help to someone like me – a dead dude.”

Ethan lowered his head and said, “Aren’t we all dead?”



“You think so, hmm, so why don’t you get your dead self together and just shoot me for good?”

“I told you ‘no’, didn’t you hear that? It’s not fair to you, you don’t deserve it.”

“Oh yeah? Of course, I don’t even deserve a damn bullet in my stupid head! Thank you, buddy, your kindness is appreciated.”

“Oh, shut up, you talk too much,” Ethan complained.

“You know what, let me tell you this. Why don’t you be fair to me and to the world? Shoot the bastard that is still out there breathing the same air with you. Get the crook, kill Danny-M, then come back to me and...fine, I will push you down, I promise.”

Ethan turned to Sean. “I will,” he firmly stated.

“Oh yeah? Hey, I am sorry. My bad. I did you wrong, Ethan. My bad. I can handle it myself. I must.”

“I said, I’ll do it,” Ethan raised his voice.

“Nah... Think twice, man, cause I may take your ‘yes’ seriously.”

“Give me more info about your Danny-M. The more the merrier.”

The pub was blasting with the drunk crowd flare. The music was fading away, while the chuckling of men was clouding the air. Ethan was sipping whiskey in the very corner of the bar; he was serenely observing the scene with Danny talking to a dwarf-like man with a gray mustache and a few hair on his shiny, oval head.

Ethan felt oddly calm and sober. His worries seemed to disappear; his mind grew flawless and sharp. He knew exactly what he was up to, and sure enough, it made him a happy man. “I’ll grant him with a couple of more minutes,” he thought, looking at Danny in action.

Suddenly, Danny got up and walked straight towards Ethan. “Do I know you?” he asked.

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Ethan kept quiet, and emptied his bottle.

“Are you hard of hearing?”

Ethan smirked, “I don’t think you do.”

No shaking hands. No panic at all. Ethan rapidly took out the gun from his pocket, and fired right in Dany’s chin. Done.

Danny’s bulky body crashed onto the floor. His friends jumped up and pointed their guns to Ethan. Indifferently, he walked to the bar and calmly spoke, “One more shot, please,” he asked the bartender.

“That one is on me, you fuck,” said the voice from behind and flamed the air.

In a few minutes, Ethan’s dead body began turning blue in the middle of the pub, already occupied by the police.

Thirty-year-old Frank Douglas had left the hospital with the doctor’s words echoing in his mind, “A few months left to live. The medication will help you with the pain, but no guarantee for your memory. You will gradually lose it.”

All blue, Frank took out the long papers with his test results out of his pocket and tossed them in the trash can. He thought of his mother, and the way her deteriorating condition had made her suffer and become somewhat burdensome for her close ones. Frank had the same diagnosis as his mother, and he really didn’t want his family to go through the emotional and physical hardships he experienced with his mother a couple of years ago. He loved his wife and kids dearly, so the decision to leave was final.

The skyscrapers were in a walking distance from hospital: Frank spotted out the closest high-rise, and walked straight towards the building. Suddenly, he stopped and looked up. “Will you help me, please,” he voiced the heavens, and decided to go closer to those heavens, anyway.



The roof of the building felt hot from the sun. Frank wished he could have let his family know the reasons for his suicide, but he knew he would not be able to overcome his fear again, so he just closed his eyes and prayed.

“The last moment is the hardest,” the voice behind sounded tired.

Frank turned around. “Who are you?”

“I have this theory,” the voice went on. “There are two kinds of suicide people who prefer a gun or hanging themselves are the ones with personal issues – could be love, guilt, betrayal, or other bull shit. The ones that jump off the buildings are those who consider themselves the victims of injustice. Yeah, man, that is it. That’s my theory, what you say?”

“It’s different for me. I am terminally ill. I don’t want to suffer and don’t want to burden my family with it,” Frank responded.

“I see. I am sorry about that. But hey, you are lucky, I would rather have that.”

“Why? You want my deadly virus?” Frank smirked.

The man smiled back, “Sure. Are you contagious?”

“No, I am not.”

“I like you, what’s your name?” said the man.

“I am glad someone does.”

“I am Frank, and you?”

“Come here Frank, have a drink with me. You are gonna go down anyway, so a shot of whiskey wouldn’t hurt. I’ll tell you my story, and maybe you’ll feel for me.”

Dragging his feet, Frank sank himself next to a man.



“My Sara,” the man started, “my sweet Sara was going to turn ten this year, but, ugh, I can’t even... It’s hard to talk, when you are dead. She got murdered, my wife too. I survived. I don’t know what’s the plan for me up there, but I feel terrible. Will you give a hand to end this story?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what you think I mean. Pull the trigger, and you’ll save me from hell - the hell on earth.”

“Don’t even go there, not gonna happen. I’ll have a drink with you, if you want me to, but that’s it.”

This was the fourth case with the same kind of an evidence for the judge Liam Henderson: four different people with no criminal background had been committing murders randomly with no obvious reasons. All the victims were well-known people: CEO’s, politicians, or criminals.

A man by the name Sean Parker leisurely walked into his colonial house and fixed himself a drink. His bodyguards were still around, but as he entered, he let them go. All exhausted, he was getting ready to meet his partner Joe Balthazar.

Before Sean fixed his drink, the heavy-set man in his early fifties walked into his living room and sluggishly mumbled, “I am not late, am I?”

“I am glad you are on time. I’ll fix you a drink.”

“Great, great. It’s getting cold out there. The season of rains is almost here.”

Joe Balthazar was well known by the state law enforcement as a successful head for the contract-killings. He hadn’t spent a day behind the bars. There were rumors that Balthazar led a small corporation called “The Mercy”, which conducted exclusive operations eliminating mostly politicians, who were labeled ‘wanted’ for the CIA.



Tasting his drink, Joe oddly stared at Sean and uttered, “What is your real name, Sean?”

“Does it matter, Joe? I do the job well and we can happily leave it at that. You wanted to talk to me tonight, I am all yours.”

“Nothing big, just was curious about the psych-part of your success. I know you’re role-playing an underdog, but what’s the key?”

“Aha, fine, so you’re curious about the inside job. It is as simple as the life itself. I just turn people’s desperation in my favor. These people have nothing to lose; they are pretty much dead when I meet them.” Sean paused then went on. “Why? So many stupid reasons: love, betrayal, money, more money, depression, terminal diseases, you name it, Joe. I make their last breath more meaningful; I give them a valid reason to die and they feel important, not vain anymore. My stories fascinate them and by killing others, they turn into the heroes in their own eyes; they don’t feel like victims, you see. Yeah, so it’s a win-win situation, isn’t it?”

Joe looked rather puzzled than impressed: he moved his lips like he wanted to say something, but didn’t speak. He tried again, “That’s...that’s just so...so...I am speechless, and,” he hesitated for a second, then went on, “here is the new list of the clients, who need your help. Call me if you need me. Your fee has been already wired to your account. It’s getting late, I better get going. Have a good night, Sean.” Joe handed a flash-stick to Sean, timidly shook his hand and walked out.

In a rush, he stepped out of Sean’s house, walked to his car and drove away. He thought he had seen it all, he had heard it all, he had done it all. He thought he did...not anymore.

Sean has not slept until six in the morning. He was having a blast going through the names of his new victims and googling more information about a well-known spot in the town called “The Cliff”- the cliff, from where Sean’s future heroes often tried their “luck”. All excited, he checked his bank account, then fix himself another drink. The sound of the starting rain has pacified his exhilaration, and he soundly fell asleep on his big soft leather chair.

Part 2- Ray Fisher



Ray Fisher stood still; he was having a silent dialogue with the people looking at him through the picture frames, neatly organized on the corner office table. Working for the Chicago police for years, Ray was one of the export detectives in the city. The murder investigation seemed to be an unpretentious one, but the butterflies in Fisher’s mind and stomach were quite stubborn. He knew there was much more to these killings. Much more.

Three sleepless nights drained his guts, and he dozed off at his office desk. It wasn’t easy to swallow his wife’s departure; Kelly left him for Canada taking their son with her. Her last words echoed through his whole being, “Your job has devoured not only you, but all of us. You seem to value your victims more than your own family. You can’t live without them anymore, you cannot; even if you quit your job, they will follow you, Ray.”

The sharp, screeching noise of the opening door awakened Ray.

“Did you find the evidence you were looking for?” The police Chief Scott MacGregor asked him in a sharp voice.

“Not yet, I need some time,” responded Fisher, trying to sober up.

“No time for that. Start Roger’s assassination case. The city major wants that case to be investigated as soon as possible. The one you are working on, needs to go to archives.”

“Boss... but”, Fisher tried.

“Your doubts have no ground, Ray. These are not serial killings, Ray; we both know - the killers and the victims. No need to complicate things at this point.”



“We don’t know the real motives behind the killings, sir, we don’t,” Fisher replied and walked to the table with pictures on it. “Giuseppe Carbone, the godfather of the family of Capaco’s, one of the most influential mafia families in Chicago, in fact, in the country. He was murdered in front of his own restaurant.”

“I know how it happened,” MacGregor interrupted.

Fisher kept quiet. He quickly moved his hand and pointed at the Asian looking man next to Carbone’s face on the photograph.

“Ken Cho,” Fisher started, “fifty years old, immigrated to States ten years ago, is a manager in a pharmaceutical company. I know his case by hard, everything, talked to the relatives, co-workers. Out IT guys scrutinized his phone, and guess what?”

“And?” MacGregor uttered.

“Nothing, sir. Cho did not know Giuseppe Carbone. In fact, he was clueless about Carbone’s existence.”

“Targeted killing does not always assume knowing the object. In this case we don’t even know if it was a premediated murder,” MacGregor concluded.

“Well...Cho has fired five times, and only two got to Carbone. To be more exact the first one injured Carbone’s leg, the second one – his arm, the rest hit the wall and the door. If the bullet hadn’t injured his thigh artery, he would have not even died. Check this out, Captain: when Carbone’s bodyguards backfired, Cho didn’t even attempt to run. He just stood there waiting to be killed. So, who



is that freaking fool to make Cho, such an amateur, to assassinate the biggest gangster there is? You tell me!”

MacGregor was silent. Slowly, he moved his gaze to the photograph on the edge of the corner stand.

“What about this guy?” he pointed at the picture.

“It’s the same,” Fisher continued, “Frank Douglas, thirty-five years old, married, has three kids, a loan officer in a local bank, never had any problems with law, only some minor traffic violations. He shot Liam Henderson, the prosecutor judge right in his face. Just like Cho, Douglas had no clue who his victim was. He just shot the man. Just like that.”

Ray walked to the big, velvet chair and made himself comfortable.

“The court guards, who shot Douglas, reported that the guy couldn’t even hold the gun properly in his hands.”

“Did they arrest him?”

“They tried. They told him to surrender,” Ray said. “But Douglas did just the opposite; he pointed his gun at the guards, so that they would shot him on spot.”

MacGregor wanted to lecture Ray some more about the situations that might arise not in their favor, but he decided to stay quiet. He knew Ray too well – nothing could stop him from finding the underlying cause of the case.



Noticing MacGregor's reluctance, Ray rushed to the corner stand and pointed to another photograph.

"Morgan Owen, forty-four years old, divorced, the owner of "Owen Technologies", a self-created corporation, a friendly and a cool fellow. On April 4, he entered a restaurant, where Harvard Luis was having his dinner...Luis is the CEO of the North Capital Chicago bank. So, Morgan approached him from the back and put three bullets in his head. Making sure that Luis was dead, he blows his own brains out.

"Well, I am sure you didn't get to find the connection between Morgan and Luis, did you?" MacGregor asked.

"I did. Ethan Beck, thirty-eight years old, divorced, one of those two killers who is a professional shooter, a former paratrooper, served in special military operations in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. After demobilization, he started his own transportation company, but wasn't successful, went almost bankrupt."

"Does Morales have anything to do with the failure of his business?" MacGregor asked. "At times, cartels get involved with transportation guys to do the job, you know."

"There is nothing on them, though. Couldn't get much info about them dealing with each other. Maybe they served together, I don't know. But, no. Out of these four, Ethan was the only qualified one, so after shooting Morales, he could've escaped. Instead, he asked for more drink. Why?"

"Cause he was there to kill and die," MacGregor mumbled to himself.

"Yes, he was. Four murders in two months, and all of them are strange, and I mean strange; and all the weapons were illegally obtained. Hmm, I don't know, man, I just need more time."



MacGregor was silent. He realized that Ray was right about most of the facts, and it was obvious that something was up with all these cases, but he was reluctant to make any conclusions.

“I’d just called them anonymous killers,” Ray suggested, slowly getting up from his chair.

“You have ten days, Fisher, and if there is nothing more to this, we’ll transfer the cases to the archives,” MacGregor replied and left the room.

The scandalous crime, that happened next day, made Fisher jump at it, leaving the rest of the cases behind. The news about the attempted murder of Congressman Neil Walsh was blasting the media, which was full of opinions, statements, and the pictures of the killer.

It happened at night, when the congressman with his assistant and the bodyguards was leaving his office. From across the street a taxi driver by the name Vahid Sadath (in his mid-fifties) jumped out of his car and shot the congressman. Neil Walsh was injured in his arm; the killer was shot dead by the congressman’s bodyguards.

An urgent investigation had to be done, since the crime was committed by a Muslim, and the congressman was a possible candidate in upcoming presidential elections. The motives of the crime were to be identified as soon as it was possible; it did really matter, if they were political, religious, or personal.

Chicago police was on its feet twenty-four-seven. Fisher and his colleagues conducted all possible interrogations trying to figure out if there was any connection between the killer and the congressman. Nothing was found; nor Sadath, nor his immediate family were religious; none of its members attended a mosque. No connections with any terrorist groups or organizations. Nothing.



Early in the morning, Fisher decided to go up the roof of the police station to get some fresh air and finish his morning cup of coffee. Before he sipped his coffee, MacGregor called him to the office for an urgent talk.

Fisher didn't even get to sit down, when MacGregor informed him that the congressman's case was taken by the FBI for more detailed investigation.

"The FBI agents will be here soon, so I want you to gather all the available information and turn it in to them, Ray."

"Fine. Will do, but don't you want to hear my version of the story?"

"Did you find anything good?"

"I did. I think we're dealing here with another case of the anonymous killer scenario," Ray replied.

"Don't even go there, Ray. I have no time for your fantasies."

"Vahid Sadath is an ordinary guy, a taxi -driver, has never done anything wrong. All of a sudden, he gets the congressman? Nonsense!"

"You need to stop right there, Ray. There is always a motive behind the crime, and if you can't figure it out, it doesn't mean it's not there."

"You're absolutely right, Captain. Sadath was never interested in politics, had no clue about Neil Walsh's existence. Moreover, he is not even religious; no one in his family has ever done anything wrong. His wife is Christian, there are no personal reasons for him to kill the guy, None."



MacGregor sighed, “Possible.”

“Okay, then tell me who is that fool, who finds a guy, who had a stroke, and who can’t even hold the gun properly in his shaking hand to kill a congressman? Hah? Tell me, please, just tell me.”

“Well, yeah...and how could he drive a taxi being in such a poor health condition? You tell me, Ray.”

“Used his left arm, probably. Didn’t want to lose his job; kept it low key. His wife said, he was practicing to eat with his left hand cause his right one was shaking badly.”

McGregor sighed again. “That’s not enough, Ray. Not enough proof.”

“Good enough to see the obvious – all those anonymous killers lived the last couple of days or even hours of their lives. All of them, no exception.”

“Are you sure?” McGregor lifted his eyebrow.

“More than sure, Captain. Ethan Beck confessed to his friends that the only way to save his family from the financial disaster was for him to commit suicide. Frank Douglas has killed the judge after he found out about his terminal illness. Morgan Owen was going through a dark depression; he was suicidal and was seeing a therapist and a psychiatrist. On his last visit to his therapist he confessed that he might put an end to his life soon. Ken Cho became suicidal after he lost his wife and the baby in a car crash because of his reckless driving. Vahid started having frequent episodes of psychosis and aggression, so most likely...”



“No need to go on, Ray. I understand,” MacGregor interrupted. “According to your reasoning, none of the killers had any clue about their targets. So, there is someone who knows about their intention and uses them to commit all these crimes. Am I right?”

“That’s the idea, but I am not sure if these people are forced or convinced to go for it, or just...most likely they’re convinced.”

“And where do you think that someone gets the information about their suicidal thoughts? From Facebook? You think, these people are announcing their intentions?”

“I don’t have the answer for you, yet. I will though. Give me some more time.”

“No. The congressman’s case is going to FBI. Period. No need for your input.”

“Fine, but you know better than me how the system works. They’ll just call Sadath a fanatic terrorist, and Walsh will use it to promote his views.”

“We don’t know that.” MacGregor sounded frustrated...

“I just explained how Sadath is not an isolated case...”

“Ray, please. The congressman’s case is not just a criminal case; they’re blood thirsty up there, and I have no desire to become their donor. Just let it go.”

“So, you don’t want us to find the real killers, do you?”



“Of course, I do. I am not closing the case completely. You may continue the investigation, and if you get the undisputable proof of your story, we will report it to FBI, no doubt. For now, get everything ready, they are going to be here soon.”

As Ray Fisher predicted, the face of Sadath was circling media in a couple of days. It was boldly announced that Vahid Sadath was closely working with the group of terrorists. Since the congressman intended to continue his campaign against the terrorist activities, the attempted assassination made perfect sense. One of the headlines mentioned, that the congressman planned to deport every terrorist suspect and his family out of the country.

“I don’t like that either, Ray,” MacGregor uttered, unlocking the door to Ray’s office, then walking in. Snappishly, he threw the newspaper on the desk; it had a big picture of Sadath on the first page.

“You may go and tell about your feelings to his family, which is being deported from the country as we speak. We’re putting these people through a hell for nothing, and I mean nothing they’re guilty of.”

“It’s out of my control, Ray and you know it,” MacGregor responded in a harsh and loud voice.

“Not good enough, but hey,” Ray grinned and sat down.

“Then do something about it; get the bastard on the hook,” MacGregor commanded, walked towards the door, then walked back to Ray. He wasn’t feeling himself; he knew that after nine-eleven things were different for many. He didn’t want to carry the guilt of messing up people’s lives for no valid reason. He did not.

“What would you do if you were to commit a suicide?” Ray asked MacGregor suddenly.



“Hmm, you think it’s time?” MacGregor mocked.

“You won’t do it; you are not the type, you’re too resilient.”

MacGregor grinned and went on. “I’d put the gun on my head and pull the trigger.”

“What if you have no gun, don’t know how to use it?”

“I’d hang myself in a trailer or...I’d jump from the roof or a bridge.” MacGregor replied.

“Per statistics, the most suicides are done with the gun shot, then comes the overdose, then hanging, then the roof or a bridge. In the case of our killer, the first two versions are not on the list, since in those situations people isolate themselves from others.”

“Okay, so you’re saying that the killer is waiting for those poor folks somewhere on the roof or a bridge, talks to them, plays with their mind, then...”

“Exactly.” Ray sounded confident.

“And how exactly does he do it?” MacGregor insisted.

“I don’t really know, but he knows human psyche very well.”

“Yeah,” MacGregor mumbled to himself. “Interesting...something is pushing those men to kill someone before they end their own lives, but what?”

“Good questions. I don’t know yet, but look,” Ray said and opened his tablet. “I did some research and highlighted the areas where for the last year the greatest number of suicides were committed. I need



your help here, boss. I want to get a team of guards, who can watch the area and report the activities for a month at least.”

“Hmm, sounds like a plan. I’ll get you a team, and if that won’t help, then,” MacGregor paused, “Then we’re done.”

“Thank you,” Ray replied and shook MacGregor’s hand with the gratitude and the smile.

The next day, the sharpest watchmen were assigned to keep an eye on the given location for twenty-four-seven. Any suspicious activities were to be reported immediately to Ray Fisher. The time was passing, but no evidence or account of any dubious activities was being recorded. Things did not look good at all.

Ray Fisher was emptying the last drops of whiskey at the local pub. He would usually go there after work just to chill and get the stress out of the way, but, recently, he hasn’t been doing that. All weary and exhausted, he called his wife.

“Jake is asleep, I can’t wake him up, Ray,” Kelly spoke in a very soft voice.

“I am missing you guys a lot,” Ray muttered in a sad voice.

“Yeah, I understand, but...we are over it, aren’t we? For the first time, Ray, I fell in peace and I feel I’m back to my real self. Ten years of agony, that’s what we had.”

“I know, I always knew it, Kelly. You weren’t happy with me. I always knew that.”



“I always loved you, but hey...that’s not enough. The self is more important I figured that out, yeah, it is. Gotta go now. Have a good night, bye.”

Ray stayed still for a while, then dropped the phone on the table, closed his eyes, and fell asleep right on the table.

“Are you okay, Sir?” The voice of the waitress woke Ray up.

“I am fine, Thank you, just tired.” Ray mumbled back. “Can I have the bill please?”

Driving home wasn’t fun. Ray tried his best not to fall asleep on the wheel; he forced his eyes wire-open, but the whiskey seemed to be doing its job better than his brain. About to doze off, he suddenly heard the loud siren of the police car. Then he saw the white car was speeding towards him. Before pushing the breaks, the car crashed into his vehicle with massive force, Ray jumped out through the front window and all unconscious bumped flat onto the ground.

MacGregor silently was standing next to Ray, when he finally opened his eyes and realized that he was in the hospital. He wasn’t sure how he ended up there, but he could remember the crash and the police car siren quite well.

“Hi Scot.” Fisher mumbled, forcing a smile.

“Hi Ray, how do you feel?” MacGregor asked.

“I feel it,” Ray mumbled.



“I know you do. You are fine now. Nothing serious, Ray. You’ll be better in a couple of days. You had your seatbelt off, and that saved your life.”

“I remember...I remember I didn’t get to break on time. I didn’t.”

“Yeah I know. There was so much alcohol in your blood, no wonder you didn’t,” MacGregor spoke in a blaming tone. “People died because of your recklessness.”

“People?” Ray repeated.

“Yes, you didn’t stop at the red light. The car from the opposite directions crashed into yours.”

“God. Oh my God. What...how many people?”

“Two,” MacGregor muttered.

Ray closed his eyes and silently let his tears to roll, and roll, and roll.

“You know the DUI laws in this state; there is no way around them. I’ve been told to arrest you, but I asked them to give you a break for now. The case against you is already opened, and you know how that goes, Ray.”

“Does Kelly know what happened?” Ray asked.

“I think, you should tell her yourself. Besides, you need a good lawyer, and I mean a good one.”

Two months passed like an airless wind above the earth. Ray Fisher was admiring the auburn-haired sunset, standing on the edge of the cliff - The Cliff of Hope located in the northern part of the city. He was trying to comprehend what had happened to him; how he became the source of pain and suffering



to others. At what point his negligence overpowered his senses and caused death of two people? Where and how did he go so fatally wrong? Nothing intentional, but who cared. He was drunk, and he killed two people. “As simple as that,” he whispered to himself. All these thoughts and the feelings were chocking his mind and vibrating through his veins. Going through lengthy trial, seeing faces of the victims, trying to justify his shitty driving, and more crap, and more. There was a way out, though – to end it all in a couple of seconds. He loved his son, but he was far away, and would eventually forget about his dad. Time cures everything. “People put an end to their life only when there is no one on Earth for whom the desire to live is stronger, than the desire to die for that person,” thought Ray lifting his heavy gaze to the sky once more.

“Your death is going to hurt others regardless, but you’re going to do it, right?” the voice interrupted Ray’s thoughts.

Fisher sharply turned around and saw the man behind the voice. “Is this the one I was looking for?” he thought. The man’s voice sounded cold and indifferent. It seemed that the man knew well about Ray and the reasons for his decision to end his life.

Slowly, Fisher got his gun and felt the trigger.

“No need for that, Ray,” the man went on, “I know who you are and I came here prepared. I guess you also know who I am.”

Fisher turned around and stared at the man. Sean Parker was standing in front of him.



“It would be funny if you shot someone who is here to kill himself,” Fisher sneered. “I’m not trying to kill you here, but I guess you want to get rid of me, don’t you? Put down your gun, so we can talk,” he suggested calmly.

Fisher threw his gun in front of Sean, who quickly grabbed it and hid it in his tiny leather bag.

“Thanks man,” Sean uttered.

“Who are you working for?” Fisher asked.

“Really?” Sean smirked, “that’s what you want to know right now?”

“Yes,” Fisher replied.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t give you their names. I work for different people, organizations. Let’s seat down man, I have knee problems.”

They sat on the big flat rock and lighted a cigarette.

“So, what’s the deal?” Fisher began, “How you do it? You’re good at it, aren’t you?”

“Do what?”

“Make people kill before they end their own lives? What do you tell them to make them do it?”

“It’s simple. I just turn their desire to die into a meaningful one. I give them a purpose to die. I come up with some bullshit story of mine and ask them to help me to get rid of my enemies before they jump from here. They do it, Ray. They love doing it, believe it or not.”



Fisher looked a bit puzzled.

“Yeah, Ray, most of them haven’t even done much in their lives. Just the usual...so I give them a chance to feel themselves important, like a hero.”

“Yeah, right. So, you’re saying that a murder is a heroism? Crap! You’re just playing a saviour, a compassionate guy and you get paid well for doing it. Just a bastard, nothing more.”

“Getting paid feels good,” Sean interrupted.

“Those people could’ve changed their mind; they could’ve stayed alive. Things always change you know. But you take away their last chance, the last hope. You do, you fool.”

“Oh, stop. I am a good man, Ray. I try my best to make them change their mind before I even start my phony story. I am honest. I try. I’ve saved many lives, you know. Some of them are my friends.”

“Am I just another case of...?”

“No. You are not. You’re different, Ray. “Unanimous Killers,” is a good name, I like it.” Sean smiled and continued. “I am getting paid for the information.”

“A human life is nothing to you,” Ray stated coldly.

“What about the lives of all those people who get killed? Pedophiles, drug cartel magnates, bigot-judges, blood suckers, you name it. Justice is blind to them, but we are not. After killing ten people, he was released from prison. Why? Those are all criminals enjoying their freedom and having a blast. Is that fair?”



“Fair? Who are you to decide what is fair? Why don’t you kill them yourself? Hah?”

“I tried, man. I tried twice,” Sean mumbled back. “When my first love broke up with me for my best friend, I tried. I was done with myself.”

Ray looked at Sean sideways. “And?”

“And I still feel sick, when I remember her.”

“What stopped you from the suicide?” Fisher asked.

“When I was standing on the edge, I felt something moving in my feet. It turned to see what’s up, and it turned to be a little puppy. I lifted him and looked in his eyes; he licked my face. Something dead woke up in me, and I changed my mind. Soon I left the town. My puppy became my only friend.” Sean paused, lighted a cigarette and continued. “I was about forty, when I had my second attempt. I was already twice a divorcee and was into drugs a big time. I was slowly dying. My friends turned their backs to me, no one would lend any money; they all knew I was slowly killing myself. I started stealing. Once, I seriously injured a man, who was trying to resist me. I needed his wallet; I was ready to kill him. I realized that soon my dead body was going to be found in a trash can. So, at the time, the overdose was the only answer to my struggles. I don’t know why I decided to jump from the roof? Maybe get closer to the heavens, who knows.”

“Yeah, I can imagine...being high all the time doesn’t help, does it?”

“That girl...the girl in white appeared on the roof out of nowhere. You’d think, I am making this up, but no. She was on the roof; I saw her run, then I pulled her dress and stopped her. Her face looked



awful: she had bruises all over it. She tried to free herself to jump, but I held her tight. Her name was Masha, and she was only eighteen, I found out. She came to US after American dream, she said. Instead, she got her American pimp abusing and beating the shit out of her. The dream, hah, that dream. When you wake up it's gone, isn't it?" Sean winked.

Sean lighted up another cigarette and continued. "She wanted to end it; she wanted to go back home, but said had no documents cause the bastard pimp took everything away from her. She she'd be killed one day, anyway, so why wait. Hey, I was there, I could help her, and I did. I found her pimp and shot him. That simple. For the first time in my life, I felt really good about myself; I wasn't just a useless piece of shit, I saved a life. I was a hero, man."

Ray interrupted him, "So you went on with your heroism?"

"Almost," Sean uttered anxiously, "I had a list of crooks, who deserved to be killed. But you know what was going wrong? I lost my desire to die. Imagine that, Ray."

"So, you found a solution, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did. I used people, who wanted to jump. Meanwhile, I got rid of the two heavy criminals. The cops were after me, and I loved the chase. I ran away to New York, name change, and all that jazz; I found a job, and still had no desire to die. If I continued killing, I'd get caught fast, so I stopped."

"So, you decided to use those miserable fellows to continue..."

"Don't call them miserable; they're people who made a decision, that's all."

"Oh really?" Ray mocked, "That's how you convince yourself, so that you can sleep well at nights?"



“Whatever, man. I have no regrets,” Sean replied.

“You’re being paid to kill. Nothing can justify that, Sean, nothing!”

“Good people don’t get murdered, Ray. Hardly ever. The profit...I share it with the families of the victims. I have the paperwork, care to see?”

“Why are you here, Sean? Why? To confess or what?” Ray sounded very upset.

Sean kept quiet. He removed a flashcard from his pocket and handed it to Ray.

“Here you go. You’ll find here everything you need; all the information you need for your investigation, Ray. Happy?”

“I quit, Sean. I am not a cop anymore.”

“Vahid is a terrorist,” Sean went on.

“I know that,” Ray uttered.

“Then you should want to know who is behind the assassination attempt.”

Ray looked straight into Sean’s eyes and read his thoughts. “Are you trying to say, you’re going to take his case to the end and kill him?”

Sean nodded. “The girl’s name is Regina Miles. Her father wants the congressman dead, and he has the right to it. Neil Walsh molested his daughter, and I mean seriously molested...a sex scandal.

Ray protested, “I don’t want to hear it.”



“Well, you have no choice. We are talking a pedophile here, the serial one. Regina is just one of them, Ray. He is filthy rich, though, he can lobby and win the elections.”

Ray got up and slowly stepped away. “I don’t believe you, Sean. Those things can’t stay unknown.”

“Yes, they can,” Sean replied. “There is a price to pay for anything you do.”

“I am not buying it. I am out,” Ray blurted and continued walking away from Sean.

“Hey, you’re gonna do it anyway. You will, trust me. You feel guilty, and that’s the only thing that will get you down. You’ll end your life. I see it in your eyes, Ray. But before you do it, make this world better. You can. I know you will.”

Sean sounded determined; he put the flashcard back on his tiny leather bag and walked away. Ray thought that Sean forgot to take the bag, so he approached it, got the gun out of the back, and pointed at Sean.

“I can’t let you go just like that Sean,” Ray yelled.

“Then do it, Ray, do it,” Sean muttered back.

“Fuck you! You came here to die...and why now? Why today?”

“I am terminally ill, Ray. I’ve seen many people go, but I wish I could kill Walsh first, then finish this business of mine. I am physically weak though; I don’t think I can do it.”



“You won’t get away that easy, Sean. You’ll go to court and confess. You’ll name every single name you got across, you’ll tell them how you used poor people to commit all those terrible crimes. The families of the victims must know the truth about their parents, husbands, wives, and children, for God’s sake.”

“Your people won’t know shit, Ray; and if I happened to get locked out, my inmates will kill me on a spot. Your people won’t know shit, I’m telling you now,” Sean slurred. “You better end this now; better for me and you. Do it.”

Slowly, Sean walked away from Ray. He was getting closer to the crosswalk. Ray stopped for a second, then pointed the gun to Sean’s back. He did not have the right to let him go. He could not. Sean fell hard on his back and was gone in a few seconds.

Ray felt a strange relief; he sat on the pavement grabbed Sean’s leather bag, and got the tablet from it. He inserted the flashcard into the tablet.

Sean was telling the truth. There was enough information proving the congressman Neil Walsh’s criminal activities. There were also many facts supporting the crimes committed by Daniel Morales, Giuseppe Carboni, Liam Henderson, the judge, and the bank CEO Howard Luis.

It was late at night, when the congressman Neil Walsh, accompanied by his bodyguards, entered the restaurant – the most prestigious and the prominent one in Chicago. He was planning to discuss a couple major financial operations with the CEOs of the two major banks of the state.



There were a few police officers guarding the restaurant entrance; Ray Fisher waited in a taxi across the street. He was watching the scene with an acute attention. He succeeded getting in, but he was stopped at the entrance to the main dining hall.

“I am a detective, Ray Fisher, and I need to talk to the congressman,” Ray suggested.

“We know who you are, and we also know that you’ve been suspended from your job, sir,” the bodyguard countered.

“I am here as a private investigator, not a cop.”

“You have no invitation, sir, so you cannot join the congressman for dinner. If you need to see him, you have to contact his office and get an appointment.”

“This is a matter of highly confidential information; hence I cannot wait for an official appointment. I have an urgent data regarding the recent attempted assassination.”

“FBI is investigating the case,” the guard responded coldly.

“You think, I don’t know that?” Ray got irritated.

The bodyguard paused, then slightly nodded as if calling the other guard standing across the hall, then muffled, “Just wait here.”

Ray watched one of the guards approaching the congressman and whispering something in his ear. Soon, the congressman got up and walked towards the restrooms. In seconds, Ray Fisher was told to follow the congressmen.



Neil Walsh was washing his hands, when Ray, accompanied by the guard, walked into the restroom.

“I heard your story, but I can’t really help you. Unless,” the congressman looked at Ray with curiosity, “unless, you have really important information for me. Do you?”

Silently, Ray threw the flash card right onto congressman’s feet.

“There is enough information to prove your pedophilic tendencies and your direct involvement in the disappearance of Regina Miles.”

The bodyguard rapidly approached Ray, but Walsh stopped him.

“Leave us alone. Wait outside,” he commanded. Brusquely, he lifted the flashcard of the ground and looked at Ray with hate.

“Where did you get this toy from?” he asked, paused and added, “Who cares, right. What do you want? How much?”

“Your life, sir. I want you dead, Neil Walsh,” Ray raged, got the gun from his pocket, and fired right onto Walsh’s head.

In no time, the restroom door wide-opened, and the guard pointed the gun on Ray’s face. Ray fired first, but he was the first to fall down dead. Two bullets ended his life fast.

The news about the congressman’s murder was blasting the media headlines. But the flashcard with all the scandalous materials on it, turned to be the braking news on YouTube first, then on TV, then



everywhere else. In one of the recordings, Fisher talked about the secret club named “Unanimous Killers” and its organized criminal activities. Disclosing Sean Parker’s continuous illicit actions, Ray also talked about his intentions to kill the congressman.



Perfect Robbery

In the center of Chicago, right across the street from the GT Commerce Bank, the things were getting uneasy. The nearby streets were crowded with people, police, news reporters, cars, and the colorful ocean of curious spectators, slowly moving towards the bank. The roar of the crowd of the Pride Parade was cheering the diversity of vibrant LGBT community. The flamboyant posters and balloons were hovering everywhere – the celebration was in its peak, when the police car sirens overturned the parade’s temper into the curiosity and fear. The attempts of the reporters to get closer to the bank were useless: the guards were tough and cautious. Nobody knew what was happening, but the crowd looked excited and animated.

Crime squad officers forcefully pushed four handcuffed men into the police cruiser. The restrained men were probably in their early forties and of the Hispanic origin. When the police car left, a tall man in a plain black suit rushed out of the bank with the ready-to-speak face. It was John Marcus, a criminal investigator. The reporters noisily hollered and pointed their ears and recorders towards Marcus.

“Today at 12:45pm we got a call informing us about a robbery that took place in GH Commerce Bank. Bank customers and the employers were held hostage. As a result of our successful negotiations, the robbers surrendered and were arrested, as all of you have witnessed just now. No one was physically hurt during the robbery. That’s all I have for now.”

One of the reporters managed to shove his microphone forward and asked, “Did the bank lose any money?”

“Yes,” Marcus confirmed, “the bank lost about hundred million dollars, and that’s all we know at this point.” He abruptly turned around and hurried back to the bank, where the bank employees and the customers were impatiently waiting for the permission to finally go home.

Glen Johnson, the police chief, slowly walked to Marcus and uttered, “So what do you say, anything new?”



“Nothing. The witnesses are somewhat weird. They say different things... a little iffy situation we got here; you know.”

“Aha, okay. Anything else?”

“Yeah, sure. The robbers had a few toy-guns; they made the safeguards turn in theirs, but let the customers and employees keep their phones, imagine? So stupid! They called 911, of course. One of the bank employees said, he had a selfie with one of the robbers. It’s crazy, Johnson, it’s totally nuts,” Marcus sneered.

“What? A selfie? You’re kidding, right?”

“Nah, I am serious and that’s not all. Two of the robbers pushed the employees away from the vault-room, and while those two were emptying the vault, the other two were entertaining the crowd – dancing, singing, and playing the guitar.

“Singing?” the chief’s eyes rolled out.

“Yes, yes, singing, some Mexican folk-songs,” Marcus responded.

“Aha...I refuse to believe you,” Johnson shook his head and looked away.

“You better believe me, I am serious as hell,” Marcus blurted, “but that is not all. These crooks actually treated their hostages with sweets and coffee; they even took some pictures...”

“Just stop,” Johnson interrupted, “What happened to the money?”

“I have no idea. The police arrived in less than five minutes after the first call. All people inside assured the police that none of the robbers went out of the building, and they’re right. There is no way that anyone could’ve left the building, given the money to someone else, then got back in. It is just impossible!”

“So, you’re saying that hundred million dollars just disappeared? Grew the wings and flew away?”

“The fact is, the money is gone, and the robbers refuse to speak without the lawyer.”



“There is an invisible man to all of these, Marcus. Someone we don’t even know is leading this game; could be one of the bank employees. Check all and let me know.”

Shortly, after Johnson left, Marcus approached one of the bank employees, who was quietly sipping his cup of tea.

“Hello, sir, may I have a word with you? Your name, please?”

“Harry Louise,” the employee grinned.

“Just a quick question for you, Mr. Louise. Does your bank have any hidden access to the street?”

“No, it doesn’t,” Harry responded.

“Then where is the money? It has disappeared, we searched every possible corner, it’s just gone you understand?”

“I understand, but I have no idea where to look for it, sir. I am sorry.”

The young man, who was carefully questioned by the detective, was me; I am the one who organized the perfect robbery. You want to know how? I’ll tell you in a minute, but first you tell me, if you believe that one hundred million dollars can be robbed by one man only? Not really? Fine. Do you believe that ten other people have indirectly got involved in that robbery? No? Fine. Do you think that one man did actually succeed in the theft of hundred million without a bloodshed? Of course, not!

This is the best time for me to change your interpretation of the robbery. They say it’s impossible to think of every little detail during the robbery. It is possible, and I did it.

I am Harry Lewis, twenty-five, born and raised in Chicago. My parents say I was a little brat since I began walking and talking. I don’t remember much of my school years. I just know I didn’t like school and got into fights with my dreary peers. My college years were better: I fell in love with gorgeous Elena



and joined the college football team. Our team wasn't successful, but it taught me to control my aggression. With Ellen, things turned the opposite direction. She had all the qualities of an ideal woman, and any man would dream to have her company for the rest of his life. She was smart, patient, kind, lenient, loving, and beautiful. With all that charming bouquet of valuable assets, our relationship didn't last long. In spite of my genuine love and admiration towards Elena, I had a hard time meeting her expectations. Her subtle attempts to change me into a man of her dreams have consistently failed. First, I truly admired her timid efforts to twist my whims into her own fancies. However, she took it too far, and I just stepped back. We lost our mutual interest in about a year, and went our merry ways, leaving behind the best memories ever.

Our break-up has affected my psyche harshly. I felt useless, vain and empty. Elena started her dating marathon in no time; I lingered around for quite a while. I focused on my college studies, and aced my final exams with no visible effort. Soon I got my Bachelor's from the University of Chicago, majoring in finances. Not that I was eager to build a career in banking; it has just happened to be what I did. At that time, the magic of finance captured my wounded heart, and I just went with the flow. Besides, it was time to start helping my parents, and I knew I could do it if I got serious about the finance business.

Considering my knowledge and the highest possible GPA, I was hired at one of the leading financial institutions in the state GT Commerce, which had more than 200 branches throughout the country.

Being an energetic and hard-working person, I spent the first two years of my banking career preparing and reviewing the loan paperwork, getting to know the offstage business of financial products. That was nothing close to what I really wanted to do. After work, I would kill my time with my friends or colleagues, drinking beer and bowling. I had a few juicy affairs with some lovely girls, but nothing serious.

It was one of the gloomy and rainy Mondays, when a young man in a striped suit got comfortable in the chair across from my desk and began his animated monologue about the unique design of his future



swimming pool. Applying for the loan to build that pool of his dream, he went on running his mouth for more than an hour.

“Why am even here...to hear this bull shit?” I whispered to myself and smirked at the striped man.

The blues was slowly making its way to my dull existence; I felt miserable and vain. Maybe the damp weather was the part of the game, but I felt like suffocating from the emptiness of all. I needed the change...but what change?

By the end of the working day, I was called to the office of the bank executive director Mr. Charles Rodgers. No one was called to his office unless something good or bad was up.

When I walked into his office, Mr. Rogers was on the phone. He was in his early sixties, a well-spoken and a decent man, very much respected by his employees. His neatly trimmed mustache was the key to his appealing presence.

“Hello, Harry, how are you today?” Rogers began. “I hope you enjoy working here.”

“I do, thank you,” I calmly responded.

“You’ve been her for more than 2 years, and I really like your work. You’re responsible, hardworking, punctual, and your numbers are always up. I started my career, when I was your age, and look at me now. I believe, you can be very successful, and maybe one day, you’ll rule it all.”

“Thanks again, Mr. Rogers. I admire your success story,” I mumbled.

I wasn’t impressed by Rogers’ speech - what an uninviting future he promised me. Thirty years of a zombie life just to get promoted to a fancy looking office with some more cash in your saving. I refuse to join the army of people, whose lives are structured and planned from birth to death. Like for instance my dad has always dreamed of playing in a rock band (he is a great base player), but it never happened; he had to support our family, working day and night. True, some lucky guys get there despite everything, and we admire them. But only a few; most get stuck in a daily nonsense and never get a chance to breath the life to the full.



I never wished for being not me. Never wanted to own a business, never wanted to be famous or anything close to that. I just wanted to be free of anyone telling me when and what to do. I turned ten. When I told my dad how I felt about having structured days, he just laughed at me and said that it was the only way to live, if I wanted to be successful. “All kids feel just like you, Harry, because you are kids and that’s all there is to it,” he sneered.

Well, I guess that wasn’t all there was to it, because here I am, in my mid-twenties and I still hate my orderly existence. So, I am not going to wait for my possible success story; I better act now and act adeptly, with no regrets.

You wouldn’t believe, but only recently I’ve noticed that the actual source of my success, the bank vault, was so close to me; and I mean very close, like about 100 feet away from my desk. Once I considered emptying the vault, I realized I needed a good plan, and since my whole life was already carefully planned, I should have been the mastermind of planning. I had to think about all the aspects of the robbery: moral, technical, human, consequential, and many more. I needed to find reliable partners, and it was not easy to do, since we were talking about hundred million dollars here. My mind started racing, and my anxiety rushed to my knees, but I knew I was up to something real for the first time in my life. I had to think of something different from all the robbery scripts I had read before; something that would be unique and unpredictable for the police and the FBI. I found out that the actual money of our daily customers was insured, so their cash was safe. Another thing that was clear for me was that the robbery would be done with no violence whatsoever: no one would be hurt, injured, and, hopefully, even scared.

When I got home, I was clear about three main questions I had to answer: first – how to perform an actual robbery, second- what is the safest way to get the money out of the bank, and at last - how can I avoid becoming a suspect? Three simple questions that needed an answer in a couple of days.

Alvaro Guerro was a hardworking man, one of the thousands of illegal immigrants from Mexico, who was making his living by gardening and cleaning. I had noticed his patience and the full-hearted effort while trimming or hosing my neighbor’s backyard. Alvaro seemed to be a very diligent and careful



worker, so I decided to ask him to help me to take care of my lawn, too. He happily agreed to do so, and that was the first step to our friendship.

One evening, when he finished trimming our stubborn rose bushes, I noticed Alvaro's blues. To be honest, I was planning to talk to him about my plans, but the unusual sadness in his eyes, made me change my mind.

"Something is up, Alvaro? You look upset," I started the conversation.

"Si, señor, my baby is bad. My wife called and said my son is sick. Very sick. He has that, she said leukemia, very bad." Alvaro frowned.

"Oh, I am so sorry to hear that. Ugh, that is serious, but can be cured. Maybe," I uttered.

"Doctors say we can bring him here to hospital. Here is good, they say, they know, you know," Alvaro muttered.

"Probably. I am really sorry to hear that, Alvaro."

"It is too much money here. I don't know what to do. My only son, you know; I have four girls, only one son Jose. What to do, señor?"

"I wish I could help, but..." I said and paused. I wasn't sure, if that was the right time to talk about my plans of raiding the bank. However, Alvaro's miserable voice made my hesitation melt away and say, "I can help you only if you can help me too."

"Hah, of course, señor, what should I do?"

"Nothing big, but important enough to get your family here, and provide your little one with a descent medical care."

I began my story telling him that there were big people out there, who were planning to rob the bank and needed my help. So, I would need some help from him, in order to support my big friends. I



explained to him that if he could also get some reliable friends, who would reach out, each of them will get a million dollar for their services.

“The only downside of this is that you and your buddies will have to stay in prison for some time, but they will get generously compensated for that – a million each,” I repeated.

Alvaro heavily sighed and didn’t respond. Shortly, he slowly rolled his eyes at me and asked, “Is that money enough to treat my Jose?”

“Of course, it is. I will get a good lawyer for you, so that your family can immigrate to US with no problems.”

“I will think about it, Mr. Lewis. I will do it. Si, I will,” Alvaro sounded excited.

“It’s a serious business, Alvaro. No fooling around with that kind of stuff,” I warned.

“How many people you need, señor?”

“Only four, and you should guarantee that we can trust them, and by saying trust, I mean trusting them our lives.”

“I see. I think I can do that. I know people I can trust,” Alvaro added, “but can you tell me the plan? Like what should we do and stuff like that?”

“Certainly,” I responded, “let’s walk to my room, so that I can tell you the rest.”

My room was on the farthest end of the corridor, so it was cooler than the rest of the house. I turned on the heat, while getting cozy on my favorite antique plush armchair.

“Here is the plan,” I started leisurely. “First you have to disarm the guards, then ask the boss to unlock the bank vault, which probably will have about hundred million dollars in it. During all these activities, you should have two of your people entertaining the customers and the bank employees. The three of you should lift the bags with money to the roof of the building, where you will use the parachutes to transport the money up to the sky.”



“What?” Alvaro looked confused, “to the sky?”

“Yes. Your parachutes will have special computer devices, which will be controlled by you. I will give you clear instructions what button to press in order for the parachutes to land on the right spot. Don’t worry about it. Once you do it, you guys can turn yourselves in. The police will be very happy to finally meet you downstairs.”

“Oh, okay. But...then ...what if the police ask us about the money we stole?”

“The truth. The truth I am going to tell you now. Listen carefully, Alvaro. You should tell the police, that you were told what to do by other men, that’s all.”

“Should I give them your name?”

“Of course not. You will tell them, that you were getting some threatening phone calls from a stranger, saying they would kick you out of the US since you are illegal here. Meanwhile, I’ll call you from different blocked numbers, so that later on they follow all the calls you got for the past couple of months,” I added assertively.

“Oh, oh I see, señor,” Alvaro nodded.

“Then you can tell the police how you placed the money in the parachute bags and let them land on one of the neighboring roofs.”

“Aha, okay, I see, senior Lewis.”

“Call me Harry,” I smiled.

“I am just worried that the police will not believe the story, but we will do it, señor. I really need the money.”

“I am glad you do,” I smiled. “One more thing - very important. Your friends should not know about me, and I mean it, Alvaro. It’s safer that way, trust me. Okay? I will tell you more a bit later. Let’s go get something to eat.”



After dinner, we needed something to keep us up for the further discussion of our plan. We walked down the street and got some strong Cafe Americano with a lot of sugar. I thoroughly explained to Alvaro that the day I picked for our project was a special day, the day of the Chicago Pride Parade. That day the police will be busier than usual, but most importantly, the celebration will assume many colorful balloons to be released into the air. That's a perfect scene for our parachute to get lost in the crowd of the sparkling festivity.

Alvaro was truly bothered by the use of the guitar and music I mentioned before. Hence, I shortly went over a human mind and told him, that in an extreme situation people act strange, so we must create a relaxing atmosphere, making sure that people knew they were safe. I am not sure, if Alvaro understood what I explained, but that's another story. By the end of our conversation, Alvaro got excited; he told me he had never heard of anything like that, and he suggested putting it in the textbooks. Textbooks? Yeah, right. No, thank you.

On Monday afternoon, around 12:45pm Alvaro and his four friends broke into the GT Commerce Bank and successfully took care of the business. The police took good care of his business too, and the bank employees and the clients got released later that evening. The next day we all were called to testify; later that night, I got the parachute with the money off the roof of the building it was dropped on. While the investigation was in a process, I made sure that Alvaro's family had safely moved to the United States, and that the money I promised securely got to its addressees.

I have never felt so much at ease! When I drove back home, I stayed in my car for a while – just couldn't believe I actually succeeded. I wasn't the first one in the world to rob the bank, but I felt special doing it in a unique way – my way. I knew where to hide the money, and how to invest it. I knew it all, so I became my own boss. Sweet!

My old folks were plunged into the television set, following the news about the bank robbery investigation. The reporters stated that it was to be considered the theft of the century, since the obscure disappearance of the stolen money puzzled the investigation team and became an unsolved mystery of



the time. The law forces were convinced, that the people who organized the crime of the crimes, were hiding somewhere abroad. My dad caringly nodded on that announcement and sipped his tea.

I smiled and went to bed. I was sleepy as hell. I did not have to wake up early in the morning...unless I wanted to.



DOG REVOLUTION

It has been more than two weeks that the wave of multiple protests in the capital city has been flaring up non-stop. Steadily increasing college tuition rates became the main reason for the students to lose their patience, and start the series of tuition hike protests throughout the city. The government, as corrupt as it was, refused to address the problem in a peaceful manner and negotiate with the students' council before everything has turned upside down. The city police tactics towards the demonstrators were rather harsh: one of the students was strangled by the police so brutally, that he ended up in the hospital and died from fractured skull and brain injury.

The terrible cruelty, with which the government treated the protestor, became the main topic in the media, and the people arose another wave of protests, asking for the Prime Minister Mathew Kanavares and his cabinet to resign. In spite of the bogus media news about the recent declining numbers of protests, people were rapidly pushing with their complaints even further. The superior court has publicly announced that the police officer, who smothered one of the students in a crowd, would be charged with the battering and sentenced in a few days. Nothing worked – people were outraged, furious, and determined; they refused to get off the streets. Period.

All this chaos turned to be quite favorable for the opposition parties, especially for the party “Freedom.” This time, the head of the party Michael Morales stated that he would make sure that the series of protests grow and continue. “People’s ultimatum for the Prime Minister and his cabinet to resign should be satisfied in no time!” Morales declared.

The demonstrations were spreading throughout the whole country with the gradually increasing numbers of protestors, while the authorities were reluctant to use a military force to prevent its rapid escalation. There were warning signals coming from the United States and Europe indicating the possible negative consequences for the government, if it decided to use military force to repress the unrests. The Prime Minister Kanavares would become the main target for the foreign banks: his assets would be frozen along with the financial investments of his cabinet members.



The secret meeting of a few cabinet members was planned at midnight in Hilton Hotel. The minister of the internal affairs Henry Jacobs and three other members of the mob-families, the heads of ruling political mafia. The Prime Minister was late.

Joe Barton made himself comfortable on the soft, plush chair. In spite of his young age, he grew to be one of the leading lawyers in the country, controlling the southern part of the city, which people called simply “the city.” That was the oldest part of the town, where the first actual construction of the city had started. John’s business included illegal activities such as firearm, drug, and gem trading.

Sam Malkovich was leaning towards the big, oval window and smoking his Cuban cigar. He was the head of the transportation network of the country, including all ports and the railroads. The illegal freight trade was under his strict supervision, and he was very good at what he was responsible for.

Alex Aramian was the head of the ethnic legal group, the members of which were all of an Armenian descent. He was quietly seating and waiting for the boss. Waiting.

Alex was in his early forties and managed to toughen his mob ties and become one of the most influential figures in politics in the capital city. Aramian’s clan took almost everything under its control: casinos, banks, big financial institutions and more. Officially, Joe Barton and Malkovich did not comply with Aramian, but they knew how powerful he was. Years ago, one of the well-known criminal groups, led by Chicha Selini, attempted to take over of one of Aramian’s big financial corporations, but didn’t succeed. Selini was found burnt to ashes in his own car. Moreover, his own business went through a smooth transition into the hands of Aramian.

“I am tired of waiting,” complained Joe and walked to the exit door.

“Sit down,” calmly demanded Aramian.

“I can’t wait anymore, has been more than an hour. I have things I have to look after,” Joe nagged again.

“Don’t we all? We must wait; there is no way around it.”



Joe heavily sighed, walked back to the couch, and made himself comfortable in its corner again.

“I am not even sure why we’re all here. Are they going to arrest us or what?” Joe puffed out his worries.

“Don’t worry, they have more important things to do...the country is on fire and it smells really bad,” added Malkovich.

The office door was widely opened and the minister of internal affairs Jacobs entered the room.

“I am sorry, I am late,” he apologized, “the conversation with the Prime Minister took much longer than expected.”

Jacobs shifted his gaze to Joe, who was still seating on the couch and observing the rest of the group. Joe understood the look, and joined the rest at the round table.

“I don’t think there is a need to talk to you about what’s going on in the country, and how serious it may turn to be for us and for the people of course. I’d even say things are getting out of hands; the opposition is preparing for the new wave of protests with the possible use of weapons.”

“We are not politicians, Mr. Jacobs, are we?” Joe interrupted.

“True, however, if the residents from the suburbs join the crowd, we’ll be in a big trouble.”

“I understand,” Malkovich spoke out, “but we cannot force people to share our political views; they can follow any leader they choose.”

“Sure, we can, and we will,” Jacobs raised his voice, “otherwise, we’ll get in trouble, we’ll lose everything, and I mean everything.”

Malkovich didn’t respond; he just shifted his confused gaze to Aramian as if asking for help.

“Please, continue, Henry,” Aramian intentionally called Jacobs by his first name, “we are all ears.”

Jacobs cleared his throat and continued, “We all know that these uprising started in a peaceful manner, since it was initiated mainly by the students and intelligentsia. As you can see things are



changing, and we are going to deal with the suburban poor and angry immigrants from all over the country. They are quickly joining the army of the protestors, and soon there will be serious conflicts with the authorities and the police. We can't let the bloodshed happen, so the only way to avoid that is for you to restrain your dogs. Period."

Aramian lit his cigarette. "I can't guarantee my partners' success, but I promise to prevent any kind of uprisings in the area which is under my control."

"Sounds good to me. What about you guys?" Jacobs turned to Joe and Malkovich.

Malkovich hesitated, "I guess, I'll need some financial support, but I think I can handle it. I'll do it."

"I am with you," mumbled Joe, "I really have to go now. I have a lot on my plate."

"We're done. You are free to go. Alex, I need to talk to you in private. Can you spare a couple of minutes?"

"Sure," Aramian agreed.

When everybody left, Jacobs rushed into the conversation with Alex.

"You know Michael Morales, don't you?"

"Yes, I do, he was my childhood buddy."

"He leads all this crap you know that? The crook is quite powerful; the masses believe him and follow him. I have heard he is going to ask for help from you."

"He is not going to get anything from me. Nothing, I promise you."

"That's what I wanted to hear. Maybe you can talk him out of his stupid plans. Tell him he has no chance."

"I am sorry, but I am not going to do it. We don't interfere in each other's business."



“I understand, no problem,” Jacobs uttered and shook Alex’s hand.

“See you,” said Alex and left.

Even though Alex’s three-storey house was quite big and specious, the TV sounded too loud and disturbing early in the morning.

A bit irate, Alex came out of his bedroom and walked to the kitchen, absolutely unnoticed by Lilia, his only daughter, who was glued to the TV like never before. Carefully watching the live broadcast of the rapidly spreading protests, she seemed not to care about anything else in the world.

“Where is mom?” Alex started, “and good morning.”

“Hi, dad,” Lilia turned to dad, “mom had an appointment at the beauty salon. I think she had some kind of a charity meeting again; more of your money needs to be dispersed.”

“Yeah, I know, mom enjoys doing that. What are your plans for today?”

“Nothing much. There is no school because of the student protests, so I will probably go to the movies with Mary.”

“Great,” Alex smiled.

Lilia made herself comfy on the couch next to her dad.

“So, what do you think about all these,” she asked pointing on the news anchor on TV.

“That’s not of my concern.”

“What if I happened to be that student, who was strangled and killed?”

“You could never be that student because you are smart enough to understand that streets are not for political disputes.”

“And where is the place for those disputes?”

“In the offices, not on the streets,” Alex sounded firm.



“I disagree with you. People are tired of this government; they want a change.”

“They demand a new government and want to appoint people they don’t even know. They are ready for the self-sacrifice for the people they have no idea about.”

“So, you’re saying, people should just shut up and deal with this crap?” Lilia was getting impatient.

“They should use their brain, sweetie,” Alex calmly responded. “One should look out for his own good, you see. It sounds selfish, but that’s life.”

Lilia frowned and looked at Alex sideways.

“What about you, dad? I am a grown up, you know, and I know well how you make money.”

This wasn’t the first time that Lilia mentioned his business, and he always succeeded turning the conversation around and avoiding the subject. So, he tried to do the same again.

“I have my own beliefs and ways of conducting business. I follow my own rules. That’s all there is to it.”

“But I already know everything, or almost everything, and I don’t like it, dad. I really don’t.”

Alex nodded and lit his cigarette.

“Well, I don’t expect you to understand me, but I hope that I am not interfering with your success, dear. I will do everything for you to be happy and prosperous. Everything possible.”

Lilia kept quiet; she appreciated her dad’s genuine care and love for her. She felt apologetic and tried to say something, but Alex interrupted her.

“I have to go now. I’ll see you later. Stay safe, sweetie, okay?”

“Okay dad,” Lilia smiled and rushed out of the room.



The streets were glowing with the marching crowd, and most of the main streets were blocked for the upcoming traffic. Accompanied by his bodyguards, Alex arrived to his office two hours later than usual, and as soon as he stepped in, he was informed about a visitor.

“Michael Morales has been waiting for you for a while now,” Alex’s secretary reported.

“Invite him in,” Alex replied abruptly.

Michael rushed towards Alex and heavily sighed.

“So, he was right,” Alex blurted, staring at Michael.

“Maybe he was,” Michael answered, “maybe not, it depends who is that ‘he’.”

“Coffee, tea or?” Alex smiled, trying to ease the beginning of what seemed to be already a very heavy conversation.

“You,” Michael smirked, “I need you, Alex. I need your help.”

“I know, but there is nothing I can do.”

“Fine, fine. You’ve lost your vision then. You don’t see the agony of your beloved régime, do you? You really don’t see it, hah? Help me to give them a push, so we can breathe, Alex, breathe at last!”

“As smart as you are, at this point, do you think I can make any decisions on my own?”

“Of course, you can! I am sure you and your people have made a deal already. You can always withdraw, you know. Always. You have enough means to sustain your autonomy, and you know that better than I do.”

“I can’t, Mike, I won’t do it,” Alex sounded irritated.

“Fine. Let it be so. Your mob is the key to this rotten system, anyway. The corruption is spreading like cancer – you guys swallowed everything and everybody. The country is on a verge of the bloodshed. They need to realize that their time is over.”



“I am not a politician, Mike, and you know it well.”

“I am your friend, Alex.”

“It doesn’t matter. I can’t help you. I am sorry.”

“I see. Okay. Just don’t interfere with what I am trying to accomplish. The outskirts are ready to join the movement, do not impede it, Alex. Let the people decide what they want.”

Alex kept quite; he just gave his friend that look...the look of a definite “not gonna happen.”

“Nothing is forever, you know, not even your Kanavares, who has crudely destroyed our country.”

“Please...keep your speech for the crowds, I know it all. Good luck, Mike. Be safe.”

“Thank you,” Michael blurted abruptly and hurried out.

The taxi stopped near the central park; almost all the streets were blocked by the demonstrators. In spite of a tiring, long ride, Lilia was quite excited to be in the middle of the action. She paid the taxi-driver and rushed out to join the protestors. Soon, she was lost in the crowd, observing how groups of students were discussing the current events and planning their future activities. Observing the surroundings with sweet curiosity, she noticed a chain of the police cars and buses, transporting the local armed forces. Soon, she heard the announcement made by one of the police officers, who ordered the crowd to step aside from the main street and let the emergency vans drive through. In response to police request, the students whistled, hollered in protest, and refused to free the streets. As the conflict elevated, the police began to look for the alternative ways to solve the problem. In no time, the tear gas was used to disperse the demonstrators. The security forces were determined to cease the protest movement with brute force, so they strangled a couple of students with using rubber clubs. Several protesters severely injured by gas canisters fired into crowds.

Lilia was shocked: she covered her mouth with a scarf and was coughing her lungs out. All lost in a crowd, she felt a heavy kick in her back, a smash on her head, and fell unconscious in a second.



Everything around was floating in some unknown direction. Lilia made an effort to speak, but couldn't. Her whole body felt paralyzed; even her breathing became a challenge.

A garish voice of a man awakened Lilia's senses.

"You bastards, you'll regret this, bloody bastards!" the voice was screaming in desperation.

"You, be quiet, idiot!" another voice responded.

Lilia made an effort to open her eyes; through the grey blur in her head, she traced a silhouette of a young man's body drenched in blood and being dragged by the police officer out of the office."

Then she noticed three other police officers who approached her and observed her face for a minute. One of them sloppily blurted, "Why is she here? Take her to the isolator now."

Two of the officers looked at each other, then at Lilia. The tall one suggested, "We can have some fun with her, she is pretty, isn't she?"

"Can't you see, she is unconscious," the short one replied.

"Yeah, yeah, even better. I don't know about you, but I am not missing this piece of ass. My wife is pregnant and fussy. I am banging her."

"I don't know, man, it's dangerous," the short one sounded concerned.

"You stand by the door, when I am done, you can do her. I will watch the door for you. Deal?"

"Fine," the short one sighed and locked the door.

Lilia forced a breath to say something, but alas. She couldn't speak and was helpless as a kitten. She felt the foul-smelling officer's face and the body hanging upon her, but couldn't move to resist anything. It seemed that her body was out of her control, and she closed her eyes wishing to die.

All done and satisfied, the tall one decided to check Lilia's pockets - just being curious. Nothing turned to be of an importance, but Lilia's latest and a very pricy smart-phone made him open her picture gallery and browse it.



“Hey, buddy, I am waiting here, what’s up,” the voice of the short one sounded distressed.

The tall one came out of the room and anxiously whispered, “Hey-hey, look at this. Look!” He handed the phone to his friends and they started looking at Lilia’s pictures.

“Shit!” the short one exclaimed, Let’s go and talk to her.”

They went into the room, and the tall one rushed to Lilia.

“Is this your dad?” he asked all nervous.

Lilia has nodded.

“Oh my God,” the tall one blurted, “we are dead, man. I mean it, we are dead.”

“Not we, but you. I haven’t done anything; I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s not going to make a difference for Aramian. He will burry us alive, period. We have to do something about this. We must.”

“Do what? Kill her?” the short one blurted.

“Not a bad idea. Look outside, it is crazy out there. No one will know if we just throw her out of this window. I am serious. They’ll think, she wanted to escape, fell down and just died. Can happen, man, why not?”

“Shut up! Fine, whatever. We have no choice; we’re dead anyway. Lift her legs, I’ll do the top. Come on, move. We can’t wait.”

Lilia still couldn’t move; in her mind, she called for her dad to help her, but...the officers threw her out the window, and she landed on the grass area, near the pavement.

Aramian was in his car, when he heard the terrible news about his beloved daughter. He was informed that Lilia had multiple injuries and was in a critical condition in the nearby hospital.



Doctors were rushing to start the surgery, when Alex arrived; the feeling of guilt, desperation, and fear he felt, was overwhelming and loud. Doctors advised to wait a while before he could see Lilia; she was diagnosed with fractured skull, which caused an internal bleeding and the possible damage to the brain tissue. Broken and devastated, Alex couldn't stand his own self; he wanted to cry his pain out, but his tears had frozen in his throat like icicles on the edges of the cave. The feeling of guilt had swollen his whole existence, and he slowly sank into his own humiliation. Lilia, sweetheart.

A young man in his early twenties approached Alex and calmly uttered, "Okay, here is the deal. It happened in the second police station. There are witnesses who saw how she was thrown out the window of the third floor by the police officers."

For a moment, Alex stared at his assistant, trying to comprehend what he was saying.

"Find them. Find them immediately. Make sure they don't get to see the sunrise tomorrow. All of them, with no exception. Did you hear me?" Alex shrieked.

It didn't take much time until the news about the incident with Lilia had exploded the media. A large group of the protestors surrounded the second police station, demanding the fair trial for the criminal police officers. The serious warnings were coming from the main offices of the police station about the possible use of armed forces to suppress the conflict. However, Aramian's private security forces quickly fenced the building.

The chaos was swelling with every minute. When the first gunshot was fired in the center of the police station, the protestors understood what was going on and left the streets as soon as they could. The security forces entered the building and the sound of the gunshots echoed everywhere.

Another explosion of media took place after the blockade of the police station. Everybody was talking about the death of fifteen police officers as a result of Aramian's security forces conflict with the police. Alex meanwhile had cemented himself to the hospital chair, waiting for the doctor's permission



to see Lilia. After the last news report has finished, he called his assistant and asked him to come to the hospital again.

“Here is what I want you to do. Get in touch with Joe and Malkovich as soon as possible and let them know that I am out. Just tell them, I am out of the game. Screw these crooks with their fucked up regime! Tell them, we’re joining the crowd; all my people will follow me - every one of them, you hear me? Tell them that,” Alex commanded.

Meanwhile the protestors were getting angrier and more determined. Many of them walked on the streets with arms and shotguns. That night, despite the curfew, the City Hall was attacked and stormed by the armed demonstrators.

The next day, the Prime Minister of the country Mathew Kanavares stepped down and resigned. In only two months the elections of the new Prime Minister were going to take place.

Michael Morales was the only candidate for the post of the Prime Minister that stood a chance to win the elections and become the new Prime Minister. One big chunk of information was interfering with his future success: his friendship with Alex Aramian, a well-known mafioso, who controlled several suburbs and a few big financial establishments. The newscasts eagerly highlighted that only after Aramian with his people and the other mob front-runners had joined the movement, the real action took place, and the revolution happened. Hence, the ruling elite was still in control even after the revolution. Morales had also promised to investigate the incident involving the shootings in the police station. None of these worked in his favor. None.

In a couple of days Morales asked Alex for a private meeting somewhere peaceful, away from the city and the media. Alex agreed, and they met at the country house. Per Michael’s request, Alex had only one bodyguard with him, and told him to wait for him in his car. So, the two friends met in a cozy guestroom and started a long-awaited conversation.

“How is Lilia?” Morales started.



“She is better, thank God. I am sending her to Switzerland to continue her treatment. They say they have the best rehabilitation centers out there.”

“Great! I am glad she is recovering. Poor kid,” Morales sounded sympathetic.

“How are you, our future Prime Minister?” Alex smirked, “you’ve got it your way, haven’t you?”

“Both of us know well that it couldn’t have happened without your support, Alex. Now you are personally interested in our victory. I wish that wasn’t the case; I truly wish you had understood the situation before the incident with Lilia. But no, you had to pay the highest price for it, why?” Morales uttered anxiously.

“Why did you call me here, Michael, why?” Alex turned anxious, “I won’t interfere with your business, don’t worry. I will stay away from you, I promise. No one will know about my support, no media, no one. Just don’t mention my daughter’s name again, just don’t, okay?”

Michel kept quiet – that look. In a moment, he stood up, emptied the glass of whiskey, and oddly looked at Alex.

“I am sorry, Alex,” he whispered.

“You are? Why?” Alex asked, then suddenly understood what was going to happen next. He hollered, “You fuckin’ bastard...” Alex didn’t get to finish his sentence; when the man from his back silently put a bullet through his head. The blood spurted right into Michael’s face and Alex’s heavy body fell onto his feet.

The media blasted with the news about the hitman murdering a well-known mafioso Alex Aramian. Michael Morales’s emotional speech about the terrible crime committed in the midst of the revolution, became the most popular speech of the time. He proudly stated that Alex was his childhood friend, but had always refused to take part in the political life of the country. He haughtily promised that when elected as a Prime Minister, he would decriminalize illegal groups and provide safety for the country residents.



As expected, Michael Morales won the elections and became the elect Prime Minister of the country. However, he failed to see his ideas come alive, because on the day of his inauguration, he was assassinated by the hitman. The hitman was the leader of Aramian's safeguard militia.



CHAMELEON

“I did not expect him. He promised, he’d stop visiting me, but he had failed to keep his promise as always. When I heard his footsteps in the hallway, I literally sprung in my bed; I got anxious and nervous waiting for the upcoming conversation. He looked different: his typical grin has disappeared, but the strain on his face looked rather alarming. His jaw muscles have clinched together with an enormous tension. For only a second, the streetlight pierced through my window, unshadowing his entire face - just terrifying! Those eyes - so much pain and hatred in them. I wanted to say something, but...no need. I knew him too well to interrupt the silence. I knew him better than I knew myself; he would not hurt me. No. For a few seconds, he stood by the bedroom door and stared at the wall. I cautiously followed his gaze and felt the blues – the wildness in his eyes, that flaming stare of his! I will never forget. It seemed that he was ready to burn his past with those eyes - his grief, his troubles, his worries, his sufferings. And that was the payoff time. Jake has finished and sighed, “I don’t think you are listening to me, doctor.” Jake was lying down on the couch; slowly he opened his eyes and looked at doctor Morada, who appeared to him kind of lost and off the subject.

“You are not listening to me, are you?” Jake insisted.

“Of course, I do. Very carefully, Jake. I always attend to you with great curiosity.”

“Are you recording this?”

“Yes, I do; all the sessions with my patients are recorded. You may continue, Jake.”

Jake made himself comfortable again and uttered, “yeah, so he, hmm, shortly, he sat on the edge of my bed, didn’t even look at me. I don’t think he actually saw me.”

“Did that surprise you?” Morada asked.

“Not really. I was rather scared, for I didn’t know what to expect from him this time. Could be he really didn’t see me, yah, could be.”

“How is it possible? You were physically there, correct?”

“Why don’t you tell me, doctor? You hear me?”

“I told you I hear you,” Morada was getting aggravated.



“You’re listening to me speaking, but you don’t hear me at all. Your mind is busy with something else. Just busy.”

“Analyzing me?” Morada smirked.

“Hah, you sounded exactly like him,” Jake sneered.

“And how you react, when he talks like that, you go on talking or just keep quiet?”

“He is Michael. His name is Michael.”

“Good to know,” Morada smirked again, “and did you name him Michael, or he picked his name?”

“He introduced himself as Michael,” Jake calmly uttered.

“I see. And...and what makes you think I don’t hear you?”

“Great, you’re finally responding.”

“If that could be of any help to you, my pleasure.” Morada kindly smiled.

“Last night Doctor Morada and his wife Katherine Morada were present at the charity fundraising event organized by a renowned Bill Santosi. The following incident resulted in police visit and the arrest of one of the guests of the event. Doctor Morada got into a severe argument with the above-mentioned guest, because the young man had asked Dr. Morada’s wife to have a dance with him.”

After careful observation of Jake’s rushing lips, Morada uttered, “Quoting the yellow press? I really appreciate your keen interest toward my person, but trust me, it’s not going to help your case, Jake. It’s pointless.”

“I have a question though. You like to be the one, don’t you?”

“What do you mean?” Morada asked.

“The guy strangled by you is in jail. You’re free. The law works in your favor, so you are the winner in the game.”

Morada felt uneasy; he wanted to understand the reason Jake chose that particular topic for their conversation.

“Are you willing to discuss this subject for the whole session?”

“If you don’t mind, doctor. You said that your responses...”

“Fine, Jake, we’ll go your way,” Morada sounded calm. “So, the young man was absolutely drunk and silly. He kept flirting with other men’s women and acting foolishly. After I talked to him about his



annoying behavior in person, he kept pushing it and pushing it. Shortly, I got busy with one of my colleagues, so he suddenly approached my wife again and started dragging her to the dance floor. Instead of complying with me, he started pushing me with all his strengths and yelling at me. I had to defend myself; I had no choice. Are you satisfied with my response, Jake?”

“Well, you seem to contradict yourself doctor.” Jake sounded relaxed. He moved a little forward and crossed his legs, mimicking Morada.

Noticing Jake’s emulating moves, Morada acted cool.

“And at what point do I contradict myself?” he slurred.

“You said ‘complying with me’ and ‘defending myself’. Those are kind of opposite notions, aren’t they?”

“I’d agree. I guess just a slip of the tongue.”

“But what did you really mean? Obeying you or defending yourself?”

Doctor Morada got aggravated; the questioning was getting immense.

“The subject is closed for further discussion.”

“But why? Just think of me as someone very close to you, and talk to me, doctor, open up, why not?” Jake added calmly.

“Well, I really like you Jake, but please remember where you are.”

“I certainly do, doctor.”

“Then you should understand that your condition of multiple personality disorder is to be treated with an adequate support and cooperation.”

“No need to mention my condition, doctor. I am aware of it.”

“Of course, you are. I didn’t mean to point out any of that, I just wanted to make sure you realize that I am here to give you professional care and nothing less than that. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Yes, I do. I do mind it, doctor,” Jake replied abruptly.

A little surprised by Jake’s response, Morada put on a face of triviality, thought of the way to end the session earlier than usual, and meekly looked at the clock.

“Recently, I read somewhere that the therapy sessions involving the close discussions between the patient and the therapist can develop mutual trust. Would you agree?”



“If you think I’m going to discuss my personal life with you to gain your trust, you’re mistaken. I am not going to disclose any secrets of mine whatsoever,” Morada said firmly.

“Then let’s talk about things that are not in a category of secrets,” Jake suggested.

“Like what?”

“Like about human emotions...let’s say how does a man feel at the moment of committing a murder.”

The elevating discomfort was getting to Morada’s throat.

“Why would I know the answer to that question?”

“Because you are a highly qualified professional, doctor.”

“Why murder? Did you discuss that with Michael before?”

“No. He told me not to trust anyone.”

“You can trust me, Jake.”

Jake gave Morada a look, and confidently stated, “Michael said the trust should be mutual.”

“Is he here right now?”

“Do you think he is?” Jake grinned.

Silently, Morada took a glass-ball off the table and began playing with it. He bounced it back and forth, then squeezed it in his left hand.

Jake gave Morada that look again and asked, “Are you trying to hypnotize me?”

“No. I’d like to talk to Michael.”

“I’ve told you; he doesn’t trust you, doctor.”

“Four weeks ago, when you started with me, you didn’t trust me either, did you, Jake? You know well, that trust is earned, so...”

“Yes, but Michael is different. He sees people through, and you can’t hide anything from him.”

“Just tell Michael all we have to do is just to get to know each other, no need to become friends.”

Jake stared at the floor for a moment, then he rubbed his hands together, as if focusing on the subject. Morada observed him carefully.

“Fine, let it be your way,” Jake agreed, “but make sure you don’t talk to him about my condition. Michael will take it as a weakness of yours, and he hates weak people.”



“I promise,” Morada stated firmly.

“I hope, you keep your word, doctor, I really do,” said Jake, paused for a second, and got up off his chair. He slowly approached the wall across the room, leaned his forehead towards it and began whispering something in a very enigmatic tone. Morada strained his attention, trying to understand Jake’s words. Suddenly, Jake turned around and stared at Morada with a different look. In no time, Morada understood everything. Those eyes, fiery and blazing with dignity and confidence.

“Hello, Michael, welcome. Please take a seat,” Morada suggested calmly.

Jake made himself comfortable on the couch and scanned the room with the curious irony. Morada’s certificates and licenses were proudly displayed on the freshly painted gray wall.

“I think you have a lack of confidence, Bruce. I hope you don’t mind me calling you by your first name,” Jake articulated.

“I don’t, and by the way, those credentials are just to impress my patients, that’s all.”

“Gaining their trust, I guess. Not me; I still don’t trust you.”

“No worries,” Morada replied.

“Really? Then our conversation is useless,” Jake sounded wound up.

“If it was useless, you wouldn’t be here, Michael,” Morada replied.

Jake’s intense stare at Morada seemed rather lengthy.

“Can’t play those primitive psych-games with me, doctor,” he finally uttered.

“I just want to help you, Michael.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“What about Jake?”

“Jake is simply a weak-minded guy. He is certainly an exceptional man, but he is scared to death of his own shadow.”

“And what is so unique about him?”

“Did he tell you about his dog?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“His name was Rex; it was his birthday gift as he turned five. He was very attached to his dog. Rex became Jake’s only real friend.”



Jake's voice broke, so he cleared his throat and continued. "Jake's dad was an awful man. He could care less about his son, his family, pets – he hated all, even his deceased wife. So once, Jake heard his buddy Rex crying, and I mean barking and crying badly. When he rushed out of the house, he saw his dad beating up Rex with the baseball bat. When Jake got in between them to save Rex, he got beaten down by the same baseball bat. Imagine that, Bruce. Just like that. Just picture it."

Jake's voice has changed: it became rough and inert. After a short brake, he asked, "Have you ever heard how dogs cry?"

"No, I haven't. There is scientific evidence that animals can go through emotional experiences."

"They do cry, Bruce. Jake witnessed Rex crying his pain out."

"Were you with him at that time?"

"Yes, I was, but Jake didn't know about my presence yet. I watched him weep, hugging Rex."

"What about you? Were you hurt, too?"

"No, not at all. I actually enjoyed it."

"Really? You're saying you enjoyed that terrible scene?"

"I could have interfered, and make Jake call for help or call 911, but I didn't. At that moment, I realized how powerful I was! No one controlled the situation, but me, and I loved it."

Morada grew edgy. Suddenly, he realized that he had squeezed his fingers into a very tight and painful bunch. Slowly releasing them, he stayed in a state of shock for a quite a while. Throughout years of work, he has seen few patients diagnosed with multiple personality disorder, but this one was a true exception – an ocean of difference between Jake and Michael.

"What happened then, Michael?" he asked.

"For two days Jake was feeding him, sleeping near him, doing everything possible to save Rex's life. He died in 2 days, and Jake cried for days in despair. He fell into a deep depression; he wanted to end his life. Yes. It was the right time for me to step in, and I did."

"Did you get to help him?"

"Well, for a while he refused to know me, but later, he realized that he can actually trust me, so he did."

"How did you gain his trust?"



Jake smirked, “Ah, you should have known that by now, doctor. You are an intelligent man, aren’t you?”

“Jake’s father?” Morada asked cautiously.

“Of course, damn it. I did it! I am sure he has told you about his house getting on fire...with his dad inside the house.”

“Yes, he told me his father was caught in a fire and passed away.”

“True, but he probably missed out the main fact: I tied his dad’s hands and feet before I threw a burning cigarette into his bed...while the bastard was asleep,” Jake grinned. “Yes, I did it, and I am glad I did.”

“It is a murder, Michael.”

“Is it?” Michael viciously sneered and added, “So would you like to call the police and tell on me? Before they come though, I won’t be here anymore, and Jake, he won’t tell them anything.”

Doctor felt nervous again; he got the glass ball into his hands again. Jake’s alter ego has transformed his overall perception of the situation, and he needed to concentrate on his further actions.

“How did the murder impact Jake?” Morada asked carefully.

“Again Jake? What do you want from Jake? Leave him alone, will you?”

“Why? What’s the matter?”

“I don’t want to talk about him anymore. I told you already he is just this fragile crook. Leave him alone.” All irritated, Jake hopped out of his seat, “I could see his excitement and vigor with every murder we committed, but guess what, later on, he would act like just a sissy boy, as if he had nothing to do with it.”

“Did I hear you right? Did you say victims?”

“The conversation is over," Michael blurted quickly," I have to go."

“Please, wait Michael, we have to talk. Jake has never told me about the murders. I don't think he is capable of it."

“Cause you can’t think out of the box, just like everyone else."

“You think so?"



"You assume that Jake is a victim, but you need to go beyond that. Let him reveal the depth of his psyche and you'll see his true self."

"I am sorry, but I don't believe you," uttered Morada, while taking some notes. "I just don't."

Jake kept quiet; he idly rubbed his chin.

"Have you heard about the "Chameleon"? I am sure you did," Jake spoke again.

Suddenly, Morada froze. He seemed to metamorphose into something dark and heavy.

"Are you talking about the serial killer, who murdered more than twelve women?"

"Yes, the media calls him a chameleon, cause of that chameleon charm he leaves on his victims."

Morada cleared his throat. "Hmm, yeah, yeah, I've read about it, but what does that have to do with Jake?"

"Don't play dumb, Bruce. You know it well, and if you don't, I'll tell you, since this is our last meeting."

"I am all ears, Michael," Morada articulated in a very tense voice.

"Jack and chameleon are the same people."

Morada's effort to keep calm failed. His hysterical laughter filled the room.

"Oh, my...I was close to believe you, Michael, so close," Morada continued chuckling.

"I didn't expect such a reaction from you, Bruce, but I am actually serious about what I said. I never lie, it's Jake who does. Besides, I can prove it to you."

"You can? How?" Morada was still laughing.

"You ask me anything about each victim, and I will tell you the details. And I mean the real details. Like for example how Jake and I followed them, got hold of them, killed them."

"That's nothing. Today's media is quite loud and clear about those serial killings. Anyone who is interested may get access to that information easily."

"You seem to be one of the fans of chameleon, aren't you?"

"Not really. From the professional point of view, yes. In fact, I assisted the police department to make a killer's psych-profile."

"Is that why you exclude Jake from the possibility of being one?"

"That too," Morada responded.



“Okay then you just made things easier for me.”

“What do you mean, Michael?” Morada asked, carefully observing Michael’s body language.

“You said you assisted the police, so most likely you know more, than anyone else, true?”

“Possibly. However, I am not going to reveal any of that information. It’s confidential.”

“No need to tell me anything. I know it all. For instance, the number of the murders is not twelve, but thirteen, and the reason the last one wasn’t credited to the chameleon is because the little charm he’d always leave was not at the murder scene. It was stolen and sold on EBay by one of the reporters.”

“Oh yeah? How do you know all that?”

“I just told you that Jake is a serial killer, or Jake and I are serial killers.”

“It’s impossible. I don’t understand why you’re blaming Jake, I don’t understand it.”

“Ugh, aren’t you one stubborn human being, Bruce! You keep thinking of Jake as a victim, you need to stop that. Believe it or not, he enjoys killing people, especially, when I am with him. The first two murders, he just watched, but later...oh, man, he just gets a kick out of it.”

Suddenly, Morada got a dancing eye; he got extremely panicky, and put his wet fingers into a shaking bunch, again.

“You need to stop, Michael, and I mean it! You are a shameless liar! I don’t want to hear your voice anymore!” Morada shrieked.

Jake didn’t respond. He turned to the window and indifferently gazed at it for a few seconds.

“I know what’s best for Jake, doctor. He should turn himself in. Now. You failed to help him, so I am doing it instead. Jake’s confession will solve all the problems. He will finally free himself from the trap he is in and will get to appreciate his unique self.”

Coming out hostilely, Morada raised his voice again. “Listen to me, Michael. Every murder chameleon committed is a unique piece of art. Killing and the violence are only the trivial parts of the whole thing. You or Jake, you people can’t even go close to grasping the ‘chameleon’ phenomena, so shut up!”

Indifferently observing blazing Morada, Jake said, “You’re just an ordinary human being, Bruce, and the human error is for you, too. You miscalculated Jake, yes you did, so what? Just accept it. His confession will end this chaos, trust me on that.”



“No, never. I will never let you blame Jake in something he’s never done!” Morada’s voice was getting croaky.

“Jake is the chameleon. Period. He is going to the police station right now.”

“Fine!” Morada yelled again, “it’s over. I can’t let it happen. I can’t share my name with anyone else. I don’t want to. It’s mine, and only mine, you hear me, Michael?”

“What is yours, doctor?” Jake calmly played his hand.

“Chameleon. That’s my name, and no one else can claim it. No one.”

Jake quickly looked at the tape recorder on the doctor’s desk.

“Yeah, yeah, the recorder is on, but I’ll delete everything before you know it. No one will believe you, and you know why, don’t you?”

Jake got close to Morada and quickly reached for his FBI identification card.

“They will, Bruce. I am Rob Nashville, FBI.”

Dry silence. Those frozen hands and lips. He has never had a single glitch... all these years. Never. How could this be happening to him? How?

“Sit down, Bruce, we still have some time before they arrest you,” Nashville ordered. “A couple of years ago, we added your name in our list of suspects, when we found an incidental connection between you and the second and the tenth victim. One of your patients was the brother of Sara Parker, your second victim; your sixth victim, Jessica Stone, was your intern a few years ago. I have to give you the credit - your performance was incredible! When you began helping the investigation, I was the only one insisting to keep you on a file. My colleagues were sure you were innocent, but I didn’t let you go. And at that very moment, we all heard about another murder.” Nashville smacked his lips.

“Melanie Kunis?” uneasily uttered Morada.

“Yes. We still had no evidence against you, but I knew a chameleon would not kill for no reason; he must have followed her, got to know and enjoyed her ways, her habits, friends, everything. So, I followed Melanie myself, and I did a pretty good job, I think. I looked for any possible connection between you and her, looked everywhere, but there was nothing, and I mean nothing. You are good, Bruce. Very good,” Nashville concluded.

Morada awkwardly looked down, then sharply turned to the wall behind and sighed.



“Yes,” Nashville continued, “you did follow her, but you did it very cautiously; in the supermarkets, on the streets, on her way to work. But hey, we still did not have any valid evidence against you, which made me think of more creative ways to get you in my trap. I pretended to be your patient and you know the rest, doctor,” Nashville smirked. “It took me a couple of months of intense training in the psychiatric institution. I closely observed a few patients with DID. I learned a lot Bruce; I mean a lot. The serial killers are not just criminals. There is more to their crooked mind, much more than one can imagine. I tried to look through your thinking process and understand at what point your mind moved into the concrete action of killing the victim. It wasn’t easy, you know, but I did it,” Nashville uttered and frowned.

“I can see it, sir. No kidding. You are as brilliant as I am.”

“Oh, I don’t need your evaluation at all, Bruce. Keep your compliments for your future cellmates.”

Briskly, Nashville approached Morada, rushed his hand to his chest and pulled his shirt open. Rapidly grabbing his necklace with the chameleon charm on it, Nashville uttered, “You’re not going to need this anymore, Bruce.” Then, turning to the exit door he loudly voiced, “You may come in now, please!”

Shortly, a few FBI agents entered the office, handcuffed Morada, and accompanied him out of the office.

A grey dullness embraced Nashville’s heart. He felt kind of lonely and vain. “I’ll miss you Jake,” he muttered and laid down on the soft and comfortable couch. Jake’s couch.



THE SECRET

It has been more than two hours since John Liberski, a popular journalist of “Financial Times”, was trying his best to pull the answers from Alex Freedom, the president of one of the most successful banks in the country - Alex Bank or ‘AB’.

Mr. Freedom’s office was a luxury one, right in the center of New York City, with the beautiful view and comfortable setting.

Liberski was feeling uneasy - his multiple attempts to find out the president’s well-kept secret were not going exactly well.

During the nationwide financial crisis, Alex Bank has managed to not only maintain its funds, but it has significantly upturned its assets, while other banks went merely bankrupt. It has been only a year-and- a-half since the financial crisis hit the country. Back then, most people have failed to make their loan or mortgage payments on time; the inflation has turned out to be rather substantial and burdensome for almost all financial institutions; for all – but interestingly not for the Alex Bank and a few other financial establishments that have succeeded to keep their business running.

There would be nothing peculiar about ‘AB’, if not for the fact, that it turned to be the only financial body, which did not borrow any money from the government. Nor it had dealt with the financial giants such as oil corporations or ET firms; it did not invest in new profitable projects or charity funding. No help whatsoever.

John Liberski was sweating. He was desperately trying to make Alex to honestly reflect on his inquiry about the true secret of his bank’s success in such difficult for the country times.

“We were just smart enough to avoid any kind of operations that could involve an evident financial risk. We acted extremely cautious about selling our stocks and did not want to endanger our reputation and the stability.”



Liberski was sharp enough not to settle for that kind of an answer, so he did not.

“Please, listen to me carefully, I will...” Alex was getting impatient. “You’re not going to leave me alone, are you?”

“Not really, Mr. Freedom. If you keep repeating what I already know, I may try to find out more about this matter from other sources. In fact, I will get to it, as soon as I leave here. So, you may choose to open up to me and tell me about that magic wand you used a couple of years ago.” John loosely beamed and continued, “what do you say, Mr. Freedom?”

“A magic wand you said, hah. I like that! The magic wand...how mysterious and romantic!” Alex giggled full- heartedly.

“Well,” John got serious, “there is nothing else I can think of. Might be the money laundry, but I strongly doubt it. What else? What else?”

Suddenly, Alex got up and carefully eyed Liberski. “Fine, I will tell you my secret, but there is one condition, and there is no way around it.”

“I think I know it. You don’t want me to publish it, right?”

“Oh no, you are free to publish whatever. But you might choose not to do that after all.”

“And why would I want to skip on such an exquisite material?”

“A good question.” Alex shrewdly smiled and went on. “What about you, sir?”

“What about me?”

“You have a secret you want to share with me? A secret that only you and no one else knows about.”

“I probably do. Yes, I do. Perhaps, I do.” John started sweating again.

“Mr. Liberski,” Alex sounded edgy, “you obviously are not quite serious about this, so we should stop this conversation right now and you can go on your merry way.”



Liberski froze. “Mr. Freedom, I am very sorry I left an impression of a silly man. I am just lost; I cannot figure out where you are going with this. It sounds like a game to me, but...”

“But what? What is wrong with playing a game? Don’t you do it all the time? You are a reporter, aren’t you? Listen, there is nothing complicated about the rules of this game – you tell me your secret, I will tell you mine. Period.”

Liberski grew curious; he had all kinds of experiences being a reporter for one of the major publications in the country, but the game offered by Alex seemed to be an exceptional one.

“Okay, I agree. You want to hear my secret. I am ready,” Liberski suggested.

Alex sloppily smirked and slowly walked towards the back window.

“Anything funny?” Liberski asked.

“Nothing much. I just forgot to warn you, that your secret needs a real proof, a true evidence, yeah; just want to make sure you did not make it up. Otherwise, I won’t take it.”

Liberski looked confused. “How can I prove a secret; the reason it’s called a ‘secret’ cause no one besides me knows about it. I keep no witnesses for my secrets, Mr. Freedom.”

“Ah, come on, John, you know you can do it, you are a smart cookie, aren’t you? Let’s do this: you go home, think about what I just said, come back tomorrow morning and tell me your secret.”

Silence. Heavy breathing. No. Liberski was not thinking. Not at all. He just felt somewhat tangled in his brain, to the point of screaming his lungs out and running away from Alex’s office.

Quite coldly Alex continued, “If you are not interested, let’s just leave it at this point. Maybe next lifetime.” He took a quick step forward to shake Liberski’s hand.

“I don’t think so. I am taking your call. I will be here tomorrow morning with your request, sir. I promise. Have a good night, Mr. Freedom.”



On his way home, John Liberski felt the ground in his throat. He has been tough a lot in his career; he has interviewed many financial celebrities before, but this 'Freedom' phenomenon was a unique one. The game he got into was becoming rather attractive, and his curiosity was climbing up to his chest with every breath he took. The thought hammering was getting unbearable: "What's on your mind, Alex? What are you going to do with my secret? Publish it, make it known to my friends, my family, my boss... okay, I may lose some money, maybe my career, but what is there for you? You crook. Wanna embarrass my ass, humiliate me, laugh at me, make a fool of me? I don't think so, Alex, I don't think so."

Next morning Liberski spent more than two hours in the fancy waiting room of Alex Freedom. Getting anxious and impatient, he looked around and thought of all the things he could've accomplished in those two hours. Shortly, the hefty doors of Alex's office opened up and Tom Robertson, a senior Vice-Minister of Finance, walked out of his office.

"There we go," thought Liberski, "that's how we get the government support and money. A few cool smiles, that's all you need, and you're no exception, Alex."

Noticing Liberski's silhouette through the doorway, Alex immediately invited him in.

"Are you thinking, what I am thinking?" he started.

"Perhaps, I do."

"Mr. Robertson is my client, just like any other - a valuable asset to our bank clientele. Anyway, I am all ears John, can't wait to hear your secret. I am sure, you can't wait to reveal it to me too hah?" Alex's eclectic smile released the overall tension in a room.

"Well, hmm, yes...I'm seeing this girl on a side, I have a mistress, has been a while now."

"Okay, kid, you are wasting my time."



“I just told you my secret; I don’t know what else you want me to say?”

“Yes, you do. Sure, you do. You left your wife two months ago, so having a girlfriend is more than acceptable. Anything else?”

“How did you find out about that? We are not even divorced yet.”

“Simple - social media, Facebook, Instagram, your ex’s funny comments about you, cowardly leaving her, cheating on her, just being a dog. So yeah, that’s all. So good luck, Mr. Liberski, I wish you the best.”

Liberski paused, cleared his throat and uttered, “You really want to know my secret?”

“Well, not really. Only if you want to know mine.”

“Fine. Just a little warning, Mr. Freedom. If this just happen to be a game in order to make a fool of me, I won’t have it that way. I will make sure things get really bitter for you too.”

“Aha, you are finally being honest with me. I like that John, go on.”

As soon as Liberski realized that he was going to tell the truth, he made a genuine effort not to walk out from Alex’s office. All a nervous wreck, his voice trembled.

“I guess, you have heard about two giant pharmaceutical corporations joining each other. I am talking about BSG and Medical TC.”

“Sure, I know them well. There was a big scandal, I believe, about the release of some secret documentation that had to do with the BSG forging its asset and falsely skyjacking its value, right?”

“Right. And the evidence for that scam was published in “Financial Times.” Now you can guess, who has put out the entire material for the article out there. I got paid quite generously to do that, Mr. Freedom.”

“How much?”

“Twenty grand.”



“And can you prove it to me?”

“Of course, I can.” Liberski was getting impatient. “Listen, I just told you something that could put an end to my career, get me locked up, fuck me up forever, you see what I’m saying?”

“I do. Tomorrow, not today, I will tell you my secret tomorrow, okay?”

“Again?! Why tomorrow? I am here now, why not now?”

“I have my reasons. Let’s have a late dinner together at eight in ‘Astoria.’ You know where that restaurant is?”

“I do, but why tomorrow? I’d prefer to have my article ready as soon as possible, it has been long overdue, I must publish it!”

“That’s the best I could do for you, John. I will see you tomorrow at eight. I’ve got to go now. Take care.”

Next evening, they were leisurely chatting and enjoying an exquisite bottle of red wine at ‘Astoria.’

“How do you like the wine, John?” Alex opened up the conversation.

“To be honest, I don’t care much for wine, but it tastes awesome. I hope, our discussion will end up being an awesome one, too.”

“It will, no worries.”

“Do you mind if I record my interview?” Liberski took out his tiny recording device and put it on the table.

“Go ahead; it’s your call, do whatever you want.”

Liberski looked surprised. “Really? Hmm, so the very first time you thought I could’ve published your secret information, but now, that you know my secret, you have the...”

“Don’t worry,” Alex interrupted, “No one will know anything about your dark side. You’re safe.”



“And you always keep your word?”

“Always.”

Liberski nodded and turned on the recorder.

“Let’s start then,” he uttered. “Mr. Freedom, you are one of the most successful and influential businessmen in today’s financial world. What’s the secret?”

“The secret. Mr. Liberski, why did you tell me your secret? I guess, you needed something in exchange, didn’t you?”

Liberski’s eyes widened and he sluggishly garbled, “Hmm, yeah, of course, I guess so.”

“People, who don’t want to go through the long-lasting process of a background check and the financial approval, come to me and I welcome them with all my heart. I trust them, just as you trusted me with your secret, and things just roll on. That’s all.”

“Interesting. Is it legal to skip checking people’s credit history and so on?”

“Absolutely. It is the bank’s decision whether it wants to put its clientele through the extensive verification process or avoid the hassle. We do reserve the right to go a different route if we want to, so I do what I do, and you see the results.”

“And what do you exactly do, Mr. Freedom? Do your customers pay you back their loans on time and in full just like that? Just because you trusted them?”

“Certainly. No exception. Has been years now, can’t complain.”

“But how is it possible?”

“Simple. They lend their secrets to me and get my support in exchange. Fair enough, isn’t it?”

“Enough?” Liberski looked stunned, but went on, “I’d say yes. However, just to make sure, I understood you correctly, Mr. Freedom. You keep your clients happy, by keeping their secrets and loaning them money in exchange?”



“Exactly, Mr. Liberski. In case they don’t pay off their debts, I am free to do anything I want with their confidentiality: I may sell it, publish it, broadcast it, exchange it, you name it, and that is per our legal contract. You can call it a mutual appreciation agreement. It works miracles as you can see.”

Alex smirked, leisurely sipped his wine and added, “One more thing: the secret should be valid. Very important. I won’t take anything with no evidence.”

“Whoa! That’s just brilliant, Mr. Freedom, just splendid! I am impressed!”

“Indeed, Mr. Liberski, indeed. That idea came to my mind out of blue, just like anything worthy is born by a pure chance. And it works perfectly. Sure, there is a hitch to it, like to everything else in this world. Practicing ‘trust’ for a while, I’ve been exposed to so much crap about the rich and the famous, that it made me sad. And I mean sad.”

“Hmm, I can see your point. But...”

“Celebrities, ministers, movies stars, well-known government service reps, politicians, renowned artists, showmen, and sport-icons – all of them are on my list; a variety that you can’t even dream of, John. People praise and adore them, they’re public’s favorites – but little they know they’re nursing the snakes in their bosoms.” Suddenly, Alex paused and frowned. “But listen, I’ve got it all and you may have it all, Mr. Liberski.”

Liberski timidly looked down, heavily sighed and went on.

“Mr. Freedom, do you realize that after this interview, you may become a real target for not only national media, but the national law enforcement? A legal action can be taken against you and your institution. You may face the judge for making your clientele’s confidential information known to the public, they may even attempt to kill you or hurt you physically. Do you realize that?”

“What about you, sir? Do you realize that now you own all that information and you can publish it before I can even release any data? Here is your flashcard; it’s yours now. Do whatever you want. Enjoy the freedom of choice. You don’t get to exercise that constitutional right of yours very often, do you?”



Here is your chance, John!” Alex put a tiny flashcard on the table, emptied his glass and smacked his pale lips in a sarcastic chuckle.

Liberski was in the shock of his lifetime. His heart sank deep down to his knees, and a swelling exhilaration embraced his whole existence.

“May I ask you why are you doing this now? Why now?”

“Because it’s time. It is time to know who are those people we admire and praise. We tell our kids to look up to them, we are fond of their achievements, and we love and respect them. It is time for the truth - that’s all, Mr. Liberski. There is time for everything; I got all kinds in there: politicians, who advocate for labor unions, but own a dozen of child-labor based corporations overseas, some business tycoons with criminal records, priests and ministers with pedophilic tendencies and felonies, you’ll see names of celebrities involved in drug trafficking. You’ll have fun, trust me.”

“But your business flourished, too. Your profits grew quite well, am I right?”

“You are, however, most of my income was disbursed into various charitable projects, and I have the proof of it on the flash-stick you got. I just happen not to care much about accumulating wealth. I know it’s strange, but you are free to think of me whatever. I just really want the crowd to know the truth about their icons. It is the right time, Mr. Liberski, trust me on that.”

“You know that they’ll try to get rid of you, right? You have to be very careful, Mr. Freedom. When I publish this information, they’ll find you and things will get nasty on you. You should strongly consider running away, hiding. You won’t be safe anywhere, and I mean anywhere on this planet.”

“Oh, I know it better than you, John. I do. But I had to do this, you see, I wanted to do this for a while, but couldn’t find the right person to talk to.”

“You trusted me, why?”



“Because you are one ambitious cookie, John. You are motivated and very determined, so I like it a lot. You didn’t make me wait for your honesty - gave me a real deal. All people have the dark side on their moon. And if they say, they don’t, I don’t trust them.”

Liberski gasped and finally felt relieved. “Thank you for everything, Mr. Freedom; it has been a real pleasure knowing you. I truly appreciate your honesty and trust. Take care of yourself, please. I mean it.”

“I will, Mr. Liberski, I will. You have a wonderful evening, sir.”

The nationwide furor that followed Mr. Liberski’s publication of Alex’s material was beyond any expectations: it has blasted like an H-bomb not only in the United States, but became the most popular “media explosion” of the century throughout the world. It followed by few court cases of well-known public figures, involved in the deals of Alex Bank. The law forces of about fifty cities started investigations of the illegal activities performed by Alex’ clients within the last two-year period. But Alex was nowhere to be found. Nowhere. Mister Alex Freedom had disappeared - the man who changed the world.

In a week, after the global newscast, Liberski received an email from Alex:

“Dear Mr. Liberski, you’ve trusted me with your secret, and I’ve decided to do the same. In a few hours, we are going to launch a private satellite traveling from Earth to Mars. It will take about three hundred days for us to reach there, but I am ready and excited like never before! Our team of ten will be the first group to try to establish the first human settlement on the ‘red planet.’ It might be not easy, but it’s going to be a hell of an adventure for sure. So now, you know my last secret, and I can leave this place feeling content and satisfied. Good-bye and take care. Yours, Alex.”

Fabulous. Liberski read the email once more, and then deleted it. He earnestly smiled: things were getting as good as they possibly could get. The hot shower made him feel fresh and ready-to-go. He was rushing to get dressed for the Oprah show - he was John Liberski, the man of the year.



PHENOMENON

Jason Brooks walked into the living room and gazed at the Heisman Memorial Trophy, which had proudly displayed his name etched with golden letters. He always tried to avoid looking at that trophy; it reminded him of his glorious past – the past that was followed by the chain of tragic events. Nevertheless, the fusion of the virtuous memories and the pleasure associated with the trophy, made Jason stop and look at it again. When holding it, Jason had the strange feeling that it could literally walk him out to the football field, and his fans would cheer and give him a warm welcome once more. They would wait for the miracle that only he could provide for his team: he was the best quarterback of the NCAA. He had quite often saved his team from a disastrous loss and was highly appreciated by his coach. Leading the team, Brooks became a champion three times in a row. According to some sport specialist, he had a promising career; hence, it was no brainer that Jason along with few other players was nominated to receive the Heisman Trophy, and, of course, the name of the winner was proudly announced -Jason Brooks!

The day of the award ceremony was a special one for Jason: it was also his mother Julia's birthday. He was getting ready to express his gratitude to his dear mom and kept repeating in his mind the upcoming speech devoted to her. He also prepared a big surprise birthday party for Julia, and couldn't wait to see the big smile on her pretty face. But the tragedy that happened ahead of time, ruined Jason's sweet anticipation: the big truck coming from the opposite direction, suddenly lost its control and violently crashed into Jason's car. Mom died in no time; Jason was taken to the hospital with multiple body injuries, including broken bones, fractures, brain damage, and more. After a long treatment, doctors succeed to get Jason on his feet, but playing football was out of the question.

Feeling hopeless and miserable, Jason got out of the hospital. The feeling of guilt turned into a constant torture, and there was no way out of it. His mother was gone, and the loneliness, he was dealing with, was simply overwhelming. There was one thing Jason felt he was still able to do: go to the fitness center and work his grief out as much as his injured body would allow. While getting in shape, he participated in a small-side football game. When one of the football players pushed him down, he could

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hardly get up and was immediately hospitalized. His doctor gave him the last warning and firmly stated, “If you want to lose the ability to walk, go ahead, try your luck once more.”

For a long time, Jason was in deep depression and was avoiding life as it came. Nothing seems to move his curiosity anymore, so days were passing by like the ocean waves – meaningless and hollow.

Killing his time in the neighboring café, James got a call from the local television station; one of his old pals had offered him a job of a sport commentator for the upcoming game season of NCAA. He liked the idea, and agreed to think about it. The numbness in his heart began to tingle and thinking of the chance to get close to his dream again, he deeply sighed and said ‘yes’ to himself.

Gradually, Jason got moving. During one of the games, he was introduced to Emmy, a beautiful looking young girl, who had never heard of the football star James Brooks - just what he needed – forget the past and start a new life. Emmy was mellow, charming and sharp; she worked at one of the leading publications in town as a reporter-journalist. Quite quickly, they moved in together, and Jason felt a breeze of happiness taking over his old and sorrowful breath. In about two years, they began seriously thinking about getting married and taking off to Hawaii to celebrate their union.

Emmy called and said she was going to be late. To avoid waiting for her, Jason went for a walk to the nearby park. On his way back, the thick and heavy voice of a stranger turned his head.

“You have a cigarette?”

Keeping quiet, Jason observed the stranger and noticed the silhouette of another man behind him in the dark. The bold one with the tattoo on his neck was the one asking for the cigarette, the shorter one, with the big scar on his face stood behind him.

“Are you deaf or something?” the bold one continued.

“I don’t smoke,” Jason calmly responded, turned around and kept walking.

“Hey,” the short one yelled, “where you think you’re going?”

“I don’t have any money, guys, leave me alone,” Jason mumbled.



“Right. Empty your pockets,” the short one command.

“I just said, I don’t have anything,” Jason repeated and turned out his pockets.

“Your chain,” the bold one insisted.

“Can’t do that,” Jason said, “It has a sentimental value for me – mother’s gift.”

“Who cares, take it off on your own, or else, you know, fool,” the short one muttered by pointed the gun on Jason’s head. “I am sure your mom will appreciate the big hole in your head.”

In a moment, Jason lost his temper, pushed the gun out of his hand, and punched the short one on his face. Then he quickly reached for the gun, but got sturdily knocked on his head before he knew it.

The hospital walls appeared shabby and blurry; Jason’s head was throbbing with pain, when he forced his eyes wide open.

“You’re in the hospital, babe. Everything is okay...is okay,” Emmy repeated and gently squeezed Jason’s hand.

“Yeah, I am,” Jason whispered and tried a smile. “My head is heavy, my head.”

“The doctor said, you have nothing to be concerned about, but they want you to stay here for a few days just to make sure that there are no consequences to your injury.”

“What happened to me?” Jason asked.

“A stranger, who saw you fighting, called 911 and they found you unconscious.”

Suddenly, Jason began tapping his neck looking for the gold chain.

“The chain wasn’t on you, when you arrived here, babe,” Emmy added.

“Crooks,” Jason mumbled and turned his face away from Emmy.

“Police is after them. I am sure, they’ll get them,” Emmy smiled.



“I need a painkiller, I can’t stand this headache,” Jason uttered.

“I’ll let the doctor know, wait.” Emmy rushed out of the room.

In three days, Jason was home. To celebrate his ‘welcome back’ Emmy told him to meet her at the local pub for a couple of drinks. Getting there first, Jason got a shot of whiskey and made himself comfortable at the very corner table, away from the crowd. The pub was blasting with the loud music and jumble; Jason did not like it. It seemed to aggravate his senses, but he was a bit resistant to admit it. He felt awkward, but made a conscious effort to absorb his new experience as it was.

Soon, Jason noticed that he could single out certain words and phrases from the shrill clatter. “Is this real?” he thought to himself and concentrated even more on hearing the words out of the clamor.

The table behind him was crowded with the young group of people, who were discussing the upcoming wedding of one of their friends. They were discussing some details of the future ceremony and mentioned that about two hundred guests were invited to the wedding.

“Two hundred people,” Jason repeated the phrase, which got stuck in his head. No other information seemed to commit to his memory; his brain acted selectively, and would take in only certain words and phrases. This process reminded him of putting the volume up on his favorite part of the song, and putting it down for the part he didn’t care for.

A little annoyed from his own new experience, Jason tried to switch his attention to other things happening around him. He asked for another shot of whiskey and looked at the cute couple sitting at the table across from him. They were talking about the train going to Washington tomorrow at 7:15 pm.

“The train... tomorrow at 7:15,” Jason whispered to himself and his brain made an immediate imprint in his memory.

“I’m either going nuts or turning into a wizard,” he thought to himself and finished the second shot of whiskey. He tried hard to capture what was happening to him, but the only one thing was clear at the moment - his mind filtered the surrounding rattle and set certain things firmly in his memory. This



information echoed in his head and became a part of his recollections later. Daunted, he asked a bartender for a pen and a paper and began jotting it all down.

Rushing towards Jason, Emmy deeply sighed and uttered, “I am so sorry, babe, I am late again. How are you? Did you order something?”

“Not yet, sweetie, my head is kind of numb, I need to use the restroom,” Jason sluggishly responded, slowly got up and walked away.

“Sure, we’ll do no worries.” Emmy uttered, looking a bit surprised.

Falling asleep was a torture for Jason. His head was pounding with all the phrases he had heard the night before. Around five in the morning, Emmy noticed that the light in the kitchen was on. Surely enough, Jason was glued to his notebook, sipping a cup of tea on the side. A quick look at Jason’s screen, made Emmy upset.

“Are you planning to leave me?” she inquired.

“What?” Jason sharply turned to her. Seeing Emmy awake surprised him; she was standing with her back to Jason watching his screen. “You scared me,” he grumbled.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to. You are up so early, something is up? Headache?”

“No. I will tell you, if you promise to take it seriously.”

“Of course, babe; you’re in love with another woman,” she smirked.

“Stop. I said, it’s serious. Take a look at this,” Jason sounded nervous. In a moment, he pushed the paper he had in his hand towards Emmy sitting across from him. “Read, please,” Jason said.

Emmy began to read, “Tomorrow at 7:15 pm, in the fourth train-car of the train going from New York to Washington, a bomb explosion, set up by terrorists, will kill two hundred people.”

For a few seconds Emmy was silent, then she oddly looked at Jason, then began to read the note again.



“Did you write his? What does it mean?”

“I don’t know. Last night I heard these conversations at the pub. I mean, I heard voices, different voices from different groups of people. Some words have echoed in my head and they were random and meaningless. Then something clicked in me; I started writing them down, then I linked them. Now, they make sense, Emmy, they do!” Jason sounded excited.

“Fine,” Emmy heavily sighed, “so let’s say, I am telling you let’s go to a jazz concert tomorrow. Is it that you’re getting only some random words from what I said? Like tomorrow or concert?”

“Exactly, babe. Exactly!”

“What happens in-between? I mean...”

“I have no clue! My injured head, that’s what happens.” Jason looked frustrated.

“It’s a gift, sweetie,” Emmy smiled.

“I don’t know, I don’t believe in that stuff you now say, but I have to do something with this information.”

“I know. We, probably, have to let the FBI know,” Emmy suggested.

“I thought about it, but they’ll start asking questions and all that jazz. I wouldn’t know what to tell them. Why, what, how do you know, who were the people, are you one of them? They can even lock me up.”

“I know babe, but we can save lives of two hundred people. If we don’t prevent this crime, we’ll feel guilty for the rest of our lives.”

“They’ll say it’s my fantasy,” Jason went on. “I should try to do it on my own. I’ll go to the train station, I’ll call the police, and...”

“That’s nonsense. That’s impossible.” Emmy raised her voice. “I think. I know what to do. Let’s have some coffee first.”



Next morning, on her way to work, Emmy made a call from a nearby payphone to the local investigation department of FBI in New York and reported about the upcoming terrorist act in the train station that evening.

In a couple of hours, two FBI agents visited Emmy at her work and invited her to follow them to the FBI office for the further interrogation.

Frank Carter, one of the most experienced agents was assigned to questions Emmy.

“I am sure you understand the reason we invited you here, miss,” Carter started.

“No idea,” Emmy responded calmly.

Carter grinned and turned on the recording of Emmy’s phone call on his laptop. The screen showed how Emmy walked to the payphone and made a call.

“It’s the gestation camera, miss; should have been more careful,” Carter uttered sternly. “So, let’s not waste our precious time. Tell us more.”

Emmy kept quiet and looked aside.

“It’s in your interest to unleash the truth, miss. Just avoid the trouble you’re going to get into, will you? We can get your data faster than you can imagine, so please, cooperate.”

“I am trying to help you to prevent a crime – a horrible crime of blowing up two hundred people’s heads, do you understand, sir? Jason was right; you’re blaming us for helping you, guys.”

“Is Jason your boyfriend?” Carter asked.

“Is he in trouble?” Emmy felt lost.

“Not yet, but he will be, unless you start speaking.”

“You won’t believe my story, anyway. I know you won’t.”

“I will, Emmy, I promise.” Carter kindly smiled and poured a glass of water for Emmy.



Immediately after Emmy told Carter about Jason's strange abilities to hear and memorize random information, Jason was called to the investigation office.

"Mr. Brooks, I understand your situation," Carter started "but it's hard to imagine someone intelligent and famous like you coming up with such nonsense. Why do you need that? You wanna see your name in the news headlines? Is that it, Jason?"

"What the hell, man! You think I am making all this up? For what? To entertain your asses?" Jason yelled, "You think I have nothing better to do? You think I don't understand what I'm getting myself into?"

"Hey, calm down. Chill. There is no logic to what you're saying. It's hard to believe your story, Jason. It's just hard," Carter replied.

"Of course, it's hard. It's not easy for me too, you know. I don't know what happened to my freakin' head. I am just trying to help you here."

Carter was calmly observing Jason's gestures and the face expression, trying to catch the farce in his behavior. Jason was honest, and Carter felt for him.

"If you still have Emmy, please, let her go. She has nothing to do with this," Jason requested.

"Seriously?" Carter reacted, "In a couple of hours two hundred people will be in danger of losing their lives and you're worried about your girl?"

"Hell, yeah, I care about her. Always. You need to get busy with preventing the incident from happening, sir, but you're still here doing I don't know what."

Carter got up and began walking back and forth.

"There could be more to this story, Jason. What if you are a part of the plan to get our guys to the station and blow them up with those two hundred people? What if..."



“Please,” Jason cut Carter off, “stop that nonsense. I bet you don’t believe a word you just said, and if you do, start writing thrillers. You’ll be a success.”

“Okay, here is the deal: for now, Emmy and you are going to remain here,” Carter directed and looked at the clock; it was 5:30 and he had to go to prepare for the upcoming train station operation. “Then, we’ll see,” he slurred and walked towards the exit door.

Jason grew furious. “I need to call my lawyer. Now!” he yelled.

“Please do,” Carter quickly responded and closed the door behind him.

The silence was killing Jason; he was going crazy thinking about the situation he got himself into. “Emmy,” he thought, “ugh, why did I even tell her that? She knew this was going to happen, she knew it, but no, she had to act upon it. Damn it!” He was still sitting in the same chair, staring at the tiny window across from him; he couldn’t stop tapping on the table, he couldn’t stop thinking about Emmy.

Meanwhile, several FBI agents, looking like civilians, got into the train station and established a few observation zones; Carter and two of his colleagues controlled the fourth train car. When a young couple entered the wagon, Carter got alarmed; the man seemed to be clam, but the girl looked anxious and was tensely looking around. He noticed how the man pulled the woman’s hand down, making her seat down as soon as they came in. It became obvious that the couple was nervous and edgy.

In a moment, as planned, two police officers entered the train-car, knocked down one of the FBI agents and dragged him out in front of the suspect couple. The young man got extremely restless and dug his hand into his pocket. In a second, Carter and his partner got their guns out, pointed to the couple and told them not to move. The young man tried to punch some numbers on his cell phone, but Carter shot him down.



Jason was getting impatient; he walked to the door once more and shouted for the third time. “I need to make a call. You can’t make me stay here without a phone all. Now, I said, now, damn it!”

In a couple of minutes, the door to the interrogation room has opened wide and Frank Carter walked in.

“Mr. Brooks, your information was verified. We succeeded catching the offenders; one of them is being questioned as we speak. They had enough c-4s to blow up half of the train, imagine that!”

“I knew it, I knew it, you see! I am happy you got them Mr. Carter. I hope we are free to go now,” Jason excitedly uttered.

“Not yet, Jason. We have more to clarify.”

“I can’t believe this! That’s your ‘thank you?’” Jason exclaimed.

“We are grateful for your help, we are. However, we need to find out more about the source of the information you provided us with. We must know how your brain works, Jason. I am being honest with you.”

Jason deeply sighed and hopelessly looked at Carter.

“Can I see Emmy, please?” he pleaded.

“You’ll see her; you have my word, but not right now. Besides,” Carter changed his tone of voice and continued, “I want to thank you for saving lives. I truly appreciate your cooperation and care.” Carter shook Jason’s hand and kindly smiled.

“Mr. Carter, please, let Emmy go. I can stay here as much as you need me, but Emmy...”

“I will do my best, sir,” Carter interrupted Jason and left the room.



It was Wednesday afternoon and the office of Leonard Lamar, the chief executive of New York office of FBI, blasting with the sunshine and fresh air. Frank Carter was in the middle of reporting data about Jason and Emmy, by pointing out the highlighted sections of some printouts.

“Everything is clean, Mr. Lamar. We checked everything, and I mean everything: their phone conversations, texts, social media, you name it. They are all clean, no doubt about that,” Carter concluded.

“I see. So, what do you say, then? Is he a genius or something?”

“I can’t really say; all I know he knew what he was talking about. He accessed that information somehow; even if he doesn’t how he did it?”

“Okay, but can we?” Lamar asked.

“We may be able to. I’ll call Rita Nelson, the behavioral analyst. I know her well, and if anyone can make sense of Jason’s head, it’s Rita.”

Mr. Lamar nodded, “Agree, Frank. Go ahead and ask Ms. Nelson to see me tomorrow after lunch.”

“One more thing: we need to make Jason happy, so that he cooperates well with Nelson. I think releasing Emmy will help.”

“Do whatever you think is right. Good luck, Carter.”

Emmy was kept in quite a small but neat room, which had a bathroom, running water and a comfortable bed. The office personnel treated her with fresh cooked meals, tea, coffee, and even a dessert. Nevertheless, Emmy was truly concerned about Jason; she was spending hours lying down on her bed and staring at the ceiling.

Suddenly, the door of her room opened with the creaking noise and Jason appeared in the doorway all excited and nervous.



“Hey, are you okay, babe? Missed you,” called out Jason and rushed to Emmy. They kissed and hugged each other passionately.

“You look tired, sweetie, your eyes,” she went on, “are they treating you well?”

“They do. What about you?”

“Same here. I am so sorry, babe, I should’ve not done that, it’s entirely my fault,” Emmy whispered, and hugged Jason again.

“No regrets. Two hundred people’s lives were saved, and you did it, babe. No reason to feel bad about it. Even if we have to spend more time here, it’s worth it.”

“More time?” Emmy puzzled, “For what?”

“Just for them to dig into my brains, examine by head, my hearing abilities, their abilities to catch me lying, whatever.”

Emmy’s eyes fired. “We’ll get a lawyer; I’ll tell my friends to publish an article about this...this outrageous people here.”

“Calm down, babe, we are in the Federal Bureau of Investigation. There is not much we could do here, you understand?”

“So?” Emmy complained.

“So, we have to think of something else, Emmy. I want you out of here. I can stay as much as they want me here, but you shouldn’t waste your days in this cell.”

“I am staying with you. Period,” Emmy muttered.

Rita Nelson was only thirty-five, but was fairly recognized as one of the best behavioral analysts in the agency. The list of the cases she handled fast and effectively was long; many crimes were revealed through her effort, knowledge, and persistence.



Jason slothfully walked into Carter’s personal office, where Nelson was waiting for him. She preferred to start their communication in more of a welcoming setting than the official one.

“Good morning, Mr. Brooks. I am Rita Nelson, a special agent. I am honored to meet you in person. You saved hundreds of lives, and I am very impressed and appreciative of that,” Rita said and shook Jason’s hand.

“And I don’t care about anything anymore. It’s not legal to keep us here. I’ll make sure we meet in court, miss,” Jason was brusque loud.

“Well, I understand. If that’s what you want, you may go home right now,” Rita suggested calmly.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me right. You may leave the office and go your merry way. Make sure you get a reliable team of bodyguards on your way home.”

“And why do I need them?” Jason smirked.

“Your extraordinary abilities will make you a ‘wanted’ person, that’s why. It’s just a matter of time, trust me.”

“Here we go,” Jason heavily sighed. “I don’t need that crap in my life. I was finally happy and peaceful; I want my life back, nothing else.”

“Unfortunately, that’s impossible, Jason. But we can offer you some comfort and security,” Nelson suggested.

“Where? Here?”

“Of course not. You can choose where you want to reside, and we will provide it for you, but first, we have to examine your unique abilities, if you agree of course.”

Jason sighed and uttered, “Fine, do what you want, just let my girl go. She has nothing to do with this, nothing.”



In about two hours, after signing a couple of confidentiality forms, Emmy was released. Jason, on the other hand, was transferred to the hospital and thoroughly examined. Nothing special was found, though; just a few spots of hematomas. Nelson shared the test results with Jason and said that, probably, because of the hematomas, his brain has attained the phenomenal ability to sort the information and record it as a whole. A surgery could've helped Jason to get back to his normal self; however, Nelson seemed to be reluctant for him to agree on that.

“You may save hundreds of lives, Jason. Please, think about it. It’s a unique talent, and I think you should accept it, when it’s given exclusively to you,” Nelson uttered in a very soft voice.

Jason asked for some time to think about the situation and was released home.

All excited, Emmy made sure that the dinner table was full of yummy food. There was a lot to be discussed and rightfully so; the conversation began before they started eating.

“That surgery thing is bothering me a lot, babe. Are you seriously considering it?” Emmy asked.

“Yes, I do,” Jason muttered, sipping his drink.

“I see. I was just thinking...maybe we should think about others....”

“Others?” Jason interrupted. “What about me, Emmy? Should I just get lost because of others? I am just like all those others, you know. I want my life back. Period.”

“Whatever you say,” Emmy replied and emptied her glass of wine.

Next morning, Jason visited the police station to inquire about the recent incident he had in the park. After carefully observing the photographs of the possible suspects, Jason pointed out to the faces he memorized very well.



“We are on a right track then, Mr. Brooks,” the investigator stated, “so both of them are quite famous: one is Max Armstrong known as the Crazy Max, the other one is Sergio Rodriguez, known as the Saw; both of them have a long criminal history.”

Jason felt relieved, but had already planned his next step. Later that evening, he was going to go for a walk to the same park, where the incident had happened. He had to make sure that his unique abilities still worked; he knew he would get himself into some kind of a situation there, which would help him to make a final decision about the surgery.

It was cloudy and foggy, when Jason approached the farthest bench in the park, and cautiously looked around. That spot was the favorite place for the group of young people to hang out. The drug talk they were having didn't interest him, and nothing from that conversation stuck in his head. In a split second though, he heard, “Harlem, Rosie, slaughter.” Jason stopped and closed his eyes for a moment. Soon, the young people left the park, and he heard a strange clatter from behind the bushes. Immediately, his brain started filtering the clatter, and the following words echoed in his mind: crazy max, will escape to Canada, savior. Getting his note pad out, he jotted down something, then called the police investigator, reported the new information he got in the park, got a taxi and went straight to Harlem.

When Jason got there, the special police force was already dragging handcuffed Armstrong and Rodriguez to the police car. Briefly, the detective approached Jason.

“How did you find out about the location and the rest?” he asked Jason.

“Not much to say. I was walking in the park nearby my hours and heard a man talking on the phone about the kidnapped girl. Then I hear the names Max, Saw, going out of the country and more. It wasn't hard to conclude that all these are connected, so I called you.

“Did you get to see the man on the phone?”

“No, I didn't. I had my back to him; it was safer like that.”



“Of course, I understand. By the way, we have your gold chain. Come by, I’ll give it to you.”

“Really? Oh, thank you so much. You made my day, officer,” Jason smiled and gave him a warm hug.

For a long time, Jason stood there and watched the freed young girl crying and holding her parent’s hands. He heard her telling the story of her kidnapping by the villains. She added that if not for the police team arriving on time, no ransom money would save her life, for the criminals were planning to kill her.

All keyed up and happy Jason called Rita Nelson.

“Hello Ms. Nelson, how are you doing” he began, “I’m well, thank you. I want to let you know that I made up my mind. I will cooperate with you, but only with one condition. I can leave anytime I want. I mean it - anytime.”

“No problem, Mr. Brooks. I am glad to hear about your decision. We will wait for you in our office tomorrow morning at 9. A lot of work to do,” Nelson responded cheerfully.

“You got it,” Jason finished the conversation and walked towards his car.



Murder in Paradise

It has been more than twenty years since that dreadful day, when the vicious and ruthless murder of a fifteen-year-old beautiful Emily Blunt shuddered the town - the little town called 'Paradise' - called by its folks.

It was quite hard to believe that such a ferocity could actually happen in their own hometown. Only through the public media, the town residents were getting informed about criminal activities taking place somewhere else - somewhere far away from their marvelous dwellings. For more than hundred years, people here enjoyed peaceful and happy lives. But the murder did happen in their own town - an awful crime, a terrible killing, which changed everything and everybody.

Located in a charming corner of the countryside, the town was surrounded by lavish-green woodlands, stunning high mountains, vibrant chuckling rivers, spectacular waterfalls - a real gem, full of caring and generous people, who called themselves 'true people of paradise'. The town was divided into several areas, and Emily Blunt resided in one of them. She was a real beauty - a tall girl with emerald-green eyes, fair-haired, with luscious lips and a distinct profile. Besides being gorgeous, she had that mysterious quality of attracting and drawing people to her.

Emily's close friends Daniel Monaghan, Woody Brown, Michael Ford, and Bruce Wilson lived in the same neighborhood with her, and even though, Emily had some female friends, she preferred to hang out with the boys. The townspeople called them 'the magnificent five'. They hung out together everywhere: at school, on their breaks, after school, at coffee shops, enjoying the nature or just staying home - always together.

All four were of the same age, besides Bruce, who was a year older and had a habit of taking an advantage of that; sometimes, he would take a proud role of a mentor for his friends. Having a subtle and self-reflective personality, Bruce wasn't a talkative kind. But when he did talk, his arguments were sharp and right to the point.



Woody was just the opposite of Bruce: fiery, hot-tempered, impulsive, chatty, belligerent, and frantic. He'd stir the pot and create a chaos everywhere he'd appear. All the boy-altercations happening in school would turn into Woody's personal business, and he just had to interfere with everything happening around him. No exceptions.

Daniel had a rather frigid and balanced appeal, so it wasn't easy to disrupt his serenity. Michael was more of a melancholic type, hence any careless comment or a phrase could deeply hurt his feelings. Often, when Michael got upset and isolated himself in the corner of a room, Bruce teased him and called him a 'doll'. Then, Michael would wear a face of the most miserable man on the planet Earth.

In spite of their personality differences, their friendship was genuine; they helped and supported one another when needed. But it wasn't just loyalty that held them together. The profound love they had for their inseparable friend, the beautiful Emily, seemed overwhelming. All four were hopelessly in love with her and each of them had confessed to Emily about his feelings. She was not in a hurry to single out the person she was attracted to, and it drove them crazy.

The warm weather was naughtily calling the boys to the lake for a cozy swim. When Woody suggested going to swim after school, everybody got excited.

The water was crisp and cool, and Emily was the only one who decided not to swim that day. She made herself comfortable on the little blanket near the maple tree and began observing her lovely friends as they were screaming their buzz out to the skies.

"Come on Emily, jump in here. The water is warming up!" Woody cried eagerly.

"That's okay, I'll stay here, I can't swim today," Emily replied.

"Why not?" Woody slowly got out of the water and walked towards Emily.

"I just can't Woody," Emily insisted.

"You've got to tell me why. I'll carry you; you want it?"

"I said no!" Emily was getting upset.



Daniel briskly came out of the water and approached Woody.

“You need to stop now,” he commanded. “Which part of her ‘no’ don’t’ you understand? She has her reasons.”

‘What reasons?’ Woody insisted.

“Unbelievable!” Michael’s voice suddenly interrupted the conversation. All shaking, he quickly grabbed the towel and sat next to Emily.

“Well of course,” Woody started again, “you are an expert when it comes to tedious business of the opposite sex.”

“You bet, I am, you fool,” added Michael and sharply turned to Emily, who smiled and nodded agreeing with him.

Suddenly Bruce swiftly appeared and uttered in a low but a very concerned voice, “I think it is time for us to have this conversation. I mean to get serious about what really matters. Yeah, I think, it’s time.” He cleared his throat and added, “You know what I’m talking about Emily, don’t you?”

“I agree with you,” Woody blurted, “it’s time. We’ve got to know, who that special one is, Emily.”

Emily looked lost. She paused for a second, deeply sighed, then added, “I can’t stand a peer pressure, you guys. I love you all; I cannot pick and choose, I just can’t. Not now.”

“Fine! I guess you are going to marry all of us at the same time,” Michael viciously smirked.

“I woun’dn’t mind,” tapping Michael’s shoulder, Woody sneered.

“Not funny, Michael.” Emily protested.

“Just kidding, but... we can’t go on like this, Emily. You have to choose or we will turn from friends into enemies, and I don’t think you’ll enjoy that transformation.”

Daniel was observing the scene. “We all know,” he started, “it’s not easy, Emily, but we’re getting to the point, where...”



“I know,” said Emily broken up. “I will. Promise.”

“We can all make it easier for you. Whatever you decide, we’ll be cool. No questions asked! It’s your decision, Emily, and we’ll respect it. We’ll all stay friends, and so be it,” concluded Bruce and turned to the rest behind him.

“Yeap!” Woody exclaimed.

Michael and Daniel nodded as sign of an agreement, “Deal,” they hummed together.

Emily kindly smiled, fixed her hair and gazed at the hungry four surrounding her soft and fragile being.

“Okay, I’ll let you know about my decision tomorrow, but I want something in exchange, though,” Emily added.

“Really?” Woody chuckled, “Just don’t ask us to kill the two-headed monster, who lives on the top of the hill.”

“No,” Emily smiled, “Why don’t you guys write a note for me why do you think I should choose solely you as my sweetheart. Just tell me what is so special about you, give me your reason, share it with me. That’ all I want. Can you do it?” Emily naughtily greened.

“Ugh, that’s not fare! You know I suck at being romantic,” Woody nagged.

“I like your idea, I’ll do it,” Daniel jumped in.

“Me too,” Michael quickly agreed. “What do you say, Bruce?”

“Not a bad idea,” Bruce mumbled.

“Excellent,” Woody complained again, “I am out of this game, then. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.”

“You can record your confession. You love talking, don’t you?” Daniel intruded.



“Can I?” Woody turned to Emily.

“Yes, you can.” Emily beamed in response.

“Great! I love my options,” Woody sniggered, “I may even sing for you our beauty, why not? My talents are to be yet explored.”

“We’ll see, fella,” Daniel blurted sarcastically, “let’s go hungry people, it’s my treat.”

Next morning Emily got the love notes along with the personal request from Woody to listen to his recording in private. She promised to read all the notes and get back to her friends by that evening. Her friends planned to spend the evening in the Luna Park, where the famous New York Circus was touring for the whole week.

The town people crowded the park with laughter and joy: cheerful and loud music accompanied with bright and colorful illumination made the Luna Park a place to enjoy free time. However, Daniel, Bruce, Woody and Michael were rather nervous, scanning the park for the trace of Emily.

“Imagine, she made no decision,” jokingly uttered Woody. No one cared for Woody’s comment. Feeling awkward, he continued, “You guys need to chill. Of course, she made her choice, and that’s no one else, but me.”

Michael smirked, “Go on, dreamer.”

“Oh, shut up you, baby-doll” Woody smirked.

Michael turned his back to Woody and looked aside.

“Please, don’t cry, Mike. I beg you.”

Daniel cut in, “You need to stop your bull shit, it’s not funny. We need to find Emily, that’s what we need to do.”

“We saw her a while ago near the Pacific Wheel with her mom,” responded Michael.

All this time Bruce was oddly quiet; didn’t say a word.



Walking towards Bruce, Woody asked, “Are you okay?”

“Not really. I don’t feel well. Something in my throat, just pressuring, my stomach, too. I just had a hot dog, could be it.”

“All alone? I was hungry too, you know,” Woody chuckled.

“Stop it, Woody. You should go home, Bruce. Go rest,” suggested Michael.

“I can’t, I want to hear Emily in-person. I’ll stay, I’ll be fine,” Bruce said in a very subtle voice.

“You won’t trust us if we tell you later?” Woody went on.

“I trust you all, but I want to hear it from her. I am not going anywhere. Period.”

“Woah, I like it, buddy. A real man, aren’t you? Just has to have it all straight in his face. It’s called ‘lo-ove’, baby,” Woody articulated, staring at Bruce.

“Okay guys, enough is enough, let’s kill some time. The firing range is fun, let’s see who is the best shooter here,” Daniel hastily exclaimed and rushed towards the shooting booth. The crowd followed him.

Emily never came. She told her mom, she was going to spend some time with her friends, and since then no one knew what happened to her. No one.

The search for Emily united the whole town; her friends were devastated, and looked for her in every possible and impossible corner of the town and beyond. Only after two days, one of the rescue teams found her dead body in nearby woods. Evidently, she was assaulted and heavily injured; her bruises looked quite fresh and dense. A bloodstained piece of rock was found near her face; there was a lot of blood on and around her skirt – she was raped, then murdered. Beautiful Emily.

The townspeople went nuts. They all gathered at the police station and waited for the sheriff’s reflection to the horrible tragedy that had never happened before. Not in their blessed and lovely town, where “love” was the word and friendship - sacred. They all wanted the answers!



That evening, crying their grief out Daniel, Woody, Bruce, and Michael met in Emily's favorite spot, a little old cabin located in the northeastern part of the woods. In there... so many heavenly moments were spent together; so many wonderful dreams were cherished - together! Broken hearts, confused minds, devastated souls became the painful reality for all of Emily's friends. Nowhere to turn for help, no one to ask for comfort and compassion. Emily's stunning, blue eyes, her crystal voice, her soft and welcoming smile were not going to brighten their days anymore. Never ever again. Nothing in the universe was the same; Emily's death had taken away from them the most fragile and genuine part of their existence – the faith that love can conquer all.

Woody wasn't shy to cry his eyes out – no one and nothing mattered, but the endless sorrow heavily pounding his heart and mind. Michael's weep was oddly silent; Bruce was staring at the wall, all frozen to the bones. Hitting his hand against the table, Daniel was going crazy – he started bleeding, but couldn't stop himself.

“Please stop it, just stop it. I can't take it anymore,” Bruce suddenly yelled at Daniel and walked to the door.

“No, you stay, I'll go!” Daniel responded and walked out of the house.

The investigation of Emily's murder turned into the personal business of every single resident of the town. Soon, the sheriff received an information about the local pastor by the name Patrick, who has apparently been seen at the murder scene right before it happened. After visiting the temple of St. Mary of Angels, where Patrick served and resided, the sheriff and his team were quite surprised to learn that the pastor had been away for a few days already. However, the investigation team had inspected some of his clothes he left behind and found his cassock, which was heavily covered with bloodstains and few thin hair. After the examination, the team revealed that the blood-spots and the hair belonged to Emily, so the police immediately pressed charges against Patrick. However, he was never found - still missing.

The funeral. The most heartbreaking event in the history of the town. Every single soul was silently grieving a terrible loss of sweet Emily; she was loved and precious by every family there was. The devastation of the crime stayed in every corner of every street of the 'paradise'. Forever.



After graduating from high school Daniel, Woody and Michael left the town with the intention to stay away from the miserable memories as far as possible. Only Bruce stayed in town to continue his family business.

In about twenty years friends got together to say their last good bye to Bruce, who passed away after a long-lasting condition. They all met at the cemetery. Lamenting Bruce's death, Woody and Daniel also laid a bouquet of flowers on Emily's headstone. Michael joined them later for he wanted to accompany Bruce's mother home.

The silence they sank into staring at Emily's grave was louder than the cry they wept upon Emily's tortured body twenty years ago. Nothing really mattered – the time that had passed since that terrifying day seemed simply empty. The wound felt still fresh-cut, and it humbly was hurting their hearts and minds.

After finishing New York police academy, Woody was hired to work in one of the well-known police station in Manhattan. Only in a couple of years, he became known as one of the best investigators in the city, who specialized in murder cases. His success rate turned to be the highest one in the last decade, and he took a special pride in being a pro.

Daniel's carrier was quite a successful one too. He became a major figure in IT industry in Silicon Valley, California. In about two years after being a manager for the big IT Corporation, he opened up his own business, and became a partner with the same corporation he used to work for.

It was getting cold at the cemetery; the swirling wind began to whistle the melody of sadness and despair.

"I did it," Woody finally broke the silence.

"Did what?" Daniel uttered.

"I found him. I killed the bastard."

"What are you talking about?" Daniel insisted.



“You know it well, Dan. It’s stupid of me to say that since I work for the police, but hey, I have no secrets from you guys. I had to, I had to,” Woody sounded determined.

Daniel suddenly stood up and oddly gazed at Woody.

“You must be kidding me. Did you lose your mind?” he almost screamed.

“Whatever, man. Think what you want. I couldn’t go on living with that horrible feeling inside; that fucker had to go. Revenge always works, Dan, always. “

“Are you talking about pastor Patrick?”

”Hell yeah, and don’t call him a pastor. The crook was a fucken murderer; he sold his soul to the devil...pastor...”

“I swear, you’re confused,” said Daniel.

“Confused? No, I am not. Remember last year we shortly met in New York? I told you I found him, but he did a plastic surgery and changed his name to Chris Kerson. Remember? Later, I got his fingerprints, and that’s when he got caught, so...”

“Of course, you told me,” Daniel interrupted, “but you told me he had changed his name to Ralph Montgomery and he moved to New Jersey.”

“True. But I didn’t have the fingerprints yet, so that information was not accurate at the time.”

“Was not accurate? What the hell, man!” Daniel exploded. He nervously grabbed Woody’s by his collar and shouted, “Why didn’t you tell me then, why? Why?”

“What’ wrong with you, Dan, Leave me alone!”

“What’s wrong? Everything is wrong, Woody, everything that happened is wrong! We killed an innocent man you get it? Innocent!”

“He killed Emily! What are you talking about?” Woody anger was elevating with every word he said.



“I am talking about Ralph Montgomery. We did it!”

“Ughhh,” Woody sighed, covering his face with his two hands.

“Yes. I called Michael and told him that we finally could get things straight, that you found the killer...so we agreed to get the man, and we did it, Woody.”

“Did what? Killed him? You killed him, Dan?”

“I just told you Mike and I, we killed him.”

“Oh my... why didn’t you tell me about your decision then? Why?”

“Simple! Because you are police, Woody,” Daniel responded.

Another moment of heavy silence.

“How did you do it?” Daniel turned to Woody.

“It doesn’t matter. He deserved it,” Woody mumbled in a low voice.

“Did he at least confess or tell you why did he do it?” Daniel went on.

“Nope. He said, he didn’t do it. He said, he was just passing by that night and saw Emily’s dead body in the woods, tried to help, but was too late, so he just took off.”

“Then why did he run away?” Daniel asked.

“He said because he was afraid of the police questioning him about another criminal case involving child sexual abuse.”

“You think he was telling the truth?”

“Of course not. In his last breath he muttered, ‘I hope God will forgive you. I am innocent’. Imagine that!”



Daniel heavily sighed, slowly stretched his hands up, walked back and forth for a moment, then crashed down on the ground like a hard piece of rock.

“I am lost. Who is to blame now, who is the sinner here? Mike or I, or the pope Patrick?” he shrugged.

Woody sounded harsh, “Don’t even think comparing yourself with that thug. What’s done is done; can’t change anything.”

“That’s the problem, Woody,” Daniel slurred calmly.

The sound of the approaching car turned the heads: Michael rushed out of the car with the gray folder in his hands. He looked lost and bewildered.

Daniel quickly walked towards him, noticing the sad oddness in his eyes.

“What happened? What is this?” he rushed to ask Michael, and took the folder from Michael’s hands. He quickly opened it and silently looked through it. There were the envelopes with their love confessions and an audiotape recorded by Woody.

“Where did you get this from?” Michael’s voice was shaking.

“Bruce’s mom gave it to me.”

“And why would Bruce have all of these. I remember well that the police had not found anything in Emily’s house. They searched everywhere. Why Bruce?”

Michael pulled an envelope from his pocket and said. “This is from Bruce. It’s for us to read. I wanted to start, but...didn’t dare without you guys.”

“Let me see it,” Woody demanded and grabbed the letter out of Michael’s hands, quickly opened it and began to read.



“If you’re reading this letter, it means I am gone. I don’t even know why I lived for so long; for some reason I didn’t succeed in my few suicide attempts. I guess God wanted to reprimand me in a different way; death wasn’t good enough for him. So, I waited to see what was coming my way.

It was the most nerve-racking day of my life. I was anxious from head to toe; I felt an unbearable physical pain inside just thinking that Emily may choose one of you, and not me. I took some of my grandpa’s pills to calm myself down.

When I met you at the park, I wasn’t feeling well. The pills made me nauseous, my head was as heavy as the bowling ball, I was dizzy and weak. I told, I was going to get water, but I went to throw up. On my way back to you, I saw Emily walking back, too. When she saw my pale face, she offered to walk me home, and I agreed. To get home faster, we decided to cut through the woods, and of course, I got impatient, so I asked her about her choice. Lucky Woody, she chose you.”

Woody froze. His eyes briefly teared up, but he forced himself strong, and went on reading. “On our way home, Emily was trying to justify her choice, saying that she still loved all of us, that we are all so dear to her. But I wasn’t listening, I was just mourning my loss – Emily had ended for me, my love had deceived me. I lost my own self; I turned into an animal. I forced her to the ground and started ripping her clothes off; the beast in me was acting crude. Poor Emily, she was crying for help, but the Bruce she knew wasn’t even there to help her. When I was done, Emily kept begging me to calm down; she promised that no one would know about the incident. But I wasn’t ready to deal with what the beast had done: what I was going to tell you, how I was going to look in Emily’s eyes, in your eyes, in my own eyes? My thoughts were random and evil. I felt trapped, so I ended my sufferings. I picked up a big rock and...”

Suddenly Daniel yelled in a weep, “Stop! I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

Woody coldly stared at him first, then at Michael and continued. “I emptied Emily’s pockets, so that the sheriff would think she’s been robbed. She had our love letters in her pocket and Woody’s audiocassette - that’s all. When I got home, I finally realized what I did, so I rushed to the garage and hang myself...I didn’t succeed, the rope wasn’t strong enough to hold my weight, so I fell down...alive.



You probably can recall how I was dressed up in a thick turtleneck for the next few weeks after Emily's death – I didn't want you to see the burses around my neck.

I will not talk about my life after I killed Emily. Only I know the living hell of those years – the hell I fully deserved. I found out much later that the pills I took had side effects- aggression, and so on, but who cares. I did what I did.

I am not asking you to forgive me, because you can't, and there is no need for it anymore. I just feel obligated to tell you the truth, and I'm doing it now...Bruce."

"And how we should go on living after all this, Woody? How? Why?" Michael muttered after a moment of silence.

"No idea, no idea..." Woody's voice gloomily echoed, and he slowly walked away.