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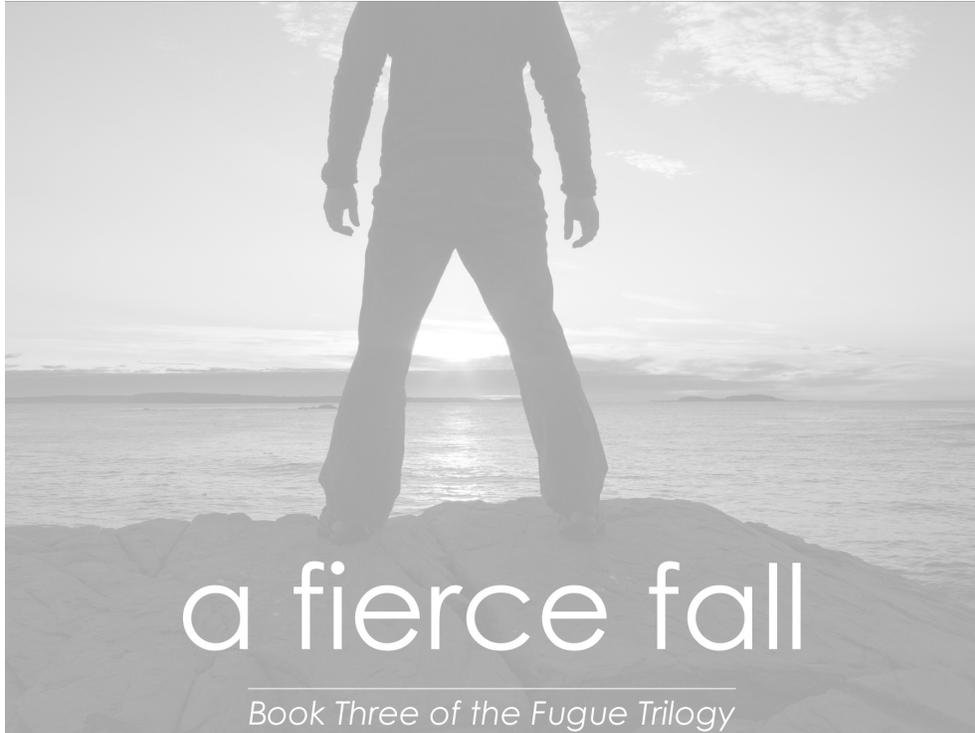
Guy



PS. I am a God-fearing man, but my novels tend to go their own way...

Although this one does not contain excessive violence or sexuality, it does include adult themes—violent situations and light erotica—and is intended for mature readers.

Guy Orgambide



a fierce fall

Book Three of the Fugue Trilogy



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Chapter 1

27 Years Earlier

Neither castle nor jail, the massive structure was flush with the edge of the mountain cliff in a disturbed challenge to the void. Tall narrow windows perforated its stone walls, most of them corseted by rusty metal bars. The few left bare only opened onto mute, dark matter. Originally erected to defend a strategic pass in the Pyrénées Mountains in the event of a Spaniard invasion of France, the fort had never really met its destiny. Its only and rather ominous claim to fame was to have held prisoner for a few months the fallen leader of the French government who had collaborated with the German invaders during the Second World War. Briefly considered for renovation, the fort had itself fallen into disgrace after a series of budget cuts and had been eviscerated of all furnishings before being abandoned atop its remote, barren cliff.

Though frail in his build and no longer of young age, the man climbed swiftly the steep and rocky trail that enabled the only access to the fort. He seemed unnerved by the grating rattle of pebbles disturbed by his steps and that rolled downhill in small droves, breaching the silence of the site. The three prongs of the wooden pitchfork that he carried over his shoulder pointed up at the sepia autumn clouds piling up onto the mountain range.

A narrow bridge bordered by flimsy handrails led to the fort's gate; an imposing arch cut into the stony ramparts to which clung a half unhinged metal door. The man navigated through scattered rubble, entered the flank of the building that faced the precipice, and climbed an uneven stone staircase. On the top floor, he proceeded without haste between the moldy walls of a long corridor as his eyes locked onto the lovers.

The body of the broad-shouldered male covered entirely that of his partner, whose legs lay open by his sides, bare on the rough gray stones. The couple were nude, silent, and immobile; collapsed at the terminus of a powerful embrace. The only stigma left of that embrace, a small smear of blood on the inside of one of the woman's thighs. The visitor did not pause when he entered the room; he simply raised his pitchfork as high as his arms would reach, rotated it to align the prongs with the male's exposed spine and in a single, forceful thrust, planted it in his back.

The girl's eyes popped wide open in response to the pressure on her stomach. She stared candidly at the skinny man who still held on to the handle of the pitchfork planted into her lover's back. She did not react when he rolled the body away from her. She simply looked at the blood that had already pooled onto her stomach and ran her fingers through it in a vain search for a wound.

The intruder groaned as he struggled to drag her lover's body by a tall cutout in the wall, which reached all the way down to the floor. It opened to the cliff side and onto the most serene mountain scenery. With great

efforts punctuated by more grunts, he finally managed to shove the lower half of the body out of the window, causing it to tip into the abyss in an elastic swing.

The man turned back to the young girl. She had instinctively stood up and slipped on her white dress, which had in seconds soaked up the blood on her stomach. Her back flattened against the wall, she stared at the opening through which her lover had vanished with a haggard hawk and slightly gaping lips. The man picked up her sandals from the floor and forced them into her hand. She docilely put them on and did not offer any resistance when he latched on to her wrist and dragged her out of the room.

Chapter 2

24 Years Earlier

"Jeanne? What are you doing here...? Something happened to my baby?!"

"Relax, Amira. I left him at the apartment with your dad."

"My dad...? What do you mean, my dad?! My dad lives six-hundred miles from here and the last thing he'd do is to visit me!"

Jeanne's face turned livid. "But he said..."

Amira rushed down the street. The young mother felt as if her entire body was trying to squeeze a life out of her chest. Yet she covered the five blocks to her place in minutes. She slipped on the humid cobblestones in front of her building and fell heavily into Jeanne's bush of Baccara roses, scratching her bare forearms on the thorns. The burn only fed her rage; she stood up, slammed open the building door, and ran up the stairs. She brought her mad rush to a sudden stop inches from the door of her apartment, when she realized that it was ajar. She pushed it slowly as fear gripped her again.

"Baby...? Baby, are you there...?"

"Mommy...! Mommy...!"

A toddler who could not have been more than two surged from the living room and ran down the hallway with excitement. Amira lifted him into her arms and immediately whisked him outside the apartment. Jeanne dragged herself up the stairs.

"Oh God... Thank God, he is okay..." she said, out of breath.

"Take him!" Amira said and handed Jeanne the child.

Amira entered the apartment with caution and inspected every room. She finished with the kitchen and called out to her friend.

"You can come in. There's no one else here."

Jeanne joined Amira in the kitchen. The mother pointed to the counter.

"Look, coffee is brewing and the pot isn't even half full yet. He must just have run out; he probably heard me slamming the door downstairs."

"I cannot believe the guy was helping himself to coffee! But... how did he leave?"

"I don't know. Maybe he ran up the stairs all the way to the roof terrace and then back down the fire escape."

As she spoke, Amira hastily crossed the living room and leaned out of the window, but she did not see anyone on the fire escape or down the narrow alley at the back of the building. She returned to the kitchen where Jeanne had sat down with the boy on her lap and was still struggling to catch her breath.

"Amira, I am so sorry..." she said.

"You should be!" Amira exploded. "I cannot believe that you left my son alone with the first stranger who knocked at the door of my apartment."

Some godmother you are! When will you get real, Jeanne? This is not your little hometown; this is Paris, and not the good one!”

“But he seemed so genuine; he even—”

“How did he look?”

Jeanne had to admit that she had not paid that much attention, as she was carrying on a phone conversation with a friend at the same time as she opened the door to the visitor. She had let him in the instant he had declared with a confident smile that he was Amira’s father. The vague description that she provided could have fit just about any middle-aged man in fair physical shape.

“That could be anyone,” said Amira. “Anyone but my father. He has a two-inch scar across his forehead—a chainsaw accident when he was young—you could not have missed it. What happened after the man got inside?”

“He went straight into the living room and started playing with the kid while I continued my phone conversation. He seemed very gentle. The boy took up to him right away; I thought he had recognized him. Once I wrapped up my phone call, the guy offered to watch his grandson until you’d return so I went out to join you.”

Amira was calming down. She kneeled in front of her son, still perched on Jeanne’s lap, and cupped both of his hands into hers.

“I will never leave you again, love; I swear,” she murmured with melancholy in her voice. The child smiled; he was too young to recognize a lie.

Chapter 3

November 13, Year 4.

I may not have deserved a good man's rest; yet I lay inanimate, deep into my broad oak wood bed, sunk by a mighty sleep wave. I may not have deserved to live in a beautiful hillside country home, surrounded by vineyards and native forest; yet it was now my domain. I lived alone in that house, and that part might very well have been deserved, but that part too, I loved.

I had managed to shore up my life for over a year under a false identity as Richard Harris, the American superintendent of a wine estate in southwest France, and in that pretense, I had found myself. At last. I would not have dared to dream another future had the high tide not risen up on me again on that late fall night. A night of rain; a night of cold; a perfect night for a deep snooze in a warm country home.

Neither the pale yellow beam that swept across the walls of my bedroom, nor the rasping sound of tires on the gravel in front of the house reached me. It took the honking of the car's horn to flick me out of sleep. The red digits of the alarm clock marked two thirty-seven in the morning; the worst possible time to wake up, far away from both ends of the night. I got up drowsily and felt my way to the window in the dark. A still, somber mass with two yellow light beams bleeding out of it was stationed in front of the house.

I watched the vehicle for a long moment, waiting for its occupants to step out, but the doors remained sealed and the cabin dark. After slipping on my robe, I grabbed the loaded shotgun that I kept on top of the armoire and felt my way down the stairs and across the living room. Once I reached the front door, I made sure to point the barrel of the gun down, switched on the inside lights, and pulled the door wide open.

The car was crouched thirty feet from me, sideways, passenger side facing me. In response to my appearance, the roof light was flicked on. It projected a face through the passenger side window; a young woman's face. She stared at me as if in shock, her eyes bouncing repeatedly between my face and the shotgun hanging from my hand. I stared at her in shock, my eyes bouncing repeatedly between her face and the handcuffs that tied her hand to the grab-handle above her head.

The young captive was Jessica, my daughter. The daughter who had just turned thirteen when I had walked away from her, her brother and sister, and my wife three years earlier and five thousand miles away.

Chapter 4

27 Years Earlier

Hélène sat straight against the backrest of a cast iron chair, under an old linden tree whose broad wings seemed to reach down in an attempt to cup her up. Her head was tilted down toward a book that rested on the thigh of her nude leg, insolently propped onto a round stone table. In her short, white sleeveless summer dress and pale green espadrilles, she was a drop of essential oil fallen from the alembic of early spring that boiled all around her.

The visitor climbed the long alley that led up to the country home, hesitated in front of the building, and drifted into the park by the side of the house after noticing the girl's silhouette. He was just a few feet behind her when she turned her head, alerted by a vague creaking. The simultaneous vision of the young woman's face and her bare leg in perspective seized the visitor's insides in the way a heart attack fills a man's chest; in an inorganic, reality-wiping swell.

"If you're selling something, creeping up behind young girls cut off from the herd may not be the best way to go about it..." said Hélène without changing position and looking him in the eyes, half-defiant, half-teasing. The man did not scare her. His straight posture, the neat trimming of his hair and light beard, and his well-cut suit branded him a *homme du monde*; mature, elegant, and probably well-off. And as such, he promptly regained his composure.

"I'm sorry; I should have alerted you of my arrival. My name is Tristan—Tristan Rousseau—I'm an old friend of your dad."

"Is that so? Then, how come I've never met you?"

"You did—"the man paused and smiled—"Hélène; at your christening; the day before I left the country. You were just a few months old but you already looked like your mom. Now, the resemblance is uncanny. You are... *her*."

"I'll take that as a compliment even though I only know her through old photographs. She died in a car accident when I was three."

"I know... I was traveling at the time and I only learned about it two weeks later. I will never forgive myself for not attending her funeral. Your mom, your dad, and I were childhood friends; inseparable—the three chambers of a snake's heart, as your mom liked to say. After I went away to college, I would travel back by train three hours each way every weekend just to be close to... them."

"Did you mean *close to her*?" Hélène asked bluntly after picking up on Tristan's slight hesitation.

"No, both of them... I meant both of them, of course!" he replied with haste. "I was the best man at their wedding; I could not have been more blessed as their friend."

Hélène pushed her long, black curls to the back of her shoulders with her cupped hands and stared at the man with the unsettling effrontery of fledging women. She had a vague feeling that something did not add up. The man claimed to have grown up in her little rural town but had nothing in common with the village guys. Too well groomed, too soft-spoken, too stilted in his attempts to keep his eyes from dropping down onto her now exposed shoulders.

"So, where were you all my life?" Hélène finally asked with just a hint of suspicion in her voice.

"In Russia; Saint Petersburg for the most part," he replied. "I went there as an agricultural engineer and ended up starting my own company."

"What did you sell?"

"Tractors. Big tractors."

"How romantic... And in seventeen years, you never came back to France? Never visited my dad again?"

"No," Tristan replied curtly and looked around the park.

"Did you guys communicate at all?"

"A couple of times a year; short letters."

"Is that your definition of close friends?"

"It's my definition of close friends whose lives have diverged."

"So what's changed today?"

"I'm in the process of moving back to France. My company has done well for years; I've decided to sell it and come home. I'm here to ask your dad if he can host me while I look for a house around the area. I hate hotels."

"You are by yourself? No woman, no kids... seventeen years later?"

"No woman. No kids. They both ask too many questions."

Hélène took the quip with an amused smile.

"Follow me; I think Dad is in the cellar at the back of the house; let's surprise him!"

Hélène was immersed in the preparation of the *baccalauréat*, the rite-of-passage exam to which success was required for senior high school students to move on to the university. Despite a natural aptitude for mathematics, she had chosen literary studies as her major, as they caused her inner strings to vibrate in a less predictable fashion. For months, she had been devouring the letters that Rimbaud had dropped like bread crumbs along his Arabian trails. She had even been vaguely wishing for a brief spell of tuberculosis in order to slip into the dangerous liaison between *La Dame aux Camélias* and her young lover. Hélène had been engulfed in a world of corrosive passions and exacerbated sensitivities that made her male schoolmates look like a bunch of gonad bearing shrubs.

Tristan's arrival had somehow bridged H  l  ne's real and imaginary worlds. Though his age placed him in a higher realm and his experience towered over her innocence, she had sensed in him during their first encounter a hidden fault line that she seemed to bring closer to the surface. Since, all week long, H  l  ne had been at school and Tristan had spent his days exploring estates and his evenings going out with her father to visit common friends, they had not exchanged more than a few polite salutations since their initial encounter.

Spring had picked the next Saturday to reach an apex. Herds of small birds tweeted their way back and forth between the vineyards that gorged on the first scalding rays of summer and the adjacent forest that placidly kept its cool. H  l  ne was hot and bothered; literally. Hot because of the lack of air conditioning in the old country house and bothered by a bout of pollen allergy that had turned her head into a huge cotton ball since morning. Full of good intentions, she had neatly arranged all her study materials on the outdoor table in front of the house, but neither the shade of the umbrella nor the faint breeze gliding through the valley had managed to cool her off to a point where she could function properly. By mid-afternoon, the employees came down early from the vineyards—like every Saturday—and saluted her with affectionate cheers before heading for their cars. Since Tristan and her dad had left early in the morning to visit a beachside property an hour away, these had been her only human interactions of the day.

After their departure, H  l  ne looked with frustration at five more hours of static youth until it would be time for her to get ready for a party at a schoolmate's. She did, however, also realize after a while that the house was empty and the property deserted. Although the place had long lost the magic of her childhood, one room in the house had recently been reactivated with a hint of mystery. That thought instantly spurred the moment; H  l  ne slipped back inside and climbed the stairs with a little tingle of excitement around the temples.

When she pushed the door of the guest bedroom, the scent of male cologne burst out—as to warn her of her trespassing. This time, she felt a stroke of guilt but the sight of Tristan's beige cloth suitcase, closed on the bed, drew her in. Everything in the room was in meticulous order, an almost feminine order. Three suits hung in the open armoire, paired with their respective white shirts and hovering over two neat piles of undershirts and briefs. Two pairs of black shoes and one pair of tan ones, tucked under the closet, were also aligned with the suits in the best matching pattern.

That was the extent of Tristan's belongings, at least in plain sight; nothing on the bed stand; nothing on the dresser. That turned the suitcase into the last frontier for discovery, but the sliders on the two sides of the zipper were tied together by a small padlock and though they could move

freely together along the zipper, they could not be pulled apart to open the suitcase. The hurdle stimulated the bad angel on H el ene's shoulder, who brushed aside any residual guilt; if Tristan had felt it necessary to lock his luggage while in a close friend's house, he probably had a good reason for it.

H el ene rushed downstairs, popped her head out of the front door to make sure that no one was around, and then dialed one of her school friends on the phone. The teen was mostly a nuisance to her as he always tried to approach her with a fake bad boy attitude that he thought cool. He had even boasted about teaching himself how to break into a car. For once, he might actually be of some use. When H el ene described to him the challenge, he offered to come over; she gently turned him down and convinced him to give her a solution that she might try on her own. The trick was simple: bring the tied sliders to one end of the zipper, push the tip of a pen between the teeth of the zipper, and slide it sideways to force the teeth open all around.

It worked with chilling ease. H el ene pulled up the cover of the suitcase with childish excitement, but was instantly disappointed by the realization that it only contained a green cardboard folder. She opened the file and started flipping through the loose documents that it held. Page after page of tables and graphs, all printed on letterhead paper to the name of a *TR Actors Corporation*. Raw accounting documents that fell into the eyes of a romantic teen like frozen sand. The realization that she had broken half a dozen rules for that pathetic discovery sent her bad angel running for cover and unleashed all the guilt the guy on the other shoulder could manufacture. Now eager to leave the room, H el ene stopped flipping through the papers, closed the folder, and slammed it back at the bottom of the suitcase. As she lowered the cover, she noticed that an envelope had partly slipped out of the file. In its corner, a faded postmark indicated the name of her village and a date fourteen years earlier. H el ene pulled the envelope out of the file. It was addressed to Tristan in Russia; the handwriting—in faded blue ink—was round and graceful. H el ene cut her finger when she slid it through the jagged opening of the envelope. A tiny, almost invisible wound from which a round pearl of blood came to life.

Just as would her mother an instant later.

H el ene did not go to her friend's party that Saturday night. Through the tears, she had barely managed to move the tied sliders of the suitcase all the way around to the other end of the zipper to interlock the teeth back before running out of Tristan's quarters and seeking refuge in her own bedroom. She sat still on her bed for a long time, in silence, staring through

the window. The landscape across it had suddenly lost all familiarity as she redrew in the new light each memory of her short past.

Hélène's father and Tristan returned home around seven in the evening; the sound of the car engine set Hélène back into motion. She took a shower and spent a great deal of time nude in front of her mirror applying to her face her most expensive makeup. She then pulled her hair back into a bun and slipped into a light, white mousseline dress with matching high-heel sandals. She hesitated for a moment on whether to wear jewelry and finally opted against it. Once ready, she sat back on her bed and waited.

"Hélène... Dinner!" her dad shouted cheerfully from the first floor.

In the shadow, from the top of the staircase, Hélène watched for an instant the two men at the living room table. Their chatter was already enlivened by the vapors of the Pernod *apéritif* that they had been sharing. The unexpected clicking of her heels on the hollow wooden steps of the staircase immediately prompted them to turn their heads. Both men reacted in the exact same way; their smiles dissipated and their faces hardened up, as if transfixed by a sudden downpour of volcanic ashes. Hélène descended the staircase slowly, without looking at them. Both men instinctively stood up for a second when she sat at the table.

Hélène's father recovered first.

"I thought I had given away all of your mother's dresses after she passed..." he mumbled, as if speaking to himself.

"Mom had lent this one to Aunt Eugénie just before her accident," Hélène replied. "Auntie had kept it all along and offered it back to me for my sixteenth birthday."

"It suits you well," the father replied, ill at ease.

"It does..." Tristan seconded with a similar trouble. An awkward silence followed his words, which prompted him to stand up abruptly and push his chair back under the table.

"You will excuse me, but it was a long day and I don't feel very hungry. I think I'll just go lie down and read myself to sleep," he said with a somewhat recovered poise. Hélène's father stood up to shake his hand and used a similar excuse to head upstairs without eating, leaving the young woman alone at the living room table. It was not even eight o'clock.

Hélène dined as twilight besieged the windows. While the two men attended to the old scar whose skin she had just broken again, she poured herself a small glass of red wine and toasted with her mother the descent of what she already knew to be the last day of her childhood.

Chapter 5

27 Years Earlier

On Sunday morning, H el ene woke up early and stepped out for a walk into the vineyards before even sitting down for breakfast. The previous day had taken a serious toll on her nerves and the night had not done much to decant her emotions. Slow strolls through the army of old, gnarled vine trunks that had guarded her from the outside world all her life always had a pacifying effect on her. Almost always. At the turn of a vine row, a very close, deafening explosion blasted her ear drums; she reacted with a high pitch scream.

“Oh God, H el ene, I am so sorry; I didn’t see you coming!”

The girl turned in the direction of the voice and found Victor—one of her father’s farmhands—kneeling by a vine trunk.

“Victor, you could have killed me!” yelled H el ene, incensed by the smell of powder still coming from the shotgun in the man’s hands.”

“I was aiming at these wood thrushes over there,” the man replied with a mortified expression while pointing downhill at a flock of small brown birds that were frenetically fleeing. “I’d never shoot unless I had a clear line of sight,” he continued with an apologetic tone as he broke open the barrel of his shotgun. H el ene’s wrath collapsed as the man’s short and frail silhouette unfolded upward and he removed his hunter’s hat out of respect for her. Her father had once explained to her how—before she was even born—he had hired a skinny migrant worker for the grape harvest. Though a small fellow and not very socially inclined, the man had proven to be a strong and hard-working employee. Touched by his apparent isolation and lack of prospects, H el ene’s father had offered him a permanent job as a farmhand on the estate. He had never regretted it. Although Victor was too much of a loner to grow into a higher rank over the years, he had proven to be a skillful and dependable employee. He had also demonstrated from the start an almost religious dedication to his boss and his family. Anyone who would drop a disparaging comment about any of them in public would risk a serious pummeling from the farmhand.

Though Victor was only in his late thirties when she was growing up, H el ene had always perceived him as an old man. He would greet her with a soft smile, but would never joke or play games with her. He would treat her with an excessive deference, almost as an old Spanish servant would have an *infanta*. As time had gone by, she had come to think of him as one of her vine trunk guardians. When she grew into her teens and was able to join the turbulent crowds at the village fests, she knew that Victor was never far, keeping an eye on her from a distance to make sure that no harm would come her way. He would always leave the partying and drinking to the others, even at the end-of-harvest banquets where all farm hands would toast their paychecks. His only distractions seemed to be hunting or

just walking with a stick in the vineyards—even on Sundays—as if he felt the need to constantly occupy that space for fear of losing his place in it.

“Did you catch anything?” asked H  l  ne with a gentle voice to signify to the man that the incident was closed.

“No, nothing yet. This was my first shot. I’ve been here for a while but I was just watching the sunrise. I didn’t want to wake you guys up too early with gun shots.”

H  l  ne looked at him with affection.

“Have you ever left the property for more than a day, Victor? Have you ever traveled somewhere else?” she asked.

“What for? I drifted for years before your dad hired me. I know what’s out there and it was never very good to me. Here, I belong; why would I want to be somewhere else, even for a few days?”

“So, you could probably tell the story of my family better than any of us...”

“The story of the estate, maybe,” Victor replied, on the defensive, “but not the story of the people; that happened inside the house.”

“You knew Tristan twenty years ago, right?”

The man squinted and looked away as if suddenly captivated by something happening far behind H  l  ne.

“I’m not sure, but I think I saw a deer sneak into that parcel over there. I’ll have to get it out before it starts munching on the vines,” he said, pointing a vague finger.

“OK, I’ll walk with you,” said H  l  ne, undeterred.

The man frowned furtively before heading in the direction of the parcel without enthusiasm.

“You didn’t answer my question about Tristan,” H  l  ne insisted.

“Yes; I knew him before you were born. He was always hanging around here; he and your dad were good friends.”

“And my mom, too?”

“They were all good friends, yes,” replied Victor, increasingly uncomfortable.

“Was there ever anything between Tristan and my mom?”

“No... I don’t know... Your mom loved your dad—”

“Victor, I’m not a little girl anymore,” said H  l  ne. “I’m just beginning to realize that things with my mom may have been more complicated than I thought.”

“H  l  ne, if you want to learn more about your mother, your dad is the one you should be talking to,” said Victor with a cutting tone of voice that surprised the young woman. She retreated.

“You’re right, Victor. I’m sorry I put you on the spot like that.”

“Please, don’t apologize. It’s normal at your age to ask these kinds of questions; I’m just sorry I can’t give you any answers.”

They parted on a smile, but H el ene returned to the house frustrated. She had never seen Victor push back on her; she would not even have thought him capable of it. His reaction only confirmed her fast-growing feeling that she might be missing a few links in the custody chain of her short life.

When she returned to the house, her father's car was gone as expected; he never missed Sunday mass at the village. H el ene walked into the kitchen and started fixing herself a *caf e au lait* and a plate of *biscottes*, each plastered with butter and strawberry jam. Confused or not, she was still a voracious seventeen-year-old. It was only after eating her third cracker that she sensed a presence behind her. She rotated on her chair and discovered Tristan leaning on the frame of the open kitchen door.

"Did you cut yourself?" he asked and stared with insistence at the young woman's left hand, whose index finger bore a small adhesive bandage around the tip.

"Is that 'good morning' in Russian?" H el ene replied snappily, annoyed both by the man's sneaky arrival and the inquisitive tone of his question.

"If you're missing a drop of blood, H el ene, worry no more; I found it," Tristan continued, ignoring her remark and lifting his eyes to hers. "See, I'm a bit compulsive. With suitcases, I always leave the sliders by the middle of the zipper, never at an end; that way if the zipper breaks open, the sliders will still prevent the cover from swinging open in the middle of the airport."

H el ene shrugged her shoulders with annoyance.

"I'm sorry, Tristan, but I don't warm up to charades or even small talk until I've had my breakfast. You're welcome to join me; there's still coffee in the pot."

Tristan declined with a polite smile and walked away without a word. Seconds later, H el ene heard his car take off. She did not finish her breakfast. She was mad at herself for the way she had handled the exchange with Tristan. He was right and he knew it. She had reacted like a little girl caught with her hand in the cookie jar and pretending that it was not her hand. She decided to go spend the day at her best friend's, Nicole; the grown-up world could get a bit too dense, a bit too fast. She jumped on her scooter and headed to the village. The bright sun was still low above the hills and she cursed herself for forgetting her sunglasses as she drove down the narrow, winding road. She entered a tight turn bordered on both sides by thick woods that made it impossible to see around the bend. She was blinded by the sun the instant she came out on the other side of the curve. Losing all spatial markers, she closed her eyes and clenched her fists onto the brakes of the scooter. A short and disorienting flight preceded the slamming of her body against the dry soil of the road banks. The shock winded her; she gasped for air in a childlike panic before embracing a dizzy spell that swept her into unconsciousness.

Hélène opened her eyes onto foreign walls; gentle, pastel rose foreign walls. She lay on the narrow bed of what was without a doubt a girl's bedroom, replete with naïve romantic paintings, stilted dolls posing with artifice on the dresser, and several hanging mobiles all made with airy bird feathers. Only the ceramic statue of the Virgin Mary on the nightstand, with her graceful figure and clumsily painted face, seemed vaguely familiar. Hélène performed a quick check of her body; despite some soreness at the shoulder and the hip, there did not seem to be any serious damage.

Her summer dress rose up when she sat on the bed, revealing a white medical wrap around her right thigh. She touched the covered area but only felt a faint irritation underneath it in response. Upon further inspection in front of the dresser mirror, she found a band aid on the side of her face, just under the cheekbone. She cautiously pulled off one end of the bandage and discovered a wound about an inch long that had been stitched three times. The sight of the black sutures sticking out of the pouty wound scared Hélène. After surgery—no matter how minor—she should have awakened either at the hospital, at the doctor's office, or at home, and that girly bedroom—though far from threatening—was none of those.

Before she had a chance to head for the door, it swung wide open onto a young man about her age. He had a start when he saw her standing in the middle of the room, but immediately followed up with a broad grin. The lad was quite attractive, tall and slim, with even facial features and a kind smile, but that was not what fascinated Hélène. The instant she had laid eyes on him, a gentle shiver had run up the back of her neck, just behind the ears, and her mind had started looping around a paraphrase of a poem by Verlaine:

*"Often do I dream this strange and penetrating dream
Of an unknown man, whom I love, who loves me,
Who is, every time, neither quite the same
Nor quite another, and who loves and understands me."*

And as to punctuate these words, the young man walked up to her, cupped each of her ears with his hands, and kissed her lightly on the lips. He then let his hands drop down the sides of her neck and slide down her bare arms until they clasped onto her wrists. With his face still very close to hers, he murmured, "You scared me, you know, love..." Hélène did not resist when he guided her back to the bed and helped her to lie down.

"You need bed rest at least until tomorrow morning," the boy said. "I was just coming to check on you. Your mom had to go to the village to get some more dressings for your cut and an ointment that the doctor prescribed. Since your dad has a group of customers visiting today, she

asked me to stay with you in the mean time. Phew... I'm so glad you came back around; the doc said that if you did not awaken by nightfall, you'd have to be taken to the hospital. Don't move; I'll be right back. I'll bring you some hot tea and a cup of soup." He whisked himself out before she had a chance to reply and closed the door behind him.

Hélène was stunned. This unknown and yet so warmly familiar boy had just referred to her mother as a mothering being; a car-driving being... A living being! Though she did not experience any fear, Hélène felt a sudden urge to leave the place. She had lost all bearings there and sensed a threat from indulging further into a bout of insanity, no matter how mesmerizing. She walked to the door and grabbed the round knob; it rotated smoothly, but the moment she pulled the pane, its hinges squealed as if to alert her caregiver. She popped her head through the door frame and made sure that the surroundings were clear. A shiny wooden floor, several closed doors, a staircase going down; all, like the boy, familiar and not recognized at the same time. She slowly proceeded down the staircase. She could hear clinking sounds coming from the ground floor.

As she set foot on the dark red tiles of the hallway, she turned her head toward the sounds, now closer, and saw her young keeper through a door frame. His back turned to her—in what appeared to be a kitchen—he stood by an oven range and stirred a wooden spatula inside a small saucepan. He sang to himself and with much conviction "Mexico," a lively and corny tune from a popular French singer of the fifties that Hélène's father would often intone—to her great embarrassment—at wedding parties after a few glasses of wine. Despite the ridicule of his performance, Hélène felt infused with an unexplainable affection for the young man and had a hard time tearing herself from him. When the oddity of the space-time in which she was soaking finally hit her again, she ran out of the open front door and into a bright and sunny day. She kept on running through a grassy front yard and was alerted to a group of men at a distance, about to enter a patch of vines. They, too, faced away but one of the necks, at the back of the pack, with its uneven haircut under an olive green cowboy-like hat looked somewhat familiar.

Hélène kept running downhill, on the narrow road delineated by the end of the grapevine rows on each side. The same alley that eventually dove into a tall natural forest that swallowed most of the sky's light. Just as she found a second breath in the cool shadow, her run came to an abrupt stop when she nearly bumped into a beige suitcase barring the trail. The cloth of the luggage pulsed at random spots, as if something inside was bumping into it over and over. Hélène picked up a thin stick of wood from the ground and pushed it between the teeth of the zipper to force it open. A swarm of small brown birds gushed out of the suitcase without a single sound and engulfed her in a dark vortex.

Chapter 6

27 Years Earlier

“Hélène, at last... How do you feel, honey?”

The young woman finished opening her eyes as she turned her head in the direction of the voice. Her father sat on the side of the bed; his jaws contracted as he awaited her answer.

“I think I’m fine,” Hélène replied with a tentative smile.

“Is your head spinning or hurting?” the dad insisted.

“Not really; I just have a mild headache and my skull feels sore back there,” Hélène said and reached at the back of her head to discover a bump that was sensitive to the touch.

“Yes, you got yourself a hardy hematoma there; that’s probably where your head hit the ground when you fell. The doctor said that it would go away on its own after a few hours—”

“The doctor came?”

“You were unconscious; of course, the doctor came!” the father replied. “Alfred—” he said, referring to one of the neighbors—“was returning from fetching his bread at the village when he found you knocked out on the road shoulder. The moped’s engine was still running. He brought you here, since that was the closest, and immediately called the church; he knew that at that time, I’d be there. Since the doctor was attending the service as well, I grabbed him and we rushed back here. He left just ten minutes ago. He examined you and didn’t find anything serious except for that bump on your head and minor scratches on your arms and legs. He thought you had just knocked yourself out and said he’d return in a couple of hours; if you had not regained consciousness by then, you’d have to be taken to the hospital.”

“How long was I out?”

“About an hour; an hour and a half at most.”

Hélène slowly scanned the place from side to side and recognized without effort the pale blue curtains, the posters of her favorite bands, and the pieces of custom jewelry on the dresser; this time, she had awakened in her own bedroom.

“Dad, can you hand me the mirror on the dresser?” she asked.

The father complied promptly. Hélène lifted the hand mirror to her face.

“Don’t worry,” said the dad, “you don’t have any scratches on your pretty face, even though once again you weren’t wearing your helmet.”

Despite the reassurance, Hélène kept staring at the mirror, apparently fixated on a spot on her cheek.

“Are you looking for something in particular?” asked the father, now worried again by her demeanor.”

"While I was out, I had a strange dream," H el ene replied softly to appease her father. "I woke up in a bedroom—but not this one—I was also hurt from the accident; some sort of wound on the thigh, which had been bandaged, and a cut under the eye that had been closed with three stitches."

H el ene's father stared at his daughter with astonishment, now doubting his own sanity. It took him a long moment to realign his thoughts.

"What thigh and what eye?" he finally asked.

Surprised by the question, H el ene closed her eyes to picture in her mind the scene in the alien bedroom.

"Right thigh; left eye," she replied. "Why?"

"That's impossible... How could you have dreamt that? I never spoke to you about it. Who did?!" the father said, instinctively raising his voice. H el ene shrugged her shoulders and arched her eyebrows in an expression of confusion to encourage him to continue. He did, after making an effort to temper his voice.

"Your mother is the one who suffered the injuries that you just described, after a bike accident when she was around your age. Surely, someone must have told you that at some point. Was it Tristan? Or Victor maybe...?"

"No, I swear, I don't recall anyone ever telling me about that. I can't believe it; in that dream, I was... Mom!"

Father and daughter exchanged stares filled with confusion and sadness. H el ene's mind kept rushing back and forth between the two bedrooms.

"But if I was Mom, then who was—" She stopped and switched gears in mid-flight. "Why are you so sure that you never mentioned Mom's accident to me?" she asked instead.

H el ene's father had a reflex grimace but after a long hesitation, he answered the question calmly.

"It was the kind of day that one prefers to forget, especially when it belongs to a time of youth and foolishness."

"Yes...?"

"That day, I only heard about your mother's accident a couple of hours after it had occurred. I rushed to her parents' home. I was crazy in love with her and had been courting her for months, without much progress, to be honest. Your mom and I had been friends since childhood and she thought of me more like a brother."

"What happened when you got to the house?"

"The front door was open and I could hear muffled voices coming from the second floor. I climbed the stairs and headed toward the bedroom from which the sounds were coming. The door was ajar; when I pushed it, I saw your mother lying on her bed, her head raised as she drank from a

cup of tea while Tristan held her other hand to his cheek. The way they looked at each other... It was pretty clear... My two best friends, behind my back, and both knew how much I cared for her."

"What did you tell them?"

"I never said a word. I walked up to the bed, grabbed Tristan by the hair, threw him down onto the floor, and dragged him on his back out of the room, still by the hair. He was stunned; he didn't even fight back. Your mom rushed behind us and begged me to stop, but at that point all I wanted was to create hurt for them. I dragged Tristan all the way down the staircase, across the hall, and out of the house. I left him there, lying on the grass, just in front of the doorsteps. I took a last look at them—both were crying by then—and I left."

"That was the end of your friendship?"

"It wasn't; instead, it became the end of their relationship; somehow. The incident had taken place on a Sunday. Tristan was in his first year of college at the time; that night, he took the train back to school. He returned to the village the next weekend and he and your mom came to visit me at my parents' house. We had all cooled off by then. They worked hard to convince me that I had mistaken the nature of their relationship and we agreed to forget what had happened."

"Just like that?"

"Just like that. It may be hard to understand but we just didn't know how to be without each other. The three of us."

"And Tristan and Mom never dated again?"

"I don't think they ever did in the first place. I just mistook Tristan's relief for love that day and reacted like a fool."

Hélène's lips still felt the light imprint of Tristan's—even though their kiss had taken place in an alternate reality—yet she nodded to second her father's take on the situation.

"I'm hungry!" she said with forced joy to release the tension of the conversation. "Why don't you fix me your world famous *cèpe* omelet? I'll be down in five minutes."

"Are you sure you want to get up?"

"Yes, I'm fine," Hélène replied as she pedaled in the air while still lying on the bed. "Staying in bed would make me feel as if I were really sick."

She watched with affection as her father headed for the door, and stopped him just as he turned the knob. "Dad, where did this statue come from?" She pointed at the Virgin Mary ceramic on her nightstand. Her father smiled.

"Your mom put it there the day we brought you home from the hospital. You were three days old. She said that her mother had done the same with her and that this statuette, for all its defects and its crooked smile, had protected the lives of several generations of girls in her family."

Hélène smiled back at the Virgin Mary. She had just protected her across two lives.

Hélène went to bed early that night; after awakening from her light trauma, she had convinced her father to drop her at Nicole's and she had spent the rest of the day there. She had told her friend about the moped accident, but had kept the strange dream to herself, as if it were a romantic secret to be held closely. To her disappointment, Tristan had not returned by the time Nicole's parents dropped her back home. She was eager to see him; eager to rediscover on the mature gentleman's face the eyes of the boy who had pressed his lips onto hers with such tenderness and restraint just a few hours earlier. Following a dinner with her father, she waited around in front of the TV for a while, but by ten o'clock, her dad ordered her to go to bed. She did not argue; the day had taken its toll on her emotions, and somehow she was hoping that in the middle of the night, she would wake up again in the pastel rose bedroom... She never did. The night engulfed her into a still sleep, that only the alarm clock would disrupt the next morning, to rush her into a school day.

Hélène and Tristan did not cross paths for the next three days. He had decided to spend the first half of the week inside the beachside property that he and Hélène's dad had visited the past weekend, and that he was interested in buying. On Thursday, when Hélène returned from school around five-thirty, she felt a delicious wave of adrenaline jump from one shoulder blade to the other, when she discovered Tristan's car parked in the front yard. It was the only car around; her dad's was gone and the employees had already left.

As soon as she walked through the door, she shouted a joyous "Tristan?" but did not receive any answer. She stepped back outside and repeated her call, this time louder, but again without any other response than the echo of her voice bouncing off the opposite hill. She walked to the back of the house and noticed that the low, narrow door of the cellar was ajar. As far back as she could remember, the long, dark stone structure half-buried into the hill had made her feel uneasy. She pushed the door and peaked into the dimly lit space, which in return blew a breath of chilling air at her.

Tristan sat on a stool by the wine-tasting counter, behind a half-empty bottle of red wine. He raised the glass in his hand to acknowledge Hélène's presence.

"Tristan, you're here. Didn't you hear me calling you?" she asked.

"I did... I just didn't feel much like company," he replied while staring down at his glass.

"Is everything okay? Was there a problem at the beach?"

"No, everything is fine with the house there. I bought it today; I'll leave here at the end of the week."

"It looks like you can't wait to be rid of us," said H el ene, equally annoyed by the news of Tristan's departure and his obvious refusal to make eye contact with her. He ignored her comment. Out of spite, H el ene walked up to the counter and sat on a stool, right across the counter from him.

"Well, I'm sorry if you don't care for company, but I do," she said and pulled an empty glass toward her in which she poured some of the red wine.

"Are you sure your father is okay with that?" Tristan asked, finally lifting his eyes to hers.

"He's not here; you're the next responsible adult in line, so what say you?" she said, and without waiting for his answer, took a sip of the wine. Tristan watched the dark nectar slide down the walls of the glass and bump onto her full, unpainted lips.

"What got into you, H el ene? Your little show on Saturday at dinner; now this. What kind of a game is that? Some sort of a bet with your school friends? You are to try to seduce an older man?"

"Considering the expression on your face on Saturday when I came down the stairs, if that had been the bet, I could have marked it as won right there and right then. Only, I don't think that your trouble had anything to do with me. It was my mother you saw coming down the staircase, wasn't it?"

Tristan lowered back his eyes. In that cold, somber cave, confronted by a ghostly embodiment of the one love of his life, he felt faint. When she realized that he would not answer, H el ene pushed on.

"My dad told me about your fight the day Mom had a bike accident and how it had put an end to your romance with her. The only other data point I have on my mother and you is that letter in your suitcase; that wonderful love letter where she tells you—just hours before her accident—how, even though she married my dad, you always were the one and only in her heart—"

"You stole her words from me," said Tristan.

"You stole her heart from us," replied H el ene.

"What do you mean?!" Tristan's rising voice echoed in the cellar. "I never stole your mom from you or your dad. I emigrated two thousand miles away and never came back just so that would never have a chance to happen!"

This time, H el ene wished that his eyes had been pointed down. Slightly glistening from the effects of the wine, they drilled into hers with an unsettling fever.

"But her letter was written several years after your breakup and several years after she had gotten married; I was already three years old by

that time," she said, applying herself to use a soft tone of voice to calm him down. It did not work.

"So what are you implying? That we did not breakup the day of your mom's accident? That we kept going on with our romance behind your father's back until she married him and I left? That we even continued through a long distance relationship?"

"I didn't say that; I don't know..."

"No, but that's what you think! Let me clear this up for you. The day your father dragged me out of your mother's house by the hair was the last day of my romantic story with her. I loved your father like a brother; I could never have been happy with your mother knowing that we had betrayed him, even though I had stopped loving her like a sister and grown to see her like the beautiful young woman that she was. The week that followed the incident, I broke it up with your mother and though she did not understand, she accepted my decision. The three of us decided to mend the snake heart that bound us together since childhood. Three chambers, remember? With just two, it would have stopped beating for all of us." Tristan was getting agitated. "From that point on, I stopped coming back from college every weekend—"

"You forgot my mom, just like that?"

"Forgot her?! I could never let go of her inside! It would now hurt me to see her; that's why I just visited a few times a year. She and your dad went to the community college just down the street from our high school and saw each other every day. My college was two-hundred miles away. At every one of my visits, I could tell that they had grown a bit closer and I had grown a bit more different. Three years later, just a month after our respective graduations, they came to my parents' house where I was to spend the summer and announced their wedding to me. We all cried. Your dad shed tears of joy; I shed tears of pain; your mom cried—"

"Tears of joy?"

"That's what I thought at the moment and that pained me most of all. When I read her letter three years later, I understood that through these tears, she was saying goodbye to me."

"I know... If she still loved you, why did she marry my father?"

"I never gave her a chance to get close to me again. At some point, she had to move on with her life and her love for your dad was a sisterly affection. She could not have sought another kind of love since her heart was already engaged."

"Had you and Mom ever been lovers?" asked H el ene instinctively and blushed the instant the words crossed her lips. Now fully immersed in the past, Tristan answered without reserve.

"Almost once, on a weekend trip to the mountains. I had convinced my parents that I would spend the night at a friend's and she had done the same. We hitchhiked to a place in the mountains that she had discovered in

a magazine and had set her imagination on fire. A secluded fort carved in part out of the top of a rock face and abandoned to the winds. 'Wuthering Heights and Blue Beard's den in one!' she shouted as we approached it; she was so excited." Tristan paused with an absent smile on his face. Hélène nodded to encourage him to continue but he didn't.

"Did you make it inside the fort?" she pressed.

"We did," he said, as if he had suddenly shut down the sluices on the past. Hélène understood that he would not move past them.

"Will you show me that place?"

Tristan dodged the question by pouring himself another glass of wine.

"You owe me that, Tristan. By bringing my mother's words into my house, you made her come to life for me for the first time, even if these words were meant for you. Will you show me that place?"

Tristan raised his eyes and stared at Hélène's face with some distress for a long moment before replying.

"I will," he said. The pitch of his voice had dropped, but Hélène was too taken by the moment to notice.

But Victor did, as he stood still on the hill, three-pronged wooden pitchfork in hand, in the middle of a row of vines just above them, where an air vent exhaled the cellar's vitiated air into the cleansing breeze that swept the hill.

Chapter 7

27 Years Earlier

The night had just landed on Hélène's father's estate when Victor dropped her back home. They stopped by his own house, just half a mile away, where he led her to the bathroom and told her to throw her dress into the corridor after removing it. He waited outside the door for her to comply. The white summer dress smeared the beige tiles with brown streaks when it landed by Victor's feet. Blood did not dry fast. He picked it up and threw it in the washer along with three cups of laundry detergent and another two of bleach, before running the hottest cycle. He did not have any clothes that could have passed for Hélène's and the stores were already closed.

In Victor's mind ran a nagging clock. If they made it to Hélène's house before nine, her dad would probably still be working in the cellar or in his office. That would allow Hélène to sneak back into her room. She had not said a word during the drive back from the fort, despite Victor's attempts to engage her. She was in shock, but that was much preferable to hysteria. She would, however, not be able to fool her father for a second if they came face to face.

Victor escorted Hélène to the front door. No light had yet been turned on inside the house. Once they entered the living room, Victor led the girl to the bottom of the staircase and lifted her hand to the handrail.

"Hélène, you go to your room and straight to bed, okay? I'll find your father and tell him that you felt very tired and needed to rest for an early test at school tomorrow."

Her eyes were still inanimate and she showed no sign of having heard Victor, but she mechanically started walking up the stairs. She was not halfway up the staircase that the outside door swung open and the living room lights were flicked on.

"Hey, what are you guys up to?!" said Hélène's father with a playful tone after a slight start of surprise. His grin faded out when he took a second glimpse at his daughter, still petrified halfway up the stairs. Her dress, still damp, stuck to her legs and reeked of bleach.

"I just picked up Hélène from her friend's at the village," replied Victor. "They made crepes all afternoon and had a few too many. Now they both have indigestion."

Hélène's father ignored the explanation and climbed the stairs to approach his daughter, who still faced away. When he touched her shoulders to turn her toward him, her legs folded under her and she fell heavily at his feet.

"What the hell is going on Victor?!" he yelled and lifted his daughter into his arms. "Stay there! I'm putting her to bed and you're going to explain what's wrong with her."

He returned less than a minute later.

"Is she okay?" Victor asked.

"I gave her a slap and she came back around, but she is prostrated and doesn't seem to hear me. What is it, Victor? Drugs?"

Victor spoke from the living room as H el ene's father towered over him at the top of the staircase like a judge. He spoke for a long moment, without ever being interrupted. He could tell that with each word, he was taking an ice pick to the sanity of his beloved boss. The man at the top of the stairs had clenched his hands onto the wooden balustrade and his face turned more haggard with each stroke of the story. When Victor finally stopped talking, the father descended the staircase slowly while staring at his employee with great distress in his eyes. Victor braced himself in anticipation of a blow when the man's face came within inches of his, but the only blow that came was that of a warm breath.

"What you did was right, Victor. That son of a bitch took from my daughter what my wife had denied him in that same fort twenty-three years ago. The only part of her love she denied him. Now he finally owns them both. Even in hell, he will stand as the winner."

H el ene's father opened the front door, stepped outside, and slammed it closed. Victor waited for a couple of minutes before going after him. The moment he walked out, he heard screaming and sounds of broken glass coming from the back of the house. He marched around the building to the cellar, only to sit on the grass by the side of the small door. He listened to his employer who, inside the cave, summoned all the fires of hell in vociferous spasms often punctuated by the shattering of glass.

Victor trusted H el ene's father not to hurt himself—he had overcome at least one equally destructive challenge in the past— and his goal was to stand by while the man vented his wrath, just in case his heart would not withstand the pressure. However, Victor grew increasingly scared by the expression of his mentor's madness. In his torrents of hateful words, the man bundled his wife and Tristan, but also H el ene. He no longer seemed to make a difference between wife and daughter. They were one; the one who betrayed his love. "Now, I see it!" "Now, I know at last!" "Heathen!" "Whore!" he screamed in alternation, his voice getting lower and raspier at every turn. Victor thought for a moment of walking into the cellar and trying to explain to the man that his daughter was as innocent as when the day had begun, that she was a victim of Tristan and not his lover, but H el ene's father was too far out of reach. He had already damned the past with his wife and the future with his daughter.

All of a sudden, the racket in the cave ceased. Victor stood up and pushed the door. An overwhelming stench of wine assaulted him as he stepped on the blanket of glass shards from the dozens of bottles that had been smashed against the walls. H el ene's father had collapsed in front of a stainless steel vat in the back of the cellar. Victor checked his pulse at the

neck, it was strong and regular. The man had probably passed out as a result of physical as well as emotional exhaustion, and the strong vapors of alcohol in the confined space had not helped. Victor picked up his boss—a man nearly twice his weight—and carried him in his arms all the way back to the house, up the stairs, and into his bedroom, where he laid him onto the bed, removed his shoes, and covered him with a bed spread. He grabbed a blanket for himself from a closet and stepped out into the corridor where he curled up into a wide armchair.

At that moment, Victor could not have imagined that H el ene’s father would never be able to bridge the rift that had just opened between him and his treasured daughter. His boss’ drinking would start right away and would only further fuel his disgust for her. While H el ene struggled to rebuild herself after the trauma, he would refuse to communicate with her in any way, or even to acknowledge her presence. After several weeks of that painful treatment, H el ene would understand that if she were to ever heal, it could only happen away from him. On a Sunday morning, while her father was at church, she would pack a small bag, grab the savings that she had once intended for buying her first car, and walk down the grass alley that led out of her family’s property. Victor would watch her leave from the hill, his hand clasped onto the long white dove feathers that he had collected throughout the vineyard to offer her later that day as a present for her eighteenth birthday.

Chapter 8

27 Years Earlier

The moment he curled up into an armchair of the upstairs corridor, Victor was assaulted by the realization that earlier in the day, he had killed a man. Since that event, every one of his thoughts had been dedicated to securing H el ene's safety, and then her father's. Now that both lay quietly in their respective bedrooms, his mind opened for the first time the floodgates to information about planting his favorite pitchfork into a man's back and throwing his body into a ravine. Graphic images of the scene that had been held back for hours, started pouring into him with chilling force. He tried hard to convince himself that he had not been given a choice, but that path only led him to the conclusion that of all the possibilities to deal with the situation at the fort, he had picked the worst.

One by one, the visuals redrew the scene and revealed to him as plain murder what had seemed as rightful justice under the emotional discharge of the moment. He had killed in cold blood a man that he could easily have subdued, especially with the benefit of surprise. He was a murderer, and on top of the grief that realization brought him, he was also becoming aware of the legal implications of his act. He had been in such a hurry to remove H el ene from the scene that he had left behind a cadaver out in the open. Even though the fort was abandoned and secluded, the possibility of a hiker or mountain ranger stumbling on the body was not all that remote.

Victor stood up, walked up to H el ene's bedroom door, and listened for a long moment; no sound. The same maneuver by his boss' door yielded the same result. He then proceeded to the guestroom in which Tristan had been staying and started packing all of his victim's belongings into the suitcase. During the drive back from the fort, he had already figured out that he, his boss, and H el ene could just agree to say that Tristan had been called back to Russia for business. Since he no longer had any relatives or close friends in the area, no one would care for details; as long as Tristan's personal effects were not found lying around. In a final inspection of the room to make sure that he had not left anything behind, Victor's arm reached far back over the top shelf of the armoire; the tip of his fingers hit a soft ball, which rolled out of reach. He climbed on a chair and found there a small, dark cloth bag swollen by objects that felt rounded to the touch.

After a brief struggle to untie the cord that held the bag closed, Victor shook its contents onto the bed. Five thick rolls of bills dropped onto the bedcover. As Victor brushed the edge of each roll with his thumb, he realized that all the banknotes were hundred euro bills. He ran a quick calculation in his head; there probably were around fifty bills in each roll, which amounted to twenty-five thousand euros. He looked at the small fortune with fascination for a moment and then shoved with rage the bundles back into the cloth bag, which he threw inside the suitcase. It was

the money of the man he had assassinated; cursed money. It would burn with the rest of the man's belongings. After a last check to make sure that the house was quiet, Victor walked out, threw Tristan's luggage into the trunk of his sedan, and drove off. It was not even midnight yet; the day was still the same as that of his crime and he was already returning to the scene.

The drive should not have taken more than an hour and a half but Victor's poor night vision, compounded with the treacherousness of the mountain road on the second half of the trip, made the ride a slow and nerve-wracking venture. It was close to two in the morning when the car finally came to a stop on a small patch of rocky ground at the bottom of the path that led up to the fort. The trail was barely wider than the beam of the flashlight and the slope felt even steeper in the dark. After crossing the small bridge and passing under the arch that opened to the fort area, Victor repeated the steps that he had taken earlier in the day, which led him to the room on the top floor in which the drama had unfolded.

He approached with caution the tall opening in the wall through which he had pushed Tristan's body, lay down flat on his stomach with his head and shoulders sticking out of the hole, and pointed his flashlight down. He just wanted to visualize the cadaver and the landscape around it before going down to retrieve it. He crisscrossed the craggy bank of the ravine with the beam of his flashlight right underneath the wall opening, but the scanning only revealed a glistening array of overlapping flat rocks. The spot where Victor had seen Tristan's body land and lie in a disarticulated form was empty. That a rain shower would have washed off the blood from the rocks was conceivable, but it could never have carried the body away.

Victor suddenly felt ill at ease. He stood back up and sensed a threat from the massive structure that enveloped him and from which only a small disk was lit at a time. Evil spirits could just as well have been dancing all around him, playfully dodging the beam of his flashlight. He rushed down the stairs and exited the building; the fresh air calmed him down a bit. He resolved to walk along the walls of the fort in the direction of the ravine in which Tristan had fallen; maybe he had misjudged the landing spot from above.

After five minutes of a slow, stumbling walk along the wall, Victor recognized a large boulder in the shape of an eight that stood just by the edge of the ravine and under the window from which he had thrown Tristan. He walked up to the boulder and scanned the banks of the ravine with the flashlight; once again, he did not see anything but glistening stone. He knelt by the edge of the precipice, held on to the boulder with one hand, and leaned slightly into the void in an attempt to get a wider angle of vision. At that instant, a hissing sound very close to his ear petrified him.

“Come on, Victor! Grab it and cut its head off!”

In response to his father’s heckling, the boy hesitantly dangled back and forth the small hatchet that he had been using all day in the forest while helping his dad to cut wood. At his feet lay a buzzard that had crashed out of the sky and through the canopy to land like a bad omen just a dozen yards from them. One of its wings was broken; the outermost half almost folded back onto the section closer to the body. The bird had seen them and tried desperately to take off again by flapping its valid wing. That only propelled him in a circular motion on the ground during which its plumage got coated with gooey, yellow mud, which slowed him down a little more at every turn.

When he realized that his father’s initial amusement was starting to turn to irritation in the face of his reluctance to kill the bird, Victor removed his thick plastic raincoat, threw it onto the animal, and picked it up. He laid the package onto an old stump and opened with caution one end of the coat. The bird’s head popped out with a hissing sound. Panicked, Victor clumsily swung his hatchet down as hard as he could onto the emerged part of the neck. The buzzard’s head fell to the ground and immediately took a life of its own. The short feathers at the back and top of the skull slowly erected into a threatening array of arrow points; the beak opened in slow motion into a muted war cry; and the eyes... The eyes, directed straight at the boy’s, in a last ditch attempt to project into them a toxic load of primal fear and visceral hate.

After an instant of still terror, Victor pointed his flashlight in the direction from which the hissing sound had just erupted. In a flash, he saw again the buzzard’s eyes—the same fear; the same hate. He pushed back on his heels as hard as he could to project his body away from the edge of the ravine. He landed heavily on his back and rolled away a couple of times before standing up. He stood still for a good minute, his heart still banging the beat of the fight or flight mode, before recovering his senses and mustering enough courage to approach again the edge of the ravine.

From a distance this time, he leaned forward and pointed his flashlight sideways to the small cavity formed by the overhang of the eight-shaped boulder on the ravine. The yellow beam of the flashlight formed an oval envelope around a grown-up man, nude, bloody, and curled up in a fetal position. The man’s face contrasted with the fragility of his posture; it was transfixed by fear and anger, with insanely feverish eyes locked onto the source of the light.

“Tristan, is that you...?”

Victor already knew the answer; he just needed for the creature under the boulder to take back some human quality, if only through a couple of words. All the way to the fort, he had planned in his head how to dispose

of Tristan's cadaver. There was no cadaver. There was only a naked life form at the edge of the world of the living and for that, he did not have a plan.

Tristan did not respond. He appeared catatonic and just kept staring at the light with the fixation of a cornered fox's eyes. How he had managed at some point to crawl back up the bank of the ravine to take shelter under the boulder was an eerie enigma. Victor was scared. The farmhand had never totally shed the fears and superstition that had been sprinkled over his childhood and what lay in front of him was anything but catholic. Yet, after a few minutes of a silent standoff with Tristan's reincarnation, he proceeded to approach him, even descending to his level. When he got within arm's length of Tristan's body, he grabbed both his wrists in a sudden move, to preempt a physical confrontation. Tristan did not react; his limbs felt cold and oddly limp. He kept staring in the same direction, oblivious to Victor's presence or touch.

Victor let go of the wounded man's wrists; there was no threat of a fight and the contact was disturbing. He sat next to Tristan after covering his nudity with his jacket, and listened to his faint wheezing, which sounded more like a hiss. He started praying with fervor for the man not to survive the night. He knew he would not have the courage to kill him... a second time. And so he waited, for hours, under the menace of the hanging boulder.

Victor never stopped praying; Tristan never stopped hissing. When the first pink light rose over the mountain range, Victor dragged Tristan's body up out of the ravine, picked it up, and carried it in his arms all the way down the steep narrow trail back to his car. All along, he could feel on his arms and chest the unsettling warmth of the nude, limp flesh. Tristan's face was resting on his shoulder. Victor was trapped between the hate in his eyes and the heat from his wheezing breath.

As soon as they reached the car, Victor kneeled and laid the body down on a patch of short grass. He rushed to the trunk of the car, pulled out some clothes from Tristan's suitcase, and feverishly started dressing him. The man did not react at any point. His head just wobbled around as his limbs were pushed and pulled into the garments. Victor felt much better once that task was completed; with clothes on, Tristan looked more human. Once set up on the passenger seat with his head leaning against the door and his seatbelt on, he could almost have passed for a sleepy carpool commuter.

Victor drove off one mountain to immediately climb another. In half an hour, he reached the Spanish border and crossed it without even slowing down. For once, he blessed the European Community initiative that had abolished controls at the frontiers between member states. From there he engaged in a seven-hour descent toward what had been home for the first thirty years of his life. By mid-afternoon, he entered the Northern

part of Portugal, one of the poorest and least populated areas of the country, where dry, rocky hills made it hard for scattered farmers to scrape a living. Shortly after the border crossing, he navigated around the small town of Bragança to follow a narrow road that led to an arid moorland.

Victor stopped in the middle of the road—he had been pretty much alone on it since Bragança—and paced around the car while taking in the air of his youth. In reality, he was tense; very tense. Finding Tristan alive at the fort had totally messed up his initial plan, and despite a night of reflection and prayer, it was only upon opening Tristan's luggage to get his clothes out and seeing the cloth bag containing the rolls of bills, that he had come up with an alternative strategy. A dicey strategy. After a few minutes, Victor got back into the car and soon turned onto an unpaved road at the end of which stood an old, isolated, one-story stone house. He stopped the car a hundred feet from the building and walked the rest of the way. Before he reached the house, the front door opened, revealing a woman in dirty olive green overalls.

Chapter 9

27 Years Earlier

Victor stopped and stared at the woman in the door frame with profound distress for a long moment. Where he had abandoned a beautiful younger sister with matte skin, a slender figure, and onyx-tinted hair pulled back in a tight pony tail, stood an emaciated woman whose long, shaggy, grayish hair was a harrowing testimony to her premature aging. She spoke first, clearly struggling to contain her own emotion behind a dam of pride.

“Victor... You remembered the way here?”

“The one time I came to this house was memorable enough,” Victor replied on the same guarded tone.

“I hope you haven’t returned to try to take me back home once again.”

“Would you be willing to follow me back home now?”

“No. It was too soon then. Now, it’s much too late.”

These few exchanges would be the essence of their reunion after twenty-five years of separation.

“What is it?!” echoed a thunderous voice at a distance.

Victor instinctively took a step back; he had instantly recognized the swaggering gait of his sister’s husband—Jorge. The burly man was hastily descending the hill at the bottom of which the house was planted. He had not changed much, except for his receding hair that exposed a gigantic square forehead. Jorge nodded several times with an annoyed expression when he approached Victor.

“If you stopped by to say hi to your sister, we’ll kill a chicken for supper. If you came to try and take my wife away again, you’ll be supper to the boars that roam around here,” the stocky man said with a loud voice, as if speaking to a crowd.

“I have an offer for Silvia,” Victor said. Jorge frowned. “—and you.” Victor added swiftly.

The husband looked at his brother-in-law with skepticism, but invited him into the house with a curt hand swing. The dim light and chilly atmosphere of the dwelling took Victor by surprise. Only one small window was cut through the thick walls and it faced north. His sister stood stilted by a wooden table on which had been thrown a clear plastic cover. Once Victor’s eyes adjusted to the low light, he discovered, sitting on a wooden bench under the fireplace mantel, an old man whose legs were covered with a blanket. The fire was all but a pile of reddish ashes. The old man stared at the visitor with a suspicious expression before turning to his son.

“Never mind, Dad; this is none of your business,” Jorge said before the old man had a chance to speak. He sat at the table and snapped his fingers in the direction of his wife, “Silvia, wine!” Victor sat across the table and

waited for his sister to return and serve the wine. She did not sit; she just stood up behind her husband and now peered at Victor with obvious emotion.

"So, what's that offer you had for me?" Jorge said after gulping his entire glass of wine.

"A thousand euros a month to care for a very sick man here for as long as it takes for him to die," Victor replied bluntly.

Jorge clenched his fists and straightened up in his chair.

"A thousand euros a month? You have that kind of money? You don't look it; I saw your car from the hill."

"Never mind where the funds come from. You'll receive a cash envelope on the first of each month. It looks like you could use the money."

Silvia instinctively cupped her hand in front of her mouth in anticipation of an outburst from her husband, but he was too preoccupied with the money to pay attention to the swipe.

"A thousand euros a month... Cash, you said? What if the guy dies two days after you drop him here? Then, it'll be more trouble for us than it is worth."

"I'll pay you upfront for the first three months. If he dies before the three months are over, you keep the money. If he lives on, you continue collecting the monthly fees."

Jorge had a dubious smile and served himself another glass of wine before downing it with the same gluttony as the first one.

"When are you bringing that guy?" he asked as he set his glass down.

"He's already here."

Jorge threw a threatening look at Victor; he was in no mood to play games after getting a glimpse of quick and easy money.

"In my car," Victor said and stood up.

Jorge and Silvia waited on the doorsteps while Victor walked back to his car and drove it up the alley, all the way to the house. As soon as he stopped, Jorge opened the passenger door, slid his arms underneath Tristan's body, and carried him swiftly inside the house, as to close the deal and start the clock. Victor stayed behind, and after making sure that he was alone, opened the car trunk. He removed the money bag from Tristan's suitcase, grabbed one bundle of bills from it and hid the rest under the spare wheel. When he brought the luggage inside, Tristan was lying down on his back on the living room table, arms and legs dangling from the sides, eyes and mouth half open.

"Is that how you are planning to keep him?!" said Victor with an angry stare at Jorge.

"No... no... of course not," the man rushed to reply. "We'll keep him properly. I sent Silvia upstairs to prepare the room."

"Upstairs, what upstairs? There's no second floor here!"

"The attic is clean and there's an old bed there, complete with mattress and all. Once Silvia dusts it off a bit and sets it up with sheets and covers, it'll be very comfy. There's even a bed stand."

Confronted with the falsely suave voice and forced smile that Jorge was deploying to convince him, Victor started having second thoughts. Silvia came down the ladder that dropped from the attic into a corner of the room and laid on Tristan a compassionate look. That look gave Victor reassurance that he was doing the best he could under the circumstances.

"Is there any kind of window up in the attic, at least?" he asked.

"No; but there's a light bulb and anyway, I don't think that'll be the biggest problem..."

Jorge's voice had suddenly reverted to a cold and cocky tone as he stared down. Victor walked around the table to stand by his side. On the dark brown tile underneath one of Tristan's hanging arms, a small puddle of blood had started forming, fed by a skinny stream that ran out of the sleeve of the shirt before plunging one drop at a time onto the ground.

"How bad is it under the clothes?" asked Jorge.

"Bad enough to be worth a thousand a month," replied Victor firmly.

"Blood is extra. I don't take cheap risks with the police. Fifteen hundred."

Victor did not reply. He lifted Tristan from the table and threw him over his shoulder with a grunt before climbing with him into the attic. After laying down Tristan onto the bed, he looked at him with pity but found some comfort in the realization that the place was actually warmer than the rest of the house. The wide chimney conduit traversed it and its stones had stored up some of the warmth from an earlier fire. A bare light bulb hung from a beam and a bit of natural light diffused through open spaces underneath the shingles. The small attic was indeed free of clutter and spider webs. Victor trusted his sister to make it more hospitable for her patient. He took advantage of the privacy to pull out forty-five hundred euros from the bundle of bills he had removed from Tristan's cloth bag. After coming down the ladder, he laid the money on the table.

"Fifteen hundred a month; times three months," he said.

Jorge snatched the bills and shoved them in the front pocket of his overhalls.

"I have to get back to work now. Are you leaving?" he asked boorishly.

"I'd like a word with my sister. I haven't seen her in over twenty years."

"Okay, but right here in the kitchen," Jorge said with a commanding stare at his wife. "Dad will be listening. Don't take too long; I need Silvia's help up there on the hill." He proceeded to the door and without turning back dropped, "Don't forget to send the cash three months from now or your friend up there will end up under the manure pile."

Once he closed the door, Victor sat down and invited his sister to the table. He took a look at the old man under the chimney who was staring at them with confusion.

"Don't worry; his hearing is very bad; he won't understand a thing," said the woman.

"Silvia... How can you live like this? And with that man you call a husband?" Victor asked and reached across the table to lay his hand onto his sister's. "I knew I should not have left you here. If only I had kept my ground in front of that beast the day I came to take you home..."

"I'm the one who asked you to leave, remember?" Silvia replied with a melancholic smile. "I was so infatuated with Jorge at that time that I didn't realize that all he wanted was a maid, an extra set of hands in the field, and... well, you know. It didn't take me three months to realize what I had done, but by then, you had already left for France and I had no idea where to reach you. Since mom and dad had already passed away, all I could do was to wait here and pray that you'd return and take me away. And today, after twenty-five years, you finally show up and it's to drop a corpse in our house."

"He's not dead..."

"You know what I mean."

"I thought the money could help you."

"It will, greatly. But that's not what I was hoping for—"

"Would you come with me this time if I asked you?"

"No. I have stopped wanting for that. I am married to Jorge in front of God. For better and for worse; till death do us part."

Victor shook his head with frustration. His sister had given him the exact same argument two decades earlier. She had been a devout Christian since a very young age; she even had considered joining an order of Benedictine sisters before falling into Jorge's hairy hands.

"Talking about worse," Silvia said, "your life doesn't seem to have taken a rosy path either. I'm guessing the man in the attic is not a friend of yours. Are you the one who hurt him?"

Victor lowered his eyes.

"Then why are you now paying so much money to make him comfortable till he dies?"

"Twenty-four hours ago I planted a pitchfork in his back with the intent to kill him. He hasn't died yet and if he does in the next hours or days, it will be God's will, not mine anymore. Leaving him in your care is the best I can do. I can't take him to a hospital; the police would find my trail sooner or later."

The old man under the chimney mantel suddenly banged his cane on the tiles to signify his impatience with the siblings' conversation.

"You can go in peace, Victor," said Silvia. "I'll take care of the man as best I can. What's his name?"

“Tristan. In that suitcase are his clothes and some papers,” the brother replied, pointing at the luggage by a foot of the table. “I don’t think he’ll ever need them again, but there’s no point in burning them yet.”

“I’ll keep everything upstairs with him.”

Victor and Silvia stood up and hugged for a long moment until she pushed her brother away and nodded to encourage him to leave. He drove off, but paused at the end of the trail that led to the house and looked back for an instant at the shaggy stone building, smothered by a low, lead-toned sky. Under the weather-beaten shingles of its roof, he had this time left two distressed souls. One possessed by God, the other rejected even by the devil.

Chapter 10

27 Years Earlier

After Victor's departure, Silvia did not rush to join her husband. He was just weeding a small alley between two fields; she knew that he had only pretended needing her help, so she would not have a chance at a long reunion with her brother. She grabbed a first aid kit and slipped a bar of soap and a wash cloth in her apron pocket before drawing water into a small plastic basin, which she managed to get up the ladder and into the attic without spilling. She sat by the edge of the bed, released very button of Tristan's shirt, and pulled it wide open. The three small, dark puncture wounds aligned vertically near the center of the victim's thorax—one of which oozed a thin stream of blood that ran along the ribs and down the left arm—did not disturb Silvia as much as the pallidness of the skin. She set the basin by her side, dipped the cloth into the cold water, rubbed it on the soap, and started brushing it delicately on the man's chest.

Once the whole area had been cleansed of the dirt and dry blood, she disinfected the wounds with alcohol and covered them with the largest adhesive bandages in the box. She inspected every one of the ugly bruises on the shoulders, ribs, and legs, and suspected the presence of several fractures, but the patient's total immobility was probably the best treatment for these.

Silvia hesitated for an instant before conjuring up enough courage to grab the patient under the arms and prop him into a sitting position. The man's head rolled around limply as she rocked him to pull the sleeves of the shirt off. She laid him back down and—before having a chance to overthink the situation—unbuttoned his pants and pulled them off, in one forceful move, together with the underwear. She was very uncomfortable with the man's nudity, but the pungent smell emanating from his body left little doubt as to the fact that blood was not the only organic matter that had been expelled as a result of the trauma. It took three changes of water in the basin for Silvia to completely restore her patient to a proper hygienic state. Once she had, she rolled his nude body between the clean white sheets and laid on top of him two thick wool blankets.

After the toilet cleansing trial, the feeding routine was a much easier task. Silvia diluted with hot water some of the chickpea soup that she had prepared at lunch time and used a teaspoon to drip the broth into her patient's mouth while she lifted his head. To her relief, though the man's eyes were now closed, he mechanically swallowed every spoonful of soup until the bowl was empty.

In the evening, Silvia's husband gave her one of his long lectures, during which he typically navigated back and forth between patronizing and threatening tones. He ordered her to make caring for the man in the attic her top priority. She would be held accountable for his premature

death if it occurred before they had been able to collect at least a solid year of fees. On the other hand, should the patient recover a bit too fast and indicate a desire to leave, she was to let him know immediately and he would “take it from there.” Jorge was so excited by the events of the day that he downed an entire bottle of red wine before dragging his wife to the bedroom where he made love to her in the only way he knew: without her consent.

The first days following Tristan’s arrival, Silvia lived in constant fear of his passing away. She knew all too well how serious Jorge’s threats were of holding her accountable for the loss of profit that would ensue. The beating would be a severe one. A dozen times a day, she would climb into the attic with a cramped stomach, pull the cover back on Tristan’s chest, and push her ear against his heart. Though his face and body were inanimate and his skin ashy, his heart beat slowly and steadily against her ear, as if it had not received notice of its owner’s passing.

After a week or so of nursing, Silvia understood that Tristan had survived the trauma. The wounds on his chest were starting to heal, he did not appear to have a fever as a result of an infection, and he continued to swallow food as long as it was somewhat fluid or mushy and delivered into his mouth in small amounts. Even though he was totally comatose, all his physiological functions seemed to operate properly. As a result, she had to take care of him as she would have a newborn, for which she did not have any experience. Thankfully, her patient’s eyes were closed most of the time and when they happened to be open, they were so shiny and seemingly full of anger that Silvia preferred to slide the lids back to the closed position.

Once the initial tension faded, Silvia started valuing her new role. Because of the importance of her nursing functions, her husband had ordered her to stay at the house at all times, which meant that she was now exempt from all chores to be carried out by his side in the fields. Tristan, for all of his stupor, had given her what her husband never could: a space of her own and a higher purpose more in line with her faith; that of a compassionate nurse. The attic was her exclusive domain; she was the only one in the house who could reach it. Jorge had a phobic fear of heights and would not climb the first two rungs of a ladder, and as for his father, his legs were so weak that he could not even walk to the bathroom without help.

Silvia grew so fond of that new life compartment that she soon felt the need for Tristan to be a true actor in it. She began talking to him when her husband was not around. At first, she found it quite odd to speak with a man whose only expression of life rested with growing hair and nails but

she overcame her shyness by engaging into a casual and disjointed chatter, usually around the weather, the food she had cooked, or observations she had made during her weekly grocery shopping trip to the nearest village.

After a couple of weeks, she became more comfortable with the one-way conversation mode. One late afternoon, as the winter light already dimmed down inside the attic, she remembered Tristan's suitcase, which she had stored under the bed. She picked it up, laid it by Tristan's side, and inspected its contents. After flipping through the pages of a French passport, she was drawn to the clothing items, all of gentleman quality, from the Italian suits to the cashmere socks and silky boxers. The sight and feel of these garments ignited Silvia's imagination, which was enslaved to the cheap romance novels that she bought at the grocer's and hid at the bottom of the laundry hamper. On a playful impulse, she decided to introduce herself to Tristan as if they had met by chance at one of these fancy American hospitals where many of the heroines of the novels seemed in one way or another to meet their fate.

"Hello Tristan. My name is Silvia. I am your nurse and I will take with you every step of this terrible trial until we come out at the other end together."

Silvia felt so silly after pronouncing these words that she abruptly stood up and left the attic. At nighttime, however, the thought of Nurse Silvia's patient in the hospital's penthouse floor—a section reserved for VIP subjects—freed her from the clammy warmth of her bedmate and her imagination flew into a hamper novel with both wings in full-range motion. On the next day, with the help of morning's cold light, she made an effort to concentrate on Tristan's personal cleansing with clinical detachment, but as the afternoon unfolded, the sultry, delightfully forbidden scent of Nurse Silvia started oozing back through the shingles. She might not have been a morning person but by five, she had summoned enough heat from wherever she came from to invest and consume the demure wife of the house.

"Your complexion is better today, Tristan," she said, this time with much less embarrassment. "It's a good sign; I know that in there, somewhere, you are climbing back up the rock face of life. Be assured that my hand will hold you at every overhang. I know what overhangs feel like. My adult life has been a long, senseless overhang..."

That second evening, in twilight space under the dark shingles, Silvia spoke—again in "chick lit" words—about herself to a man; a caring man; a man worth fighting for; a man worth waiting for. After a somber introduction, she spoke of childhood and bliss between her parents and her older brother Victor. She spoke of dip pens and turquoise blue-stained inkwells, fandango-dancing dolls, and nagging boys who would have traded all their marbles for a kiss on the cheek from her. She spoke of a lost world from which she had cut herself off in a misguided attempt to

outgrow it. With Tristan by her side, she had now found a way back to it, and she smiled at him as she reminisced with the same tenderness as she had smiled at her father on the day she had graduated high school with honors.

Three months or so after Victor's visit, Jorge's father contracted a pneumonia that took him away in a week. Silvia had always dreaded that day. To the old man, she had never been anything more than a servant. Though he spent all his time inside the house since his legs had gone weak on him, he hardly ever spoke to her other than to nag her about her cooking or to demand that she help him to the bathroom. He did, however, serve as a buffer between Silvia and her husband. When Jorge got mad—for reasons ranging from a bad crop to the results of a local election—and started slapping her around as a way to vent out his frustration, the elderly man would bang his cane on the floor to order him to stop. He did not want his maid to be incapacitated. Now on the ground level, it would just be Silvia and Jorge, in a tense tête-à-tête that could at any time tip into verbal or physical violence for a wrong word or an extra pinch of salt in the stew. The very night of the father's funeral, Silvia received a couple of slaps for having had the audacity to smile at a restless child in the church during the eulogy.

Two days later, the mailman delivered a thick brown envelope without any mention of the sender. Though it was addressed to her, Silvia took it straight to her husband who was working on the other side of the hill. He opened the envelope with the tip of his sickle and pulled out of it a bundle of hundred euro banknotes. He crouched and started laying the bills one by one on the ground while counting.

"Fifteen hundred euros!" he said as he stood up and shoved the bills into his pocket before handing the envelope to his wife. "There's a note, too; must be for you." Silvia unfolded the note and read it out loud, "Dearest Silvia, since I have not heard from you, I assume that your guest is still upstairs. I will at some point come back to check on him, but until then, as promised, I will mail you a care package for him on the first of every month. Love, Victor."

Before Silvia had a chance to slip the paper back into the envelope, Jorge roughly threw his arms around her, picked her up, and swirled her around with roars of joy.

"It's working! It's working!!" he yelled before putting Silvia down with unusual gentleness. "Now, we wouldn't want you to sprain an ankle or something. You need to continue climbing that ladder as many times a day as it'll take to keep our golden goose in good shape! Go home, now, and cook something nice for a change. Tonight, we'll celebrate!"

Silvia walked home with a light heart. Having received the money meant that she would get to keep Tristan longer. The icing on the cake was that Jorge realized that if she were injured and could not climb up into the

attic, the juicy arrangement could be in jeopardy. She no longer needed the father to protect her; Tristan had just stepped in. Tristan was her knight in pallid armor and just as Isolde, she used her healing powers to nurse him back to health.

Chapter 11

26 Years Earlier

A year and ten brown envelopes after his arrival, Tristan was alive and inanimate as ever. Silvia wanted to believe that his heart beat a bit stronger, that his breathing was a little less shallow, but it was not all that important. Sometimes, she even found herself wishing that he would never awake and never die; that everything would remain just the way it was. While loyal to her husband as God demanded, she also lived a platonic affair in the attic, and this, with both their blessings. On the ground floor, Jorge had not struck her much for months and provided that she submit to his frequent lubricious impulses, she was safe. In the attic, she had by now transferred all her love, her maternal instincts, her hopes, and her dreams into Tristan's human envelope. When she climbed the ladder, she climbed into herself.

"Did you think I'd forget our anniversary, Tristan? Surely, you should know me better by now. Yes, it was just one year ago today that we met and I brought you treats to celebrate: pudding, homemade apricot jam, and a little sip of ginjinha, just enough to bring a chill to your brave heart!"

Silvia swallowed a spoon of the pudding and fed one to Tristan; she repeated the cycle until the cup was empty. In her mind, she could form a vivid picture of the Italian seaside resort in which they were sharing a gelato with two spoons. Tristan's eyes were open on the same scenery at that moment; she did not close them. They shared two spoonfuls of the ginjinha liqueur in the same intimate spirit, but Silvia heard her husband returning home early, and immediately left the attic to go attend to him. She grabbed the rest of the pudding and the jar of apricot jam, but left the bottle of ginjinha on Tristan's nightstand to avoid having to explain to her husband why she had taken it upstairs. The next morning, after performing Tristan's toilet cleansing, she reached for the bottle of liqueur to take it back downstairs and froze for a second, perplexed. It was empty. Despite the dimming light in the attic, she could have sworn that there was a good inch of the spirit remaining in the bottle when she had left it there the night before.

On the second winter of Tristan's residency in Nurse Silvia's clinic, the weather was the coldest on record for Northern Portugal. Silvia even tried to have Tristan moved downstairs in the bedroom previously occupied by her father-in-law, but Jorge killed the idea. He did not want to see in his living quarters that *vegetable*—as he put it, since Silvia had once described her patient's state as vegetative. She had to settle for dragging Tristan's bed next to the chimney conduit and adding a down comforter on top of the three blankets.

Spring came out of nowhere and within a few days smashed the fences that had always closely curtailed Silvia's senses. She started feeling an odd tension in a diffuse area between her belly button and the junction of her thighs. The very area that she had muted since realizing a few weeks after her marriage that it was but a dark chamber within her body for a husband to raid and ravage at leisure. For the first time, it was neither pain nor shame rising from that alcove. It was an unexpectedly warm, nagging sensation. An overpowering call that plucked her from reality and confused her to the point where she would make one silly mistake after another, even in the most routine tasks such as dressing in the morning or cooking dinner.

On an ordinary day in the middle of the week, after serving lunch to her husband and making sure through the window that he was well on his way back to the field, Silvia climbed the ladder. Her hands were empty; the kitchen apron whose deep pockets were so useful to carry food and toiletry items up and down the attic ladder was back in the kitchen. She walked up to Tristan's bed, freed her bare feet from her heavy rubber clogs, rolled the straps of her brown cotton dress down her shoulders, and let the fabric slide and caress her bare skin all the way down to her ankles. For the first time in her adult life, she had omitted to pass on underwear and the constant brushing of her dress' rough cotton against her tender nipples had finished confusing her. She lifted a corner of the sheets and covers, slipped into the bed, closed her eyes, and took Tristan's nude body into a hesitant embrace.

Day after day, nap after nap, Silvia discovered intimacy. She learned to draw the warmth of her lover's body into hers. She learned how to hold her lips very close to his to take in his breath. She dared to lay the palms of his hands onto her breasts while cupping his face with hers. On one occasion, as she held both of Tristan's hands to her heart in her usual goodbye before returning downstairs, she felt a gentle, pressure on the side of her bare hip, as if it were poked with the pulp of a finger. She looked at Tristan's frigid face and lifeless open eyes and yet chose to believe wholeheartedly that his erection was more than a random urological event. A bit embarrassed, she immediately got out of bed and left the attic. For the several months that their afternoon naps would continue, this would remain the only sign of reciprocity on which Silvia could cling.

The annual agricultural fair at the nearby village took place the first weekend of October. Jorge left early that morning with his beat-up van after a long struggle to load in the back the two calves that he was planning to sell. After feeding breakfast to Tristan, Silvia stepped out of the house to

gather some wild flowers that she arranged in a large vase before delivering the bouquet to his nightstand.

Elated by the absence of her husband for an entire day, she took up to the attic his small portable TV and spent most of her time in bed with Tristan watching soaps and variety shows, which Jorge detested as he thought that they might “give her ideas.” She knew that he would not come back till late in the night; for the fair weekend, the local bar would hire two or three skimpily dressed girls from out of town to draw in the farmers and push them to drink all evening. Quite a bit of money changed hands on market grounds on fair day; a good chunk of it would end its travels in the bar owner’s hands by the end of the night. After eating her dinner from a tray, nude by Tristan’s side, she had a couple of glasses of ginjinha while entranced by a rerun of *An Affair to Remember*. She had never before drunk more than half a glass of the liqueur and she ended up drifting into a warm snooze well before Cary Grant would discover Deborah Kerr’s hidden wheelchair.

A loud squeak coming from the opposite end of the attic startled her out of sleep. She jumped to a seating position. In the bleak, pulsating glare from the TV screen, her husband’s square face seemed to float in the middle of the attic access hole. Petrified by his fear of heights, he breathed fast through his wide open mouth while staring with disbelief at his wife’s exposed breasts. He let go one hand in an attempt to climb onto the bare slats of the attic but instantly panicked and dropped out of sight. The top of the ladder shook as its rungs were rattled by the husband’s falling body. Seconds after he landed heavily on the tiles of the ground floor, he erupted into a long, ghastly cry of rage.

And then, nothing. Silvia rushed out of bed and jumped back into her dress and clogs. Trapped and terrified, she prayed that Jorge not find the courage to climb the ladder once more. The total silence rattled her nerves even more than his earlier cry. She approached the attic access hole and looked down with apprehension. Jorge was no longer around the bottom of the ladder. Just as she was about to attempt to plead with him, she heard the front door slamming and, seconds later, the raging revving up of the van’s engine soon followed by the fading away of the vehicle’s whirr. She turned on the attic bulb and frantically looked around while muttering, “Oh, Tristan... Tristan... I don’t know where he went but he’ll kill us both when he returns; that I know for sure. I need to get us out of here.”

Silvia’s eyes were finally arrested by a piece of thick laid rope that hung from one of the beams. She tied it around Tristan’s chest before realizing that it would be too short to allow her to let his body down through the attic hole and all the way down to the first floor. She recalled wrapping up a longer rope around a bundle of cut wood outside the house. After a brief hesitation, she went down the ladder, ran out the front door and toward the wood shed. The moment she turned the corner of the

house, a vague reflection in her peripheral vision caught her attention. She stopped and turned her head. It took her a couple of seconds to realize that the gleam came from the chrome rear bumper of the van, parked in the grass alongside the wall of the house. Jorge's massive silhouette stood next to it, in the frigid glow of a quarter moon.

Silvia ran on the moor with loud, continuous wailing. She kept twisting her ankles, stumbling over large rocks, and falling down more heavily every time. Just as she finally found a smooth track of dirt to follow, her thighs were locked together by a forceful tackle from behind and before she could understand what had happened, she found herself in mid-air, bent on her stomach over a sturdy shoulder, barely able to breathe and being carried back toward the house. Her husband's distinctive scent of bitter sweat and dried up soil invaded her flaring nostrils. He took her straight back to the van, opened the rear doors, and unloaded her roughly inside the cargo space with a hip throw motion.

"I'll keep you for last," he mumbled as he locked the doors back from the outside. Silvia curled up in the darkness of her cage, petrified. She heard the front door of the house slamming and a short moment later, a single, curt, and almost childlike cry that burst from higher up in the house. She let out a little yap and passed out.

The drone of a motor and the contact of a glacial surface with her flank dragged Silvia back to awareness. She opened her eyes to the inside of a dirty, rusty metal box, and only after a long moment did she remember that she lay on the bare steel floor at the back of Jorge's van. The old utility vehicle was designed to carry freight and animals. The cargo space was just a large metal can. There was no window or opening to the passenger compartment; the only light came from a tiny overhead lamp. Silvia rolled up into a sitting position and was horrified to discover the many scratches on her legs and forearms. They were superficial and did not cause her as much pain as they fed her distress.

Based on the brief, shallow bumps, the van was traveling fast on a smooth road. Silvia slid to the rear of the vehicle and pulled the emergency release while pushing on the door but it did not come ajar; it was locked from the outside. She sat against one side of the van and wrapped her arms around her legs in an attempt to warm up. Her watch indicated four in the morning; five or six hours had gone by since she had been captured on the moor. Not even an hour later, just as Silvia had found some reassurance in the fact that they seemed to travel on a crowded road, the loud roar of adjacent traffic faded out and was replaced with short-lived buzzes of engines coming from the opposite direction and quickly fading back at the rear of the van.

After slowing down on a bumpy track, the van came to a full stop. Silvia stood up, hunched in her metal crate, waiting for the back door to open. It did not. She heard the driver's side door open and slam closed, and after that, a dreadful silence set in; the same ominous silence as had followed Jorge's fall from the ladder at the house. Her neck hurt; she sat back on the cold steel floor and looked at her watch. So many thoughts went through her mind during that wait; a quick-step waltz of gory, hopeful, angry, and resigned thoughts. And when instincts wiped them away, only one survived: survival. She was but a fawn cornered by a burly old wolf; there would be pain no matter what; she might as well fight back. When a clunking sound suddenly broke out from the center of the back door, she crouched and faced it. The metal panel swung open; the light rushed in and blinded her. Still, she jumped out and planted her nails into the diffuse shape of her kidnapper's face.

"Silvia! Stop...!" screamed her opponent at the top of his lungs. She immediately let go; something felt wrong. The man fell on his knees, his face buried into his hands. His ears were large; his shoulders narrow. Silvia bent over him and pried his hands open.

"Victor...?"

She dropped to her knees as well and, while still holding the man's wrists, stared at the face of her brother, stunned at the same time by relief and horror. She had just inflicted on him some nasty scratches on both sides of the face; luckily, she had missed the eyes.

"It's okay, Silvia; it's okay... Let's go inside," said Victor with aggravation.

Silvia helped him up and looked around; they stood in the tall grass of the front yard of a small dwelling that had probably been a cheap new house two decades earlier, but now showed some serious signs of fatigue. She wrapped her arm around Victor's shoulders and escorted him to the front door. She drew a sad smile the instant they entered the house; it smelled like an old guy's place. Once her brother sat down, he instructed her to grab a paper roll and a bottle of vodka from a cupboard. When she brought them back to him, he imbibed a square of the paper with the spirit and started cleaning his wounds with it.

"Victor, don't you have a first aid kit?!" Silvia asked.

"What for? That's how I've always treated scratches and it works great," he replied with a grouchy tone of voice.

Silvia walked behind him and laid her hands on his shoulders.

"Oh Victor, I am so glad to be with you. I was so scared..."

"And from what I understand, you didn't see the half of it," Victor replied while dousing a second piece of absorbent paper with vodka.

"I don't know what happened!" said Silvia. "I was with Tristan; Jorge saw us. When he threw me into the back of the van, I saw in his eyes that

he was going to kill me. I don't understand... Why did he end up bringing me here instead? Where's he now?"

Victor grabbed his sister's hand, gently forced her to sit down on the chair next to him, and said with a calm voice, "It wasn't Jorge who brought you here..."

Chapter 12

24 Years Earlier

Amira tried in vain to ignore the silence that had just blanketed the outside of her headphones and concentrate back on her Spanish lesson. She knew all too well the sudden lull that would cap some of Jeanne's fights with Gabriel, her roommate's boyfriend. By now, Jeanne was probably lying somewhere on the floor of the living room, dazed by one too many of her man's blows. Blows delivered with a viciously flattened hand; blows designed to brand the insides, not the merchandise.

Gabriel was just over twenty; half Jeanne's age. A tall, skinny young man with a pale face and febrile eyes, he somehow triggered women's maternal instincts and bended their gaze in his direction as he walked down the street just like a glass prism bends the light. They might not have shown the same draw had they known that the fever in his eyes was a curtain of opium fumes, and that he had with very little moral quandary turned his enamored girlfriend into a prostitute to support his little habit.

"Jeanne...?" Amira whispered into the corridor after cracking open the door of her bedroom. An odd, hiccup-like sound answered her call. She cautiously entered the living room and scanned it from wall to wall; it was empty. Only when she walked around the sofa did she discover her friend squatting in front of it, holding her stomach, her forehead planted into one of the cushions.

"Oh, Jeanne... Not again," said Amira as she knelt behind her roommate and rubbed her back with both hands. She had seen her friend in that same position a couple of times before, after her boyfriend had administered to her one of his favorite blows; a hit to the solar plexus with the palm of his hand. He was well aware of Jeanne's phobic fear of asphyxiation; she could not stand confined spaces and even hated driving over bridges for fear of falling into the water. Having the wind knocked out by a hit to the diaphragm would terrorize her and leave her prostrated for hours. Amira slid her hands under her friend's armpits and helped her up.

"You can't go on like this, Jeanne. We're going to pack a small bag and I'll take you to a friend of mine's until we figure out something, okay? Where's Gabriel now?"

Jeanne shrugged her shoulders and pointed her chin to the front door, which had been swung wide open. She followed Amira to her bedroom and watched her shove a few of her clothes and toilet items into a straw beach bag. She felt cold and erased; the only thought to cross her mind was a notice of how the tables had turned since the day she had offered shelter to a lost pregnant girl who could have been her daughter. Amira threw the bag over her shoulder and firmly grabbed Jeanne's arm.

"Come on, girl; let's go," she said, escorting her friend across the living room and toward the front door. The smell of tobacco smoke alerted her—too late—the instant she passed the door frame. An arm swung right behind her, cutting Amira off from Jeanne who was still in the corridor of the apartment. With a playful smile, Gabriel, who stood right outside the apartment smoking a cigarette pulled the door closed on her. He did not lock it, but Jeanne did not make any attempt to open it back, leaving Amira alone with her boyfriend.

"That wasn't smart Amira..." Gabriel said with the same impish grin.

Amira sensed that it was about to turn ugly and in a reflex, decided to take at least one shot. Gabriel did not see it coming; Amira's slap hit him hard on the cheek, triggering in him at the same time a nauseating adrenaline rush and tears in his eyes. Not maddened as much by the slap as Amira's defiant stare, Gabriel responded with a closed fist; a daunting blow at Amira's left temple that threw her gasping for air on the floor. Gabriel towered over her for a moment to give his tears a chance to recede, and then put one knee down and clawed at Amira's throat with his right hand. The clamping of his fingers onto her carotids instantly drained all energy from her. She stared at the top of her assailant's left hand, which he held in front of her face and was adorned with a clunky black opal silver ring.

"Kiss it, Amira; kiss the ring and I'll let you go..." Gabriel said calmly.

Amira's visceral fear started turning into warmth and her hope to see one of the other tenants step out and intervene faded away without consequence. Her vision darkened and the contours of Gabriel's silhouette blurred out and expanded at the same time, as if a creature was born out of his back and now towered over him as he had towered over her. A very dark, silent abyss swallowed them both.

Amira woke up in her bed the next morning calm and refreshed but the sight of Jeanne asleep on a chair by her bedside instantly turned on the memories of the past night. She reached for her friend's hand; in response, Jeanne slowly opened her eyes.

"Finally, you're back," she said with a drowsy voice. "I wasn't sure what to do; your breathing was fine but you wouldn't wake up."

"What time is it?" asked Amira as she turned her head toward the window.

"Two in the afternoon. Are you okay?"

"I feel fine; thanks for dragging me into bed."

"I didn't. You don't remember?"

"No... The last thing I recall is Gabriel choking me. I guess he decided not to kill me after all."

"He didn't decide anything. I was looking through the peephole..." Jeanne broke down into tears. "I am so sorry, Amira... I know I should have

come out to help, but I saw the look in Gabriel's eyes; he *was* going to kill you."

"Why didn't he?"

"The man came behind him—"

"The man? What man?"

"Your dad... Well, the man who pretended to be your dad when he came to the apartment the other day and played with your son before vanishing. I saw him pop up behind Gabriel and they both immediately disappeared from my field of vision."

"Did you hear any noises?"

"Stomping sounds, something dragging down the stairs... I'm not sure."

"And then what?"

"Nothing for a while—five minutes maybe; I was about to open the door when he returned."

"Gabriel?"

"No, the man... Your dad."

"Stop calling him my dad!"

Jeanne ignored the brush off.

"He came back and leaned forward—over you I guess—and then the door of the apartment was kicked open. It hit me on the forehead, since I was still stuck to the peephole and I fell backwards in the corridor. The man carried you inside in his arms. I was half-dazed; I just pointed him to your bedroom, got up, and then followed him there. He laid you down on your bed and checked your pulse at the wrist. When he was reassured that you were okay, he went and grabbed a rose from the bouquet in the living room, left it on your bed stand, and walked out, without as much as a look for me."

Jeanne pointed her finger to the night stand on the other side of Amira's bed. There lay flat a Baccara rose; eerily fresh, as if preserved from dryness and from the night's events. Preserved by a ring; a garish black opal silver ring that had been slid over its long stem.

"What do you think that means?" asked Jeanne with a tense voice. That's Gabriel's ring."

"I have no idea, Jeanne," lied Amira. She knew all too well that her roommate's boyfriend would not have parted with his fetish ring of his own will.

The rest of the day became a space of pretense; pretense that nothing had happened the night before. Once she got convinced that Amira was fine, Jeanne went to "work," as she liked to put it. Amira spent most of the day catering to her body, as if to erase the abuse of the previous night. After a long bath and an intense lathering with a cheap lotion of royal name, she went out to the local supermarket and bought herself a large

platter of sushi. She had never cared all that much for steamed rice and raw fish but for some reason, it felt cleansing in a primal sort of way.

Gabriel was never heard from again. Jeanne cried for two weeks as she combed all his favorite hangouts, wallowed in total denial for two more, and—out of the blue—stopped hooking. One of her former customers, obviously more worried about her soul than his, had offered her a cashier job at a butcher's shop run by one of his nephews. She took the job and started peddling cow meat all day with the same application as she had her own for years. Jeanne and Amira continued to be roommates, and after Gabriel's disappearance, neither one entertained a relationship. Amira was exclusively focused on her son and Jeanne enjoyed her return to a clean, free life, too much to push her new chips back onto the betting mat.

One morning, as Jeanne ate breakfast before going to work, she was surprised to see Amira come out of her bedroom. Her friend usually returned home after three in the morning and slept till noon.

"You're up already, Amira? You couldn't sleep?" asked Jeanne.

"Not a wink; I've been tossing and turning for two hours. I'll drink some milk; it may calm me down."

"Something on your mind?"

Amira poured herself a glass of milk before replying.

"You'll think I'm crazy..."

"Of course not; what is it?"

"Well, for the past month or so, I've had a strange feeling when walking back home from the club. I've gone the same route every night for two years without a second thought. It's just a ten-minute walk and that late at night, the street is usually empty. On occasion, you'll meet a bum or someone walking their dog before going to work, but that's about it. Since the evening Gabriel tried to strangle me, every night now, I've felt as if someone was following me. Every time I've turned around to check, I've seen a shadow—I think—fifty yards or so behind me."

"What kind of shadow? The street is poorly lit; a shadow fifty yards away could be anything or anyone, or like you said, just a bum."

"I'm getting a bad vibe, Jeanne. Bad enough to keep me awake at night. This, just after a man managed to be left alone with my two-year old son in my own apartment and another one tried to kill me."

"I know..." said Jeanne contrite, as she realized that she had a direct responsibility in both events.

"It's one thing for me to take my chances in this hellhole of a neighborhood," continued Amira, "but it's starting to affect my child."

Anything could happen to me here, or to him directly. I'll have to take him to a safer place until I can do better for us."

The bus stopped on the village square, in the midst of the weekly farmers' market. It was a sunny day and the place was teeming with locals for whom the fair was as much a social event as it was a shopping excursion. Amira tightened her grip so hard on her son's wrist that he squealed. She stood up, grabbed the large duffle bag—their only luggage—from the overhead compartment and pulled the child out of the bus. The instant her foot touched the ground, silence rippled through the crowd.

The persons waiting for passengers on the bus were the closest; Amira knew most of their faces. They were first to stop their friendly chitchat and instantly drop a hostile mask in reaction to her apparition. The sudden suspension of chatter around the bus alerted other groups, further away; heads turned and faces hardened one after another, as if prompted by a timed script. The beam of hatred pointed at Amira was so dense that even her two-year old son sensed it; he reacted by burying his face into his mother's thigh.

Amira clenched her teeth and proceeded to cut through the crowd. It would open in front of her but only at the last moment, as if to resist her return. No one said a word to her—maybe out of respect for the child—but she was made to force her way through a field of adverse eyes; disapproving for the gentler ones, punishing for most, and downright menacing for a few. Some of the worst stares came from women, among which former schoolmates with whom she had played for hours on end on that same village square. Her son was now crying in silence, as if afraid of awakening the crowd's breath of fire. Only for an instant did his face light up and his eyes widened with hope; only for an instant before his mother pulled him away.

The emotional tension, combined with the heat and an empty stomach, triggered in Amira a cold sweat and a faint feeling. She was about to yield to the spell of a blackout when the crowd suddenly started breaking up twenty or thirty feet ahead of her as a short man jostled away bystanders with rage. When he reached Amira, he scooped her son from the ground with one arm and wrapped the other around her. Without a word, he escorted mother and child through the rest of the mob, which now opened widely to their steps. The man was feared in the village; feared because he spoke little and feared because of the uncanny strength of his frail body, which he had demonstrated a few times by knocking out much larger men whom he felt had disrespected him.

When they reached his car, parked on a side street, he helped the young woman onto the back seat and sat the child on her lap before getting behind the wheel.

"Oh God ..." Amira whispered as the vehicle took off.

“Welcome back, Hélène,” replied the man.

Chapter 13

24 Years Earlier

"Oh, Victor..." Hélène sighed. "You warned me that they wouldn't be happy to see me, but I never expected so much hatred from people who've known me since I was a child."

"Your father is so loved here," the farmhand replied. "He's helped so many and done so much for the town. They blame you for his downfall. Try not to let them get to you; we both know that it's not your fault."

"So I take it that Dad is still drinking?"

"More than ever. Some days he is so hung over that he stays in bed all day. And when he finally gets up, it's only to start boozing again. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, he wanders into the vineyard and from my bed, I'll hear him screaming and swearing at the top of his lungs. I then have to get up and find him to make sure that he gets back home safely."

"How about the business? Does he still manage the workers and market the wine?"

"I'm the only worker left, Hélène, and I haven't been paid in over a year. Your dad has run off all the customers; he's not a nice drunk. Only a handful of old friends now care enough to come buy the little wine we still make."

It was a short drive from the village to the estate of Hélène's father. She watched the ribbon of nature unrolling along the road; her school bus road. She no longer connected with it even though it held a vivid print of childhood memories. When Victor's beat up sedan turned onto the tiny side road that led up the hill to her home, Hélène kissed the top of her son's head for courage. Ahead was a father who had rejected her. On her lap lay a son that she was about to leave behind. Not the best place for a twenty-year old.

The moment the car pulled up to the house, Hélène's father burst out of the front door.

"Where the hell were you, Victor?! I've been looking for you for over an hour!" His stance was firm but his words were loud and blurred. "Come on, lazy ass Portuguese; go fetch the neighbor's tractor. I got ours into a ditch; we need to pull it out!"

Victor had stepped out of the car and just stood by the vehicle with the door open.

"What the hell are you waiting for? Didn't you hear—"

The man shut up in mid-flight when the back door of the car was pushed open and Hélène stepped out of it. Her father's eyes turned shiny with fever; he clasped his fists as if preparing for combat. Hélène could not help but throw in return a defiant stare at her dad.

"So that's what you look like now, my daughter; my little whore of a daughter," the father said with a cynical smile.

Before she had a chance to answer, Hélène's son jumped out of the car and hugged the back of her leg. His face popped to the side to take a shy peak at the man with the red eyes and raucous voice.

"Oh, let me guess..." the man continued on the same mocking tone, "You brought a little bastard for me to feed. That's it, right? I'm not surprised; I heard you were very busy hustling in Paris. I guess you couldn't figure out who the father was, so you brought him to the only man you know for sure: good old daddy!"

"He's your grandson..." Hélène said, fighting back the tears to deny him the satisfaction of having cut her. She had prepared herself for a fight; what she had not prepared herself for was to still feel love for the abject drunkard standing in front of her.

"This is no grandson of mine," the father replied. "He's nothing but the blown-up seed of a sinner. They love your womb; it's just like your mother's, warmest to the men who leave and cold to those who stay. This child belongs to the rotten branch of our family; I want nothing to do with it."

He had not even raised his voice; he was cold and merciless. Hélène picked up her son. Victor saw the anger in her eyes and before she had a chance to fire back at her father, he said with force, "I'll take care of him."

Father and daughter turned to him as one, equally stunned.

"You mean you want that bastard?! You can barely take care of yourself, you, old fool!" Hélène's father shouted and punctuated his words with a nasty laugh.

"I'll take care of him," Victor repeated calmly, ignoring his boss and looking straight at Hélène.

"But you never—" she said.

"No, I never. That doesn't mean I can't. I have dedicated my life to this boy's family; you both know that," Victor replied now looking at his boss with affection. "What I don't have to raise this boy properly, I'll find."

Father and daughter's eyes connected instinctively, without animosity for the first time since the confrontation had begun. For an instant, a very brief instant, Hélène's father's face relaxed but he did not allow the sentiment to live.

"Fine, Victor, if that's what you want. Just keep him away from my land," he said coldly and turned around. He walked back into his house and closed the door behind him without noise.

It was less than a mile drive to Victor's house, yet he had to stop twice to let Hélène out so she could vomit. The spasms would shake her violently

but only produced bile from her empty stomach. By the time they reached Victor's tiny farmhouse, she was haggard. As soon as he got her settled in the living room, Victor walked out into an adjacent kitchen to prepare some tea and a couple of bread toasts. By the time he returned to the living room with a loaded tray, his face was just as wan and contracted as the young woman's. He looked down at H  l  ne's son who seemed just as distressed as the two grown-ups in the room. The little boy stared at his mother with confusion; he had not said a word since they had descended from the bus at the market. Victor had him pick a couple of chocolates from a box adorned with a colorful Christmas tree. He complied but did not put them in his mouth; instead he held them tightly in his hands. A heavy silence set in while H  l  ne dunked the grilled bread into the tea before eating it in tiny bites.

"Thanks," she finally said after drinking the cup of tea in a succession of short sips. "I feel better, now." She reached for her son. "Come, baby; come onto mommy's lap." The boy rushed into her arms; once she got him squared away, he finally started eating the melted chocolate mush in his hands.

"I had never expected it to go this badly, Victor," said H  l  ne as she ran her fingers through her son's hair. "I knew it would be a tough meeting, but somehow, I had always pictured a happy ending to it. I can't believe how much anger is in Dad still..."

"It was too much for him, H  l  ne," replied Victor. "He had somehow managed to overcome the loss of your mother, but then he lost you and his best friend on the same day after the incident at the fort. Also... he lost your mother a second time just a few hours later—"

"A second time?"

"Yes; the day after Tristan's death, your dad had sobered up and he went into his room to gather and destroy all his belongings. His plan, just like mine, was to tell everyone who had seen Tristan that he had been called back to Russia for business, which is what he did eventually. But that day, he found a letter that your mom had sent to Tristan."

"Oh no... the letter! How could I have forgotten that?!"

"After packing away Tristan's belongings the night before, I had left the letter on the dresser," said Victor. "I was planning to slip it under your door before leaving—I thought you'd want to keep it in memory of your mom—but I forgot it there and your dad found it the next morning. It finished crushing him. He showed it to me one day when he was drunk. He explained that until he found that letter, he had always wanted to believe that your mom had chosen him over Tristan in the end, but that in fact, she had fooled him all along. It is the letter that finished turning him against you."

"Did he not realize that I had been raped by Tristan?"

"I think he did, but you had gone to the fort with him behind his back, just like your mother had loved Tristan all along behind his back. He is making you pay for what he sees as a revival of your mother's deception."

"But, Victor, he called me a whore. My own dad called me a whore! Surely, he couldn't mean that..."

Victor dodged Hélène's stare.

"Victor...? He didn't really mean it, did he?"

"You know how people talk; he may have heard rumors—"

"What kind of rumors? Victor, look at me!"

Victor lifted his eyes but did not look directly at the young woman's face when he replied.

"Someone saw you in Paris... A villager who went there with some friends to attend a big agricultural fair. You know what happens when guys get to spend a few days in the big city without their wives..."

"They drink?"

"That... and the rest."

"What rest? Women?"

"One night they went to one of those special neighborhoods where young girls are... available."

"What neighborhood?"

Victor hesitated before answering with a low voice as if to prevent the boy from hearing.

"They saw you, Hélène... In a gentleman's club."

Hélène felt the nausea returning. She had often reflected on the odds of anyone in the village learning about her occupation in Paris and had always come out reassured by the analysis. There was no connection between her past and her present; she had even changed her name to Amira to further insulate them. Only a pretty unlikely random event could connect them.

"I work there," she said after a long silence.

"That's what they rushed to tell everyone when they returned."

"I mean, I work there as a waitress, Victor. As a waitress!"

"They said that all the women in there were dressed like—"

"Yes, the women in that place are prostitutes. It is one of them who took me in after I landed in Paris with just enough money to last me a week in a motel. I became her roommate; she helped me get the waitressing job in that club to help with the rent, and later take care of my son. I didn't have any qualifications to do anything else! You have to believe me, Victor, I am not a prostitute!"

Victor laid his gnarled hand on top of Hélène's.

"I believe you, Hélène. But don't expect too much from the others..."

"Including Dad..."

"I'll speak to him when he is sober... It'll take some time."

“Did you mean what you said about taking care of my son, Victor?” asked H el ene.

“I did,” replied the farmhand as he laid his other hand on the boy’s shoulder.

Chapter 14

24 Years Earlier

Hélène did not shed a single tear during the eight-hour train ride back to Paris. She was torn beyond tears. She had left her son behind; that son from which she had never been apart for more than a few hours since he had broken into her life. She kept telling herself that it would only be a short-term solution, but could not really believe it. At twenty, without any skills or support, the only place in the world where she belonged was *Pigals*, the site of meat trade to which Victor had timidly referred as a gentleman's club. It may not have been glorious, but there, at least, was a place where she could be; there, at least, was a place from which she could draw a sustenance income. There, at least, was a place to start, even though starting from such a low point would mean a long climb back to a sunny terrace of life.

In an attempt to chase from her mind the thought of her son asking for his mom as the train ripped her away, she had made an effort to focus on the material aspects of the arrangement with Victor. The farmhand was a poor man but he would never leave the domain to seek more substantial employment elsewhere. He would accompany his boss to hell if that's where he chose to go. As they discussed the details of her child's care, Hélène had promised Victor to provide financial support and she was intent on keeping her word. She needed to own fully that last bit of mothering left to her.

As the train crossed one small town after another, anger gradually smothered pain and financial needs transformed Hélène's distress into cold-hearted resolve. Moral boundaries started dropping like spring leaves off a rotten tree as she reviewed her options to increase her income. The only hard limit that she ended up setting was the requirement for a "Yes" answer to the question, "When my son turns twenty, will I be able to look him straight in the eyes and tell him where the money that Victor used to raise him came from?" By the time the train entered the Gare Montparnasse station in Paris, she had already sketched in her mind a plan that could make it possible for her to reach far into the precipice of immorality and bring back from it handfuls of wild berries without ever falling into it.

After a night of waitressing at *Pigals*, Hélène would usually head home in a ghastly state of mind. She had after a few months become accustomed to the grabbing and verbal abuse from the customers but was still sickened every day by the dreadful fate of the dolls of bruised flesh who furnished the club. Wedged, night after night, between lewd customers to whom they were beasts of pleasure and brutal pimps who peddled them like slot machines, most of the prostitutes vanished after a few months. Hélène had

never gotten really close to any of them except for Jeanne, her roommate, who had landed her the job there and only worked in the club when business was slow with her regulars.

The very night that she returned from her trip home was the night H el ene resumed her work at *Pigals*. It was also the night she took the first step in the execution of her plan. It was a Monday night; always a slow night—half the customers, half the girls. It was also the evening on which a customer different from all the others would visit the club. Though he always dressed impeccably—down to a very aristocratic bow tie—his short and chubby figure, flabby round face, and wide nose with small flaring nostrils had immediately earned him the nickname of Cochonou, the French equivalent of “Piggy.” Everyone addressed him by that name, even the waitresses, but he did not mind. He was a mild-mannered, jovial fellow who seemed to find bliss in downing a couple of glasses of red wine while surrounded by young women in skimpy outfits. He had, however, always been seen leaving the club alone and the girls treated him more like a brotherly house eunuch than a potential customer. If he had never made a pass at any of the working girls, he had often tried to court H el ene using a very old-fashioned, though somewhat endearing approach. When H el ene brought him his usual cabernet, he once again took a chance, with little illusion.

“My dear H el ene, I heard that you were out the past week. Nothing wrong, I hope? A little vacation maybe?”

To his surprise, H el ene did not smile and walk away in silence as she always would. She raised an open hand with spread fingers and pointed it at the club manager behind the bar to signify him that she was taking a five-minute break, put her tray down on the small table, and sat by Cochonou’s side.

“How come you never leave with any of the girls?” she asked him bluntly.

Cochonou’s eyes rounded up with surprise, rendering his face even more cartoonish.

“But... What do you...” he stuttered before nailing his landing, “That’s not why I come here.”

“Do you realize that the only purpose of this club is sex trade?” insisted H el ene. “There are much nicer places to just have a drink in a lively crowd if that’s what you like.”

“Are you telling me that I should leave if I don’t... *trade*?” the man replied and anxiously looked around the room.

“No. Don’t worry; no one will kick you out. I was just curious and you didn’t answer my question.”

“Sex is not all that important to me.”

“But you like to be around prostitutes.”

"Not prostitutes; attractive young women. Prostitutes happen to be the only ones who do not intimidate me."

"Do I intimidate you?"

"Yes."

"Are you married?"

He nodded.

"Happily?"

"Yes."

"Then, why have you been flirting with me for months?"

He hesitated for a brief instant before replying.

"I wish I knew... Since I turned fifty, I feel that need to crack open a window to take a breath of fresh air; just for a couple of hours; just once a week. Midlife crisis, I guess. I was hoping that maybe you could open that window for me..."

"Sex?"

"No sex."

"What then?"

Cochonou hesitated a brief instant, as if looking for the right words.

"Illusion," he finally replied. "Two glasses of wine and two hours of romantic conversation with a beautiful young woman who would dress up for me and make me believe I was the most desirable man on earth. That must sound very odd to you, but I swear, that's all I'm after."

"Very odd; no. Not odd enough maybe..."

"Does that mean that you wouldn't be interested?"

"I did not say that."

"I would of course pay the young lady for her time."

"I am not for sale," H el ene replied without animosity. Cochonou stood up halfway with a sad expression, expecting her to walk away.

"I heard that you work at the Interior Ministry..." said H el ene without looking at the man, who sat back down.

"Yes; I have been there for over twenty years."

"If you bring me outfits that you like, I'll wear them for you and I will also do my best to breathe some fresh air onto you. What's your real name?" she asked, now looking straight at him.

Overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events, the man responded with hesitation.

"Honorin... Honorin Beauchamp."

"Are you available in the afternoon?"

"Only after five, but I could make myself available till seven."

H el ene scribbled a few words on her order pad, tore off the page, and handed it to the man.

"Here is my address; it's just two blocks down the street. Stop by next Monday at five. My name is H el ene. I'm a size six."

“Our *cinq à sept*,” that’s how Honorin called his weekly encounters with H  l  ne at her apartment. Five to seven in the evening was the mythical time slot allotted in France to all illicit romantic rendezvous, from sleazy little affairs to dangerous liaisons. Few *cinq   sept*, however, were likely to resemble Honorin and H  l  ne’s. Initially, H  l  ne was very dubious about Honorin’s intentions—with a peak of doubt on the very first encounter, to which he arrived with three small, nondescript plastic bags. He timidly handed them to H  l  ne who let him in, only to leave him alone in the middle of the living room after she took the bags—without a word—and disappeared into her bedroom, closing the door behind her. She dropped the contents of the bag onto her bed and although they raised much perplexity on her part, they also immediately reassured her. He had not brought along some sleazy S&M gear or creepy schoolgirl costume. No; not at all.

She proceeded to slip on each of the pieces, turning her back to the mirror as a game so she would get the full impact of the scene when she turned around fully geared up. When she finally did, she had to cover her mouth so Honorin would not hear her burst of laughter. She had in a few minutes transformed herself into the revival of the sixties flower girl! Skin tight, parti-colored pants molded her hips and thighs only to flare up widely below the knees. They were matched on top by a sleeveless jacket of the same pattern that opened onto a bright yellow tank top. Since Honorin had the tact not to have included underwear for the outfit on his first visit, she had elected to reward him by embracing the true freedom spirit of the sixties... A pair of platform cork wedge sandals, a daisy-themed custom jewelry set, and—yes—even a tie-back scarf headband completed the “totally outta sight” outfit.

H  l  ne managed to disguise her amusement into a seductive smile when she walked back into the living room under Honorin’s bewildered eyes.

“Oh, Sheila... My Sheila...” he said in a whisper.

And so was born Sheila. She would only exist in a tiny time frame but the intensity of her persona—pushed by an intuitive H  l  ne and pulled by an avid Honorin—would easily make up for her all-too-brief bursts of life. Honorin would arrive shortly after five every Monday, carrying every time a new outfit for Sheila, probably purchased at some vintage clothing store. Once H  l  ne had metamorphosed into Sheila, she would sit on the sofa close to him, she would pour two glasses of wine, and she would lead him into a bubble that floated just above the horizon of reality.

They would never speak of their personal lives, present or past; they had a tacit agreement on that point from the start. Their interactions consisted of lively conversations around literature, cinema, and societal

themes, past and present alike. Honorin brought books, articles, and movies for H  l  ne to enjoy during the week. At first, she had been annoyed by his assumption that she would work on their relationship outside of the agreed time frame, but she found herself enjoying a return to the discovery of intelligent materials. She was also flattered that a man of Honorin's intellectual quality would care to discuss these materials with her and actually listen to her opinion. Above all, and under H  l  ne's diligent tuning, their encounters always took place in an atmosphere of soft seduction on her end and light courting on his. A fine balancing act at which they became better at every encounter and that eventually transformed them into lovers as true as unconsummated.

Honorin kept his word; he never tried to initiate any kind of sexual interaction with H  l  ne. She understood early on that this would not happen. Honorin was entranced by the character of Sheila that she had been carving out with keen inspiration week after week. Trying to touch her would have been the surest way to burst the fragile bubble. H  l  ne supposed that Sheila had once been real and she drew from his hints to refine her character, until she started sensing that her substitute Sheila was slowly taking over the real one in Honorin's heart.

H  l  ne had a plan for Honorin from the start. Step one of that plan was to seduce him. What she had not foreseen is that along the road, she would learn a lesson that would empower her in a way that she had never anticipated. Her life had been derailed at a very young age by a man's lust and she had since assumed that raw physical sex was the primal—and only—force behind a man's interest in a woman. Through her role-play with Honorin, she had come to uncover an even higher force, one that superseded the man's reproductive urges and called upon even deeper rooted instincts. She had understood that the most powerful erogenous zone in a man—at least a smart one— lay somewhere in his imaginary space. And the enormous advantage of that erogenous zone over all the others was that, if properly stimulated and satisfied, it would enslave the man emotionally to his partner as opposed to compelling him to sneak out in the morning just before she woke up.

"Honorin, what would you call what we do?" asked H  l  ne one evening, out of the blue.

"I'm not sure what you mean..." replied Honorin with surprise as the young woman refilled his glass with red wine.

"What value does it bring to your life? Is it something you would pay for?"

"I can't even imagine my life without our weekly rendezvous anymore. I'm prepared to pay you today for every single time we have met over the past six months. You name your price. That's how much value you bring me," replied Honorin without any acrimony. H  l  ne smiled softly.

"Like I told you before, I am not for sale. You should have stopped after telling me how important these meetings are to you and asked me in return what value these encounters bring to me..."

"I can only hope that they do, to a small extent, bring you something since you never canceled one or asked for any kind of compensation."

"You're right, Honorin; I value our time together and over the months, your friendship has brought back to my heart a warmth that I thought lost forever. In fact, I would hate to miss one of our get-togethers just as much as you would. There's something I need to tell you though..."

Honorin stiffened up on the sofa. H  l  ne continued with a poised voice.

"When I first agreed to our little arrangement, I had a hidden agenda—"

"I am not a fool, H  l  ne," said Honorin nervously. "I never thought for a second that such a beautiful young woman as yourself would become enthralled by *Cochonou*." His face contracted as he felt suddenly thrown back into the frigid waters of reality. H  l  ne grabbed his hand and lifted it to her cheek.

"There's never been a *Cochonou* here, Honorin, and there'll never be. That night at *Pigals* when I first agreed to meet with you was the first night in two years I would spend without my son. Every night and every day since have been without him as well and the only times when I don't ache about that are the ones I spend with you."

"You haven't seen him or communicated with him since?"

"I speak with him on the phone but I can't baby him anymore because he has to learn to live without me. I am nowhere near a mothering situation."

"I could help you both—"

"Unfortunately, I don't function like that, Honorin," said H  l  ne as she slowly lowered Honorin's hand back onto the sofa. "I could not accept that kind of help and remain truthful to you, for the same reason that I never accepted money from you in the first place."

Honorin responded with a tender smile.

"Isn't there anything I can do?" he asked.

"There is, Honorin, and that's what my plan for you was initially. Only, I wasn't intent on telling you about it; I was just hoping to lure you into it."

Honorin hesitated before standing up and walking to the window, turning his back on H  l  ne.

“Try me,” he said after a moment of silence and with a chilling tone of voice that took H el ene by surprise. With that tone, Honorin told H el ene for the first time how Cochonou might have become a high-ranking official in the national administration.

“There are these girls at *Pigals...*” she started, now feeling a bit sheepish. He nodded without turning around to encourage her to continue.

Chapter 15

24 Years Earlier

"He just arrived. I took him to the office at the back."

Hélène nodded nervously to acknowledge the barman's words and walked out of the room after a tentative smile to Honorin, who only responded with a crispation of the jaw. When she entered the small office, an older, stocky man in his late fifties with an oversized nose and a crooked toupée scanned her from top to bottom before addressing her.

"Hey sweetie, go tell your boss that if he doesn't show up within the next minute, I'm out of here," he said with a raspy voice.

Hélène sat down at the desk and started flipping through a stack of manila folders.

The man did not take well to being ignored. He walked up to the desk and slammed his open right hand onto it, triggering a bang and a mushroom cloud of dust that rattled Hélène's nerves.

"You're deaf or something?!" shouted the man, leaning over the desk. "Don't make me use sign language; your face won't like it!"

Hélène lifted her eyes and extended her hand, palm up, to invite the man to sit across the desk from her.

"Thank you for coming, Mister Dragovic," she said, trying hard to contain the trembling in her voice, "I take it you got the files I sent you."

The guy threw on the desk the brown envelope that he had been holding in his left hand.

"You, *little girl*, sent this crap? You must have a death wish. You've worked in this joint long enough; you must know who I am by now!"

"I do," replied Hélène, regrouping. "You're a pimp; you're a neighborhood drug lord, and a man reputed for his violent temper. I do know who you are, Dragovic. In fact, as you could tell from the report in the envelope, I have a much better handle on you and your little businesses than the authorities. Girls and drug deal records, places of operation, partner names, money laundering channels, and so on. I have enough in there to buy you a VIP lounge in hell by the fireplace."

The man looked at Hélène with such a threatening expression that she sensed an urgency to reverse the stroke.

"I'm not here to blackmail you," she said, pushing the envelope back toward him. The man hesitated and then decided to sit down.

"How did you get all that information?" he asked, clearly struggling to control his temper.

"I was able to allocate many more resources investigating you than the police could ever put together," Hélène replied. "The kind of resources that are designed for dealing with national security threats."

The man's eyes widened and his mouth opened slightly to accommodate an accelerated breathing.

"Surely, you don't mean the DST; they don't deal with petty crime..." he said, referring to the French equivalent to the FBI.

"They do if a friend of the family asks them nicely."

"And you would know someone like that?"

"How else would I have gotten the information?"

Hélène paused for a moment to give the man a chance to realize that he was cornered. It did not take him long.

"So what now? Since they know everything, what are they waiting for to come down on me?"

"Like I told you, this investigation was done... on the side. It may remain buried at the bottom of a DST drawer for a long time."

"You said you weren't a blackmailer. What is it you want then? And if I give it to you, what is it that tells me that you won't take me down anyway afterwards? I was told that you were always nice to my girls at *Pigals*. You could get rid of me just to set them free..."

"And some other creep would step in and take them over the next day. I don't have the power to stop that grinder, Dragovic. With you at least I have some leverage. This is all I want—" Hélène handed the man a small piece of paper torn from an order pad with five names scribbled in blue ink. "—Release these girls to me."

The following evening, five young women were dropped in front of Hélène's building without any instruction other than to climb the stairs to the first floor and knock at the door of the apartment on the left. They were scared; they had all been booked as part of a group before but never by someone who lived in such a run-down neighborhood. It felt more like a plan for a collective beating of some sort than one for a kinky party. When Honorin opened the door, they all erupted in titters of relief and followed him into the living room.

"Amira...?" said the tallest of them—and yet perched on stiletto heels—when she entered the room.

"Welcome, ladies," Hélène replied with a smile. "Why don't you have a seat and help yourselves to some coffee; I just brewed it."

The girls served themselves in silence, turning their heads in concert every time a sound came from the other side of the front door.

"No one else is coming," said Hélène. "It'll be just the five of you, Honorin, and me."

"For what?" asked a second woman who was a few years older than the others—probably mid-thirties—and had a strong Slavic accent.

"For three simple things, Mila: coffee, freedom, and a business proposal."

The girls looked at each other with confusion. Before they had a chance to ask questions, Hélène embarked on a long and precise speech

that she had been running in her head all day. She watched the girls first oscillate between incredulity and suspicion. As she developed her arguments, she could tell that each wanted to start believing, but hope and promises were precisely what had landed them in places like *Pigals*, and in such places, trust was never a good idea. Strangely enough, they only started to believe H el ene’s promise of freedom when she offered them an alternate avenue for hooking.

“A brothel?!” said the perky brunette in the group.

“A very small brothel; a handful of workers, a handful of carefully picked clients.”

“Picked by whom?”

“By Honorin and me.”

“Like you picked us? Why us and not the others at *Pigals*?”

“For two specific reasons: From what I’ve seen, none of you appears to be on drugs.” The girls shook their heads as one to confirm. “And, just as important, you don’t talk much. I have spoken to you many times in the past months and I don’t know anything about your origins, your personal situation, your customers; you never once mentioned Dragovic’s name either. The men to whom we will cater need the utmost discretion when they have... an indiscretion.”

“Public officials?” asked the brunette.

H el ene did not respond directly.

“The advantage with customers like these is double. First, they aren’t ruffians; they are educated men—”

“I’ve met a few of these who were worse than *Pigals* customers when they caught you between four walls,” said Sonia. H el ene approved with a nod of the head.

“Second,” she continued in the same tone, “if one of them gets abusive, we can kick him out and bar him from coming back. Again, discretion; men like that don’t make public scenes around hookers.”

“What’s your cut in this plan?” asked the Slavic girl after they all seemed to agree with H el ene’s point.

“I’ll work upstream from you,” H el ene replied. “My job will be to secure all the bookings and to provide a safe environment for you to operate. I will pay you a fixed hourly rate—”

“How much?” eagerly asked the youngest of the girls, a short, cute blonde in a tight jumpsuit.

“I’m still working out the details, but it’ll be five to ten times what you have been charging your customers.”

“And we’ll be able to bring our regulars there?”

“No. We will choose every client ourselves.”

“Since there won’t be many, it won’t be a full-time job, then?”

Honorin, who had been standing by the side of the room all along, intervened for the first time.

“At fifty to a hundred times minimum wage, a dozen hours a week should give you a cozy life. I suggest that you take advantage of the free time to educate yourselves and plan for later. However, if you want to see other customers when not working for us, it’s your life. Just keep in mind that working with us should be your first priority. We will coordinate with you and our guests to draft a schedule every week and we will expect you to honor it.”

Hélène approved with a smile to Honorin before taking back the floor.

“One more non-negotiable item, ladies: blood tests every month; we’ll pay for these and we’ll need to see the results. Granted we won’t be running a Girl Scout troop here, but if we’re going to do this, let’s do it as safely as possible, for you and for our clients.”

“What if we decide not to work with you?” asked the Slavic girl after turning back to Hélène. “Dragovic won’t set his dogs after us?”

“No; he won’t. You’ll be as free as you can make yourselves.”

“When do you need an answer from us?”

“Why don’t we meet tomorrow, here, same time if you are interested? We’ll start hacking out the details; I’ll need your input on some aspects of the plan. I’ll also have a specific number for your hourly rate; Honorin and I will work on that in the mean time.”

The girls left the house in silent cohort, but Hélène watched them talk to each other with animation in the street for a long time before they finally hailed a cab. Only three of them came back the following night. The Slavic girl had decided to take advantage of the opening to fly home. She was not convinced that Hélène could prevent Dragovic from pulling her back into his net. As for the younger girl, she decided to go it alone, but would beg Hélène to take her back just a month later after being severely beaten by a customer.

The most laudable ventures will often struggle for years—when not wilt altogether—before taking to the air. Hélène’s business, despite a most questionable karma, took off like a rocket. To her credit, she had planned the enterprise in the minutest details before opening the doors to her “man boudoir,” as she liked to call it. Honorin had lent her the funds to rent and decorate a small flat in the heart of chic Paris, and, more importantly, nestled within walking distance of five different government ministries.

On day one of operation, Honorin took two of his Interior Ministry colleagues to the apartment in the middle of the afternoon “for a cup of tea.” They were greeted by Hélène who captured their attention from the start. A beautiful young woman in a sophisticated designer dress more expected on a wealthy middle-aged lady, she branded her lounge from day one as a departure from the outside world. Only minutes after tea was

served to the men, three attractive and lively young ladies happened to drop by the suite to visit H el ene. Tea turned into an exciting game of flirt and laughs between the girls and the older gentlemen. Though nothing other than conversation developed on that first day, by the time they left, Honorin's friends were under the impression that they had, in less than an hour, genuinely seduced beautiful women half their age. The very next day, they pressed Honorin to arrange another visit to H el ene's.

During that second visit, Madame sat alone with the two men and explained to them the terms of her "hospitality" and although they felt a pinch when they realized that they had been played like rookie sailors on their first night out on a foreign shore, the thrill of H el ene's proposal quickly revived their excitement. Both got so inflamed with the new experience, in fact, that they asked to come back for tea the very next day. A man of quality could never drink too much tea... This time, H el ene scheduled them separately. She hosted each one for a brief but formal tea session in the living room before running her fingers across a miniature harp on the coffee table, at which time a naiad in a see-through neglig ee popped out from one of the bedrooms and pulled the man into the gravitational field of her twin planets.

Word of mouth did the rest. Contrarily to women's beliefs, men can be outstanding communicators, especially among themselves and on the subjects of sports and sex! Within weeks, H el ene found herself in need of additional staff, especially since one of the girls had left to become the kept mistress of one of the ministry gentlemen in a pad he had rented for her. H el ene had accepted her defection with grace; she had from the start promised herself never to act like a pimp. She had just asked the girl to help find a suitable replacement, which she had done. H el ene had a meeting with the other girls to ask for their help in identifying additional "employees" and ran in-depth interviews. She would eventually have a dozen girls in rotation at the boudoir and after reaching that size staff, she chose to turn down new customers rather than keep expanding.

H el ene passed on the bulk of the profits to the girls, which kept her at peace with herself. She only kept enough to support a simple lifestyle for herself—she had few needs—and, most importantly, to finance her son's upbringing. She sent a check every month to Victor, which rapidly grew from a few hundred euros to a lofty stipend. This was intended to enable him to continue raising her son under good conditions and contract some help if needed, for tutoring or house maintenance, for instance. Her child had adjusted well to living with Victor and his sister and seemed happy there. To preserve that balance, H el ene would only speak to him on the phone once a month, a constant struggle for her as she missed him just as much as the day she had left him behind. She would make up for that void by calling Victor two or three times a week to hear him speak of the child's daily happenings at school or at home.

Hélène ran her “man boudoir” for fifteen years, shielded from the police, the tax man, and rogue competitors alike by her select customers, all high up in the government food chain. She made sure to always clearly delineate her position from that of her employees by having tea and a formal chat with each guest before he had a chance to move to the bedroom with one of the girls. By doing so, she also established with her customers a position of some authority. This came in handy when some of them would try to get abusive with her employees, which, according to the girls themselves, happened with these educated men at just about the same frequency as it did with their former blue-collar customers on the street.

Through these many tea sessions, she learned as much about the men’s “intimate complexities” as she did about the spheres of power in which the officials operated every day. The men trusted her with their secrets and often unburdened on her professional matters as well, sometimes even asking for her opinion. She ended up at the center of one of the most desirable and powerful influence networks in Paris, even though she only used it for protection.

During these fifteen years, Hélène continued to be Sheila to Honorin. He never left his wife; he just kept on visiting Hélène for their *cinq-à-sept* every Monday. She did not run her tea room on that day. Over the years, they developed a closeness that filled Hélène’s heart enough that she never felt the need to respond to the many advances that she received in her boudoir or on the outside. True to his first word, Honorin never touched her, and true to her past, she never gave another man a chance to touch her. She did, however, kiss Honorin in the end; his end. All warmth had already drained out of his lips by the time she reached the hospital after being notified of his heart attack at work by one of his colleagues. She left the room just before Honorin’s wife and children arrived. They crossed paths in the stairway. She recognized them from the pictures Honorin carried in his wallet. They did not pay any attention to her; she had never been wallet material.

Hélène immediately started making plans to end her activities at the brothel. Without Honorin by her side, she no longer felt the desire to continue. Her son was to turn eighteen that year and had already gotten a full scholarship for college. Only years later would she find the courage to face the man he had become away from her. As to her own destiny, it would be delivered to her door by a lawyer a week after Honorin’s passing. She was notified that he had gifted her in his will a whole estate in Argentina; a house and close to one hundred acres of vineyards.

It took three days for her to settle all her affairs in Paris. She left the brothel to the girls for them to manage collectively. A handshake sealed the transition; there had never been any ownership papers in the first place. That was her guarantee that no one in Paris but Honorin would ever know

her real name. The girls knew her as Amira. As for her customers, they knew her by the name that she had given them on the day she had opened her “man boudoir” and that she would keep long after leaving it behind.

Madame.

Chapter 16

25 Years Earlier

Tristan closed his eyes and plunged into a deep sleep seconds after buckling his seatbelt in the plane that would take him back to Saint Petersburg. His whole body had the dull and unresponsive feel of a lip numbed by Novocain. He had just spent five hundred and forty-seven days lying in the attic of a remote Portuguese farmhouse. On the five-hundred and forty-eighth day, he had killed his nurse's husband and driven seven hours across Northern Spain to deliver her to her brother in Southern France. All this thanks to the countless, dreadful hours that Tristan had spent retraining his body, muscle by muscle, under the covers when Silvia was not in the attic.

Tristan had never really lost consciousness after being thrown out of a high window at the fort. He had gone into a catatonic state in which his body was out of reach and his mind detached from reality. For months, and regardless of the time of the day, he would drift in and out of a still, muted, comatose state, with, as sole bodily expression, the ability to open his eyes when out of that state. The mind came back first and reset circadian rhythms, which finally allowed him to sleep at night while staying semi-conscious during the day.

He would soon be able to see clear images and hear sounds as well, but they did not seem to belong to his world and he did not react to them in any way. Only one image and one voice seemed to prick his consciousness a little. They belonged to a woman and made him feel warm; a little like the gentle dream of a long lost mother. Day after day, that image and that voice sharpened for Tristan and drew him out of his fog a little more, until the instant when his eyes were somehow made to look sideways and he saw that woman lying against him under the sheets. He could not feel her, but she was too shockingly nude to be part of a dream.

The woman's nudity had lit the pilot light in Tristan's mind and within hours, his consciousness would be fully rekindled. Unfortunately, with it came along the gradual realization that he was trapped inside a dead body. He had just entered months of extreme anger and haunting memories imprisoned with him under a dark lattice of shingles with meager light bleeding through it at regular intervals. His frustration was always greatest when having to listen at lunch and dinner time to the rowdy voice of the man downstairs, and when the woman who was probably his wife would sneak into his bed almost every afternoon and talk to him for over an hour in a language that he did not understand. He had almost immediately realized that she was taking great care of him, but when she lay next to him in that way, he could neither feel her nor receive her soft spoken words.

After countless sterile afternoons of cuddling, Tristan would finally receive a signal, but it was not made of words. As always, Silvia rotated his neck to the side so his eyes and mouth would face hers after she lay down next to him. As always, she laid his hands on her breasts. As always, she pushed her lips against his. As always, he did not feel their pressure, but this time, he felt *some* pressure; far away from the lips, somewhere by his lower abdomen. A mild and odd pressure that somehow got translated into tiny vibrations that traveled all the way to the brain. For the first time in ages, Tristan felt pleasure; just a tiny wavelet of pleasure, but it triggered in him a tsunami of hope. He could feel! And to further reinforce the good omen, the signal had arisen from the one nerve node that could make him a whole man again.

The following day, Tristan made special efforts not to look at Silvia's nudity after she joined him in bed. He could sense that the prior day's erection had not been an oddity and he could not afford for that event to repeat. If Silvia realized that he was conscious and physically viable, her husband would soon find out as well, and from the man's frequent outbursts, Tristan sensed that it could be very dangerous for him, especially if the guy came to realize that his wife was taking a happy nap with him in the attic every day after he had gone to work. Tristan was now determined to reeducate his body, but he knew that the path would be a long and painful one to the day when he could again use it to defend his life.

That day came months later, but still a little sooner than he had planned. When Jorge, after chasing Silvia on the moor and locking her up in the back of his van, had started climbing the ladder very slowly, Tristan immediately understood that he was coming to kill him. He had managed to get out of bed, grab a bread knife that Silvia had left on the nightstand, and crawl by the access hole. The instant Jorge's big head popped through the hole, Tristan cut his throat without hesitation. From his bed, he had heard the man badger and abuse his wife for two years; it made sense for him to die like a pig.

At the Saint Petersburg airport, Tristan struggled to drag his suitcase along the endless corridor that led to the ground transportation area. He slept all the way in the cab. The vehicle had not even pulled out from the driveway of his suburban house before he had already crashed on the living room sofa with his suit and shoes on and passed out. In just under twenty-four hours, he had succeeded in hauling his phantom carcass across Europe and delivering it home.

Month after month, in a familiar environment, and with the caring support of the part-time maid that he had employed for over two decades, Tristan would continue to reeducate his body and eventually rebuild most of its physical strength. The maid might not have had any physical therapy

training, but she coached her boss with specific exercises that she had learned in a stretching class at the community center. He could feel that they helped, and would continue to practice the routines long after she had left for the day, this despite the pain emanating from several bone fractures that had probably healed in a less than perfect configuration. The only aspect that would not improve was his shortness of breath and slight wheezing when working out. Two prongs of Victor's pitchfork had gone straight through his lungs, and though they had healed during his coma, the trauma had left him with a form of emphysema that barred him from any exercise more strenuous than a walk.

The long incarceration inside his own body in Silvia's attic had also left two scars on his mind: a willful rage and a puzzling detachment from most other emotions. He was aware that these sentiments fed the mean streak in his eyes, but he also knew that these two new weapons in his arsenal would be precious in helping him carry out the plan that he had ruminated for months while stranded in bed in Portugal.

For his first outing since he had returned to Russia, Tristan picked a visit to the man he despised most in the country. Egor Dvorkin was a rogue business man who specialized in acquiring companies in financial distress and selling them for parts. He also purchased healthy companies—especially in the manufacturing sector—to capture their business and customers, before shutting them down and delocalizing them to Asia, where labor costs were much lower. When Dvorkin had heard that Tristan was planning to sell his company, he rushed to offer a competitive price for it. Aware of his reputation, Tristan had turned him down bluntly; he wanted his company to continue thriving in Russia and his employees to keep their jobs.

Dvorkin walked out of his office and into the reception area as soon as his secretary announced Tristan's arrival to him on the phone.

"Well, well... If it isn't the man who kicked me out of his office two years ago..." he said with a snide smile. "Did you come here to give me a chance to return the favor?"

"I'd just like a word," Tristan replied while standing up. Dvorkin signaled him to walk into his office and closed the door behind them.

"You'd better be here to sell me something," he said and sat down behind a huge, garish desk, leaving Tristan to stand.

"I am, with one condition."

"If it's about keeping your workers, forget it; that's not the way I do business."

"I understand that. I'll accept the offer you made two years ago; no strings attached."

"That offer was then; the instant you turned me down, it dropped by twenty percent."

"I assumed it would have. Okay for the cut, but in return, I'll ask for a favor; I heard that you had a strong personal network all around Europe..."

Dvorkin's face tensed up in response to Tristan's emphasis on the word *network*.

"What kind of network are you talking about?" he asked, on the defensive.

Tristan knew that he was walking on egg shells; the word was that Dvorkin was tightly connected with the Russian mafia's activities all over the continent.

"I need to find someone in France. A young woman; twenty years old. She ran away from home a couple of years ago without a penny and disappeared. I don't know where to start; France is a big place."

Dvorkin relaxed a bit and leaned back in his armchair.

"And you thought that a broke young chick could have run into one of my *networks*..."

Tristan did not respond for fear of antagonizing his interlocutor. He just waited for him to continue.

"Was she from the countryside?" Dvorkin asked.

"Yes."

"Boyfriend?"

"No," Tristan replied after a brief hesitation.

"Family elsewhere in France where she could have gone?"

"She wouldn't have. She knew they would have called her father right away."

"In that case, she probably headed for the broken maiden junkyard."

"What's that?"

"The capital of course. That's where they all end up sooner or later, no matter the country."

"Do you know people in Paris?"

"Did you bring a sales contract for us to sign?"

Three weeks dragged along between the day Tristan handed Dvorkin a photograph of H el ene—which he had lifted from a family album forgotten atop the fireplace mantel during his stay at her father's house—and the morning a courier knocked at his door to hand him a small brown envelope. It only contained one of Dvorkin's business cards with an address scribbled on the back. On the evening of that same day, Tristan was landing in Paris.

In the back of a cab, Tristan cranked down the window two inches to get a direct feel for the streets of his country's capital, which he had never actually visited. On the sidewalks, Parisians were tanned outside and gray inside. Summer had rolled up its fine sand beaches and sent them packing

home. On that first week of October, the scents of wet asphalt and spent gas were already reclaiming the city.

In late rush hour traffic and through the narrow, congested streets that the cab seemed to favor, the ride took over an hour. By the time Tristan stepped out of the vehicle, he was drained and irritable. He had been homebound—when not bedridden—for nearly three years and the dizzying ballet of planes, cars, and humans that had engulfed him for the best part of the day had decentered him. He just needed a little space of his own; a little silence of his own.

As he grabbed the handles of his two large suitcases, Tristan spotted a tall, narrow house across the street. It was stuck between a neighborhood supermarket and a nameless restaurant whose greasy windows did not seem to have deterred the droves of customers sitting inside. The official blue signboard on the front of the house indicated a one-starred hotel. Tristan had to drag his suitcases down one sidewalk and up the other to finally enter the hotel. A skinny older lady with a bad hair dye job sat behind a three-foot-wide wood counter that stood on its own at the bottom of a flight of stairs. There were no downstairs rooms to the right or to the left of her. Just walls encasing the staircase. The lady greeted Tristan with a kind smile.

“Hello! Welcome to Hotel Marianne. Where are we arriving from this evening...?” she asked with a cheerful attitude.

“Do you have any room facing the street?” Tristan replied coldly.

“Yes, one on the second floor,” the woman said, taken aback by Tristan’s attitude. “Forty euros a night; two-hundred for a week. Are you planning to stay long?”

“You can charge me for a week to start,” Tristan said and handed his credit card to the receptionist. Once the transaction completed, she led him up two flights of squeaky but shiny wood stairs onto a second floor where six doors flanked the staircase, three on each side. She opened one of the street-side doors—number three. Before she had a chance to enter the room and show it to Tristan, he extended his hand without a word to demand the keys, walked inside, and shut the door on the old maid. Tristan did not even look at the room; a small space minimally furnished with a narrow bed and two wooden chairs, one of which doubled as a night stand. He walked straight to the window and pulled the curtains open.

Across the street, slightly to the left, a wide, one-story building with a huge glass rectangle for a façade was already teeming with people. From his point of view, Tristan could see the entire place all the way to the bottles lined up on the shelves of the back wall, above the barman’s head. It was like staring at a huge aquarium. An aquarium for mature audiences. “*Pigals*” read the tall hot pink neon sign just above the door; the oversized “g” letter had tits and hips but no head. When the cab dropped Tristan off

on the sidewalk, just under the sign, he had instinctively kept his back turned to the place.

After taking a long shower, Tristan put on fresh clothes and headed next door to grab some dinner. The old receptionist had been replaced by a scruffy young fellow, who was absorbed with highlighting text in a thick book and did not even lift his head when he came down the stairs. The restaurant was still packed, almost exclusively by men, either alone at the bar or in packs around the long banquet tables that served as furniture. All drank—heavily—in silence at the bar, and shouting over one another at the long tables. From the ambient prattle, Tristan understood that customers were just getting imbibed on the cheap before heading across the street for action. In the midst of that din, the waiter who took his order was surprisingly stilted. Within minutes, he delivered a chicken breast with béarnaise sauce that was a pure marvel, though it cost less than a hamburger at the airport. Tristan wondered why anyone would bother cooking such a fine meal for a crowd of drunks on the prowl, but ended up enjoying the fact that he had found a decent place to eat all his meals with minimal exposure to the outside world.

When he returned to his room, Tristan unwrapped a bottle of vodka that he had brought with him—along with his favorite crystal glass—and set them both on the windowsill. He poured himself a large shot of liquor and started sipping it while looking into the aquarium. Just as it happens when staring at an aquarium, the scene quickly became repetitive, and almost hypnotic soon after. Inside the brightly lit glass box, all female creatures were betta fishes, flashy and offered. Most males were wolf eels, slimy and carnivorous. The eels tottered in and sat at a table where undulating betta soon joined them and immediately ordered champagne. Once the required bubbly purchase met and the glass hastily emptied, each eel got to swim out of *Pigals* with the betta of their choice. The betta would return to the base alone no more than thirty minutes later. Where she had been in the mid-time and what had become of the eel was a mystery. In a fantasy world, the prey might have devoured the predator but this was anything but a fantasy world. The moment they again crossed the door of *Pigals*, the betta waved their bright mermaid attributes and managed to latch onto another eel within minutes.

As time went by, Tristan, fixated on the scripted routine of the betta and eels, got more tense and drunk. He was now concerned about what he might find out about Hélène. He had asked Dvorkin to locate a defenseless, dreamy young girl, and had in response been pointed to a landfill for illusions. On top of that concern, he had to fight off a concupiscent anticipation of Hélène's appearance. In the end, though, it was the

drunkenness that prevailed and Tristan fell asleep on his chair. When he came back to the tangible world, *Pigals* was but a blinding light hole in which a handful of betta and eels now hung around on far apart stools; scattered debris left behind by a lusty tide. They were flushed out around four in the morning by the barman. The aquarium went dark and finally let go of its chokehold on a meek city night. Tristan undressed and laid his clothes neatly on a chair. He went to bed relieved not to have connected with H el ene yet and keenly aware of the fact that he would wait for her just the same the following night.

With the exception of a quick lunch next door, Tristan spent most of the next day in bed, alternating long sequences of sleep with shorter ones dedicated to the reading of Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich," which he had purchased at the Saint Petersburg airport as a going away tribute to the country that had nurtured most of his adult life. At dinner time, the restaurant with no name was even more crowded than the previous night and Tristan had no other option than to eat on a stool at the end of the bar. Just as he planted his spoon into the flan that he had ordered for dessert, he breathed a sigh of relief as the restless man sitting next to him finally stopped elbowing him and walked away from the counter. His stool was immediately snatched by another shadow. A very fragrant shadow. Intrigued by the heady perfume, Tristan discretely turned his head. The woman stood sideways with her back turned to him. She was so close that all he could see was the short, shiny black curls at the back of her head and a thin gold chain meandering along the nape of her pale neck.

"The usual, Amira?" the bartender yelled with a wink and a friendly smile in the woman's direction.

When she nodded, a brief light ripple on a foot-wide decorative stainless steel stud on the back wall caught Tristan's eye. On it, almost with mirror quality, was reflected the woman's face. Tristan experienced the same, sudden swell in his chest as the first time he had been close enough to touch that young woman with the tip of his fingers. That young woman had long, wavy hair; Amira had cut it. That young woman's cheeks kept a hint of baby fat; Amira's high cheekbones dominated a slim, tense face. That young woman stared you in the face with effrontery; Amira looked down, as if trying to abstract herself from the pub's environment.

Tristan had come looking for H el ene; Amira—who stood inches from him—was what had become of her.

Chapter 17

24 Years Earlier

Once the initial shock passed, Tristan reined in the flood of emotions that had poured into him and looked around for the quickest path through the crowd and out of the place. H el ene could turn around at any second and discover him. Before he could make a move, a rough jostle shoved him against the counter as a drunkard forced his way next to the young woman and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“Lookie here, a free sample courtesy of *Pigals!*” he shouted, pushing his face into the groove of H el ene’s neck. In a reflex, she violently threw her elbow into his ribs. He grunted under the blow, grabbed her hair, and pulled her head back.

“You dirty bitch...” he uttered in her ear as all men around the scene elected to look elsewhere. H el ene stiffened up into the man’s hold but did not say a word. Tristan slowly raised his hand to his chest, and pulled on the oval natural pearl that emerged from his tie, to draw out of the fabric, the sharp pin attached to it. He casually dropped his hand by the drunkard’s backside, and in the cover of the crowd packed around them, jammed the pin into the man’s groin area before taking it right back out. The guy jumped a foot high with a ridiculous squeal and let go of H el ene’s hair. He rushed to undo his belt, dropped his pants and briefs, and started swatting an imaginary spider off of his privates.

“Something bit me! Something bit me!!!” he yelled while leaning forward, butt naked, to examine the inside of his underpants, triggering an eruption of laughs and jeers all around the restaurant. Tristan picked up a napkin from the bar and discretely wiped the faint smear of blood off his tie pin before sliding it back into place. When he looked at the stool on which H el ene had been sitting, it was already empty. He paid his tab and hastened back to the hotel. Once inside his room, he immediately sat by the window and plunged his eyes into the aquarium.

It did not take long for H el ene to appear on the stage. She had traded her ordinary dark clothes for a hot pink tank top, very tightly molded silver shorts, and matching pumps. She exchanged a few words with the bartender, before heading for a table at which three men sat in the company of two blonds not even half their age. Though a couple of chairs were still empty, H el ene did not sit down. She stood straight just beyond arm’s reach of the men as they gesticulated to convince her to join in. She patiently waited for them to calm down and lean back on their chairs before exchanging a few words with them and walking away in the direction of the counter. The bartender loaded a bottle of champagne and several glasses on a silver tray that H el ene skillfully navigated on one hand through the maze of tables. When she bent over the customers’ table, one of the men patted her on the butt but she did not react; she simply walked

to another table and collected the empty glasses that she took back to the counter.

During the course of the night, H el ene would be groped and hassled dozens of times. Not once did she respond in an aggressive manner. She would just firmly return the hand to its owner or slip out of a lewd hug with reptilian limberness. It was quite clear that, of all the young girls in *Pigals*, only three could not be consummated as carry out. They all wore the same pink and silver outfit and powered the unremitting merry-go-round of bottles and cocktails between the bar and the tables. H el ene was the fastest of them; she was also the sternest one. She only took one short break during which she stepped out on the sidewalk and chatted with one of the prostitutes who had already circled in and out of *Pigals* a couple of times that night, with a different man each time. Though clearly in different roles, the two women seemed very comfortable with each other and H el ene even smiled on a couple of occasions during their conversation.

Around three in the morning, H el ene disappeared through a door in the back wall and returned a few minutes later in her street clothes. She kissed the barman and one of the other waitresses on the cheeks before stepping out of *Pigals* and heading down the street alone. Tristan slipped on a trench coat and hurried down the stairs. By the time he came out of the hotel, H el ene was already far down the street and he resisted the urge to run for fear of waking up his emphysema. That night, he was unable to keep up with the young woman's brisk pace. He had not gone fifty yards behind her when she had already vanished from his sight.

The following night felt to Tristan as a rerun. Behind his window, he witnessed all night the exact same sordid routine at *Pigals*, which included for H el ene the same outfit, the same break with the same girl, and the same quitting time. He himself duplicated his failure to tail her for more than a block. The next three nights were carbon copies of the first two, and Tristan was drinking more heavily every night to take the edge off his frustration.

On the Saturday that ended his first week in Paris, Tristan had grown so edgy that he did not feel hungry all day; he had skipped his two daily visits to the restaurant and just munched on a bag of chips. At nighttime, after dropping into his grumbling stomach, the vodka rushed into his veins and set his nerve endings afire. He spent his days cloistered in his room sleeping or ruminating over the past, and his nights staring at a mute and stern embodiment of a new H el ene, whose life remained mainly a black box to him. It was already clear that if his approach was very discrete, it was also remarkably sterile. He looked into the aquarium for a moment, rocking his head slightly as he sorted out conflicting emotions, and then jumped to his feet and grabbed the phone book from the chair by the bed.

"I'd like to speak with the woman in the short purple dress standing by the counter with the fat guy, to your left."

The barkeeper looked all around the bar with a confused expression as he tried to figure out why anyone would be calling him on the phone if they were close enough to see him. He finally dragged the phone to the lady in purple and handed her the handset.

"Umm... Allo...?" the woman said with a hesitant voice barely audible over the racket of the bar.

"I'm in room three at the hotel across the street. I'd like for you to come meet me here," said a nervous Tristan, frustrated by the bluntness of his words.

"Sorry, I don't go to places I don't know," the young woman replied, firmly this time. "Just come here to the bar. We'll chat a little and if we like each other, I'll take you to my spot."

"I can't get there. I'm a paraplegic and I don't have any help to get down the stairs at this time of the night. I just want to talk."

"Do I sound like a social worker to you?"

"I'll give you two-hundred for a half-hour and you can leave the door open all along. I'm waiting for you," said Tristan as he hung up. From the girl's body language, he could tell that she hesitated between taking the juicy offer and walking back to her portly john. She finally leaned over the counter, said something in the ear of the barkeeper, and stepped out swiftly into the street. When he got assured that she was heading toward his hotel, Tristan stood up in the dark, and leaving the room lights off, opened his door at a right angle. He placed a chair next to the door, into the feeble beam of orange light radiating from the safety lights of the staircase. After scanning the room to verify that he had not left any kind of personal cue in sight, he lay down on his back onto the bed, in the darker area of the room, his head behind the door.

Tristan took a deep breath when the thumping of thin heels on the hollow wooden stairs signaled the arrival of his guest. A brief silence at the top of the stairs, a few more clicks, and two light knocks on the open door, followed by a third one, a bit firmer than the first.

"Hello...?" a woman's voice murmured as her long shadow slid onto the room's flooring.

"Please sit down on the chair," replied Tristan after instinctively cupping his hands over his mouth to disguise his voice; a reflex as silly as effective.

"Where are you...?" the woman asked, unnerved by the setup and the cavernous voice coming from behind the door.

"Please sit down," Tristan insisted. "You won't see me. Like I said earlier, I just want to chat."

"Why does your voice sound muffled?"

"It's just another consequence of my accident; don't worry about it. We are not here to talk about me."

The woman's shadow swayed for an instant before compacting and merging with that of the chair.

"What is it you want to talk about?" she asked.

"You. I want to hear about your life. The life of a working girl."

"Hey, listen, I may be a *working girl*, but I don't kiss and tell. If your kink is to hear what happens with my other customers, you picked the wrong woman—"

"It's not that; I just want to hear how you cope every day with the emotional downfall from your job. How normal a life you can carry out after work? How you handle relationships with your family... your friends."

"My life is off limits; only my body is on the market."

"Surely, you must have done much worse for much less—"

"Oh, I see... We have a charmer here. What are you anyway? A wannabe journalist out for an easy-sleazy story? Some hardcore missionary out for my dirty soul?"

"Neither. I'm stuck in this room. The view from that window is all I have right now. I don't sleep much, so I end up watching *Pigals* all night. I hate to say it, but most of the girls who work the place seem to belong there. You don't. That's why I'm curious about you."

Though most questionable in a way of a compliment, the point somehow relaxed the woman.

"As long as the door remains open..." she said, as if to herself.

"It will. What's your name?"

"Jeanne."

The first exchange between Tristan and Jeanne lasted precisely thirty minutes and Tristan was the one to call its end.

"Thank you, Jeanne. I enjoyed our little chat," he said and slid a small stack of bills under the door.

"That's it...?" asked a suspicious Jeanne as she picked up the bills from the floor and started counting them.

"For today, yes, but if you are willing to visit me again—same terms—we can set a day and time."

"Sure! I'll come back as often as you want me too!"

"Wednesday around the same time?"

"I'll be here. Goodnight... Umm... What should I call you?"

"You can call me *Fantomas*," Tristan replied with a hint of pun in the voice, as he referred to a ghostly and ruthless popular character in French literature."

"Well, goodnight then, *Fantomas*!" Jeanne giggled and clicked her heels all the way down the stairs.

Tristan closed the door and dragged the chair back by the window. He watched Jeanne return to *Pigals*. She headed straight to the counter and engaged in a conversation with a young fellow who sat alone on a stool. Just five minutes later, they were walking out of the bar arm in arm. Tristan smiled. Though conceived under the influence of liquor and on the spur of the moment, his plan had worked like a charm. The setup in the room had protected his identity and reassured Jeanne. No one had walked into the hallway during their conversation; actually he had never met or even heard anyone in the hallway. Since Jeanne had jumped right back into the saddle minutes after leaving, rather than rush to tell someone about their encounter, it did not seem to feel like much of a conversation piece to her, which would help keep the scheme confined.

Most importantly, Tristan had managed to establish some level of trust with Jeanne by keeping his questions casual and avoiding anything that could have made her feel uncomfortable. He asked mainly about her childhood and her schooling—the first was as hectic as the second was basic—and above all, he had let her talk, an opportunity that probably did not come around often with her other customers. Toward the end of the chat, he could sense that she had already relaxed into the exchange. Like most people, she loved talking about herself and being paid multiple times her usual rate to do so would without a doubt make her run back to room three as often as called.

Indeed, three days later, shortly after Tristan had set the stage for her—door open, chair in the light, Fantomas in the dark—Jeanne slipped into the room without knocking and took her seat.

“I’m not late, am I?” she asked, out of breath.

“No; right on time. Welcome back, Jeanne.”

“How have you been?” the woman said casually as she pulled down on her mini-skirt, almost embarrassed by it, even though the man behind the door could only see her shadow.

“Last time, we left it at the point when you dropped out of high school,” said Tristan, ignoring her question. “You had been falsely accused of stealing another girl’s necklace in the locker room if I remember right.”

“Yes, that’s because someone—”

“We’ll come back to that later, Jeanne,” said Tristan. “Today, I’d like to talk about the present so we can go back and forth in time, session after session, and assemble your story like a puzzle, or a complex plot in a movie.”

“Okay!” replied Jeanne with childish excitement.

Tristan was eager to get to the heart of his own matter but even though he had managed to frame Jeanne back into the present, she did not take

any of the baits that he threw at her that night. He tried a new round of probing on the next Saturday.

“Do you have a night off?” he asked, in search of a fresh angle.

“Yes, Monday night. It’s always a slow night at *Pigals*. Most of us stay home.”

“Well, that’s not so bad. That’s the traditional night off for many people in the service industry, isn’t it? I’m sure they all head for bars and clubs. Do you go out with friends on that evening?”

“I spend all my other nights in a bar. All I want to do come Monday is crash on the sofa with a bag of white chocolate chip cookies and watch a romantic comedy.”

“Don’t friends visit you at home, then?”

“No, I have very few real friends—because of my job, you know—and I see them around *Pigals*.”

Without knowing it, Jeanne closed, one after the other, every door Tristan tried to crack open. He ended up looking at his watch in a nervous reflex. There were still ten minutes to go in the session but he felt that if he did not put an end to it, his aggravation would start transpiring through the casual conversation. He could not afford to scare Jeanne off. Giving the pretext of a headache, he paid her early.

“I will come back, won’t I?” she asked, worried, as she left.

“Wednesday, same time,” Tristan replied coldly.

“Great!” said Jeanne as she stepped down the stairs. “Oh, and don’t get mad if I’m a few minutes late. On that night, my roommate Amira is having a small party at home for her son’s second birthday.”

Tristan pushed the door closed from the bed and kept lying still in the dark. For a week he had been trying to get Jeanne to spontaneously talk about her girlfriend from *Pigals*, so she would not realize that he really was after Amira’s information and not hers. In the same sentence in which Jeanne had finally brought Amira onto the stage, she had pushed her to the back of it. Now, front and center stood a two-year-old boy and no matter in how many ways Tristan counted the months, that boy had been conceived within a couple of weeks of his sexual encounter with H el ene at the fort. She was a virgin then and considering the trauma that she had experienced on that day, it was very unlikely that she could have slept with another man a few days later. When Tristan had reeled in Jeanne in order to learn more about H el ene’s present, he never expected that the prostitute lived with his own son.

Tristan asked Jeanne over the very next night, and the following, and the next one as well. The woman was puzzled by his eagerness to hear more and more about her daily routine—especially at home—but then, she

had pretty much seen the whole spectrum of men's quirks by now, and not only was this one harmless, it was also very lucrative and effortless for her. Tristan, on his end, patiently fished for nuggets of information regarding H el ene and her son. Through Jeanne's disjointed accounts, little by little, he formed a more coherent picture of H el ene's path after her departure from home, which Victor had counted to him.

"And you said that your roommate — Amira is it? — never joined you in your lifestyle?"

"Never. She was working at a nail salon when I met her. She was at least six or seven months pregnant and the most miserable expectant mother I had ever seen. She wasn't that good at her job; I guess the owner of the salon had taken pity on her. I kept going back and requesting her anyway just to brighten her day a bit. After a few sessions, she started opening up to me and over the weeks, we became friends. She had been staying at a Catholic girls' shelter since she had arrived in Paris, but had been notified that she would have to leave the moment the child was born. She wasn't making enough money at the salon to take care of a kid on her own, so I offered her to share my apartment and got her the job at *Pigals*."

"How about the baby's father? Couldn't she have gotten some help from him?"

"That subject is taboo. The only time I tried to discuss it with her, she shut me off for several days. I never brought the matter up again. There's bad blood there; really bad blood..."

There was. A small smear at first, a big puddle of it a few minutes later, but that part, Jeanne would never hear. Not from H el ene; not from Tristan. Within minutes of the instant he had become a father in the ramblings of a prostitute, Tristan had redrawn his entire strategy. The same H el ene who had catalyzed his fall had in the end done for him what her mother had never been able to do; she had born his child. She was no longer an obsessive passion that he could not justify to anyone, not even himself. She was now the mother of his son; a fresh, healthy slice of him. One that did not wheeze at night; one that could run and jump. One that could love anew. The very night that he had discovered the existence of his son—as if suddenly perfused with his progeny's brand-new red blood cells—Tristan found the strength to shadow H el ene all the way home at three in the morning. Ironically enough, she reached her destination just two blocks down the street from *Pigals*. She walked into a demure three-story red brick building. Its dirty walls were lined at their base with huge rose bushes, but even their flowers absorbed the wan glare of the street lights into a deep black hue. A window on the second floor lit up shortly after H el ene's entrance into the place. A window protected by a thin white curtain that undulated as shadows passed in front of it. When the lights were finally turned off, Tristan walked back home feeling as if he owned the street. He had fathered a child with the love of his life.

Through her daughter.

Chapter 18

24 Years Earlier

Every night from then on, Tristan walked H el ene home. Only, she did not know about it. Not that H el ene was much at risk during her short hike home. At three in the morning, the street was deserted, save for the occasional neighborhood boozers still wandering about after closing time. Furthermore, a couple of henchmen in a long black sedan trolled the street up and down all night to make sure that no one interfered with the girls' business and the safety of the johns. After a couple of weeks, the driver would even occasionally nod at Tristan when passing by, assuming that he was a regular patron of their business.

Tristan always tailed H el ene from a distance, navigating through the darker portions of the poorly lit street. Once she reached home, he would take his post just across the street from the house that hosted her apartment. The five-story building there had been built in the fifties, a time when garbage chutes were a state-of-the-art feature of French architectural design. Tenants could walk out of their apartment, open a trap in the corridor wall, usually near the elevator, and dump their trash—bagged or not—into a conduit that would convey it into a large dumpster rested in a dedicated recess on the ground floor.

Though open to the street for garbage truck access, the confined room was not exactly a popular hang out. Tristan did not mind the stench; he had left most of his sense of smell on a slab of rock in the Pyr en ees. From that post, he had a perfect view of one of H el ene's apartment windows that faced the street, and even the bums who wandered about from time to time in search of a shelter, turned around after seeing his silhouette lurking in the semi-obscurity of his nook.

A shadow himself, Tristan stared endlessly at the furtive ones behind the white curtain of H el ene's apartment. Night after night, he watched with fascination the Chinese shadow puppet theater being featured in that window frame, from the time H el ene got home to the time she turned off the lights. From the haphazard sequence of silhouettes, Tristan would build his own storyline, which would always climax when one of the shadows was close enough to the window that he could identify it as H el ene's, his favorite heroin in the play. Jeanne's was usually on stage as well, as she returned home shortly after H el ene on most nights.

On a cold and damp November night, minutes after H el ene had made it home, a very short, very animated shadow character made the play for the first time. It hopped all around the hem of the curtain until it was swept off the floor and lifted by the arms of H el ene's shadow. The two shapes fused into an odd one and almost immediately vanished from the stage. Tristan's heart jumped into his throat. He had seen the woman; he had seen the child. He had felt the mother; he had felt the son. He stood by

the dumpster a long time after the lights went off in the apartment, drinking from a small tin flask that he had pulled out of his breast pocket. Exalted, incredibly alive, and immune to the winter air biting at his face. In that little apartment lived his family. And in a few hours, he would meet his son.

Tristan woke up at dawn. He had slept a couple of hours, at most. To distract a restless mind, he forced himself to read and listen to the news on the radio all morning. Just before noon, the time finally came for him to dress, grab a quick lunch next door, and head for H el ene's apartment. When he reached it, he just took up his station across the street. He felt uncomfortable; in broad daylight, no matter how far back into the garbage recess he stood, he could still be seen from the street. Luckily, the few passers-by were much too absorbed in their own routine to turn their heads.

While lying in bed that morning, Tristan had tried over and over to draft a plan of action, but his attempts had ended up crashing into a simple evidence: he had no idea what was going on in H el ene's place. Whether she was there or not; whether even his son was there during daytime. All he knew was that he could not face H el ene; she would never understand. And so he waited most of the afternoon. Despite a nagging thirst and a vague coffee withdrawal headache—he drank a dozen a day, very strong, since his Russian convalescence—Tristan did not move from his post. His persistence was rewarded around four-thirty in the afternoon, as the winter light just started to ebb. H el ene, wrapped up in a long winter coat, stepped out of the building and stood by a bus sign a few yards down the street, stomping on the ground to ward off the cold. An empty city bus picked her up a couple minutes later. Tristan waited for another fifteen minutes before crossing the street, entering H el ene's building, and knocking at the door of her apartment; the only one on the second floor facing the street.

Though he barely made it out of the apartment before H el ene and Jeanne rushed back in, he sneaked out of the building with a broad smile on his face. His son had opened his arms to him the instant he had walked into the living room. He had been vindicated as father, and by extension, as soul mate of the second coming of the woman he loved.

Tristan never repeated his incursion into H el ene's world. He just resumed his nightly contemplation of its Chinese theater shadows. By now, he could readily identify H el ene and Jeanne's silhouettes, but a third one, occasionally in the apartment at the late hours of the night puzzled him. Though slim and flexible, it was taller than the women's. It was also much more rigid and did not move its arms as much. Until that night when one

of these arms, without warning, broke away from the rest of the shadow like a spear and struck one of the women's silhouettes at chest level. The woman's puppet collapsed and disappeared from the screen.

Tristan's blood instantly came to a boil. He could not tell whether the fallen shadow was H el ene's or Jeanne's. He crossed the street as fast as his emphysema would allow him, entered the building, and started climbing the stairs when a door on the second floor opened. Tristan stopped and peeked through the railing of the staircase. Two long, skinny legs in dark jeans were propped against the wall by the door of H el ene's apartment, which had been left open. A match strike resounded like a warning to Tristan's ears and immediately filled the staircase with a scent of sulfur. Tristan held his position halfway up the first flight of stairs, uncertain whether to intervene or not, and concerned by his physical ability to do so.

The standoff lasted a few minutes, during which no one entered the building or exited one of the apartments. Women's voices coming from the hallway of H el ene's apartment ended it. From that point on, Tristan perceived the scene in disjointed, saturated flashes. The sound of a slap, the collapse of H el ene's body onto the floor; the bony hand clasped onto her throat; H el ene's glassy eyes pointed at the big black ring propped in front of her face by another bony hand... "Kiss it, Amira; kiss the ring and I'll let you go..."

The assailant did let go, when the slamming of Tristan's clasped hands on the back of his neck dislocated his cervicals. The ominous crack reset Tristan's perception to real time. Wheezing all along, he still managed to drag the long and slender body of the young man he had just killed down the stairs and shove it into a recess under the staircase. He stripped the black ring from the man's index finger in a single, furious pull, returned to the second floor, and knelt by H el ene's inert body. After verifying that she had a pulse, he took several deep breaths, picked her up, kicked down the apartment door, and delivered her to her bed without a word in front of a very startled Jeanne. The roommate watched him pick a rose from a vase in the living room, slide the ring onto its stem, and lay it down on H el ene's nightstand. Jeanne was a million miles away from making a connection between the intruder and her faceless paraplegic customer in room three of the hotel across from *Pigals*.

After leaving the apartment, Tristan pulled his victim's body back from under the stairs on the first floor and rolled it inside a long, thick curtain that he had ripped off from one of the ceiling-high first floor windows. After several tries, he succeeded in loading it onto his shoulder and staggered under the weight all the way across the street, where he finally disposed of the cadaver into the dumpster by which he stood every night. Just as he returned to his observation post, the lights were turned off in the room of H el ene's apartment that faced the street. Tristan took it as an

indication that Jeanne was not going to call the police and he walked home, exhausted, under a light drizzle.

The next day, the caretaker of H el ene's apartment building phoned the police to report the robbery of one of her curtains; they never bothered to stop by. In the evening, H el ene showed up at *Pigals* at her regular time and performed her usual routine all night. Tristan shadowed her home, as always. When she disappeared into her building, he hesitated a moment but ended up slipping into the garbage recess across the street. He climbed onto a narrow ledge on the side of the dumpster and shined a flashlight inside the large metal container. Two small trash bags, a scattering of potato peelings, a plastic camel that still smiled despite a leg burnt to a stomp; nothing else but greasy streaks on the bare metal. The dumpster had been emptied. The dead young man never showed up in the papers. He had probably burned under a mound of rubbish. Jeanne never returned to *Pigals* and with her absence, Tristan lost his land line to H el ene.

Tristan had gotten away with murder, but would not escape its downfall. The incident had rattled H el ene's nerves and now, during her late night walk home from *Pigals*, she would nervously turn around and scrutinize the street. Though Tristan stayed farther back, he was quite sure that she had spotted him on a couple of occasions. Just a month after barely escaping death in front of her apartment door, she walked out with the barkeeper at the end of her shift at *Pigals* and they continued their conversation on the sidewalk. Intrigued and vaguely jealous, Tristan cracked his window open despite the bitter night cold. The couple's voices carried clearly across the street.

"No problem, Amira, your shift is covered for the next two nights; if you need to stay there longer, just give me a call," the barman said.

"You're still okay to drive us to the station? The train for Pau leaves at eleven at night; I'd like to be there by ten," H el ene replied with a shivering voice.

"No problem; I'll pick you up at your house. The train won't get there till morning. I know; I took it once to go skiing in the Pyr enes; it stops everywhere and takes forever. Make sure you get a sleeping car."

"That's my plan. I need to get some sleep because from Pau, I'll still have to catch a bus to get to the village and once I do get there, I'll need all my strength."

The barkeeper pulled H el ene into his arms and hugged her while patting her back. When she broke free, she turned around and walked away without a word.

Tristan took a train for Pau a few hours later.

The farmer's market was in full swing when the bus pulled up into the southern village of Cazaubielle. Tristan sat on a low stone wall that encircled the small town square; no one had recognized him or even noticed him. He watched H el ene and her son descend from the bus and instantly be sucked into the market crowd. If he could only discern patches of H el ene's red and white dress flashing through the villagers' silhouettes, Tristan had a clear view of his son as his mother pulled him behind her between two rows of uneven legs. The little boy, overwhelmed, had buried his head into his mother's thigh. He dropped the toy soldier in his hand and looked back to try to locate it. At that moment, through a motley forest of pants and dresses, he caught a glimpse of Tristan's face. In response to the man's smile, the kid's eyes lit up with hope for a brief instant, until his mother's arm pulled him further away.

Tristan watched H el ene and her son get into Victor's sedan and calmly walked back to his rental car. He had no intention of tailing them. He had a pretty good idea of their destination and there was not much for him there. He drove without haste to Victor's home. When he pulled up the driveway, he hesitated for a brief instant and then skirted the house through a side alley to park behind it. Just as he turned off the ignition, his former nurse—Victor's sister, Silvia—alerted by the noise, came out of the back door while wiping her hands with a small towel. When Tristan stepped out of the vehicle, her hands froze into the white linen. She slowly walked backwards into the house, and closed the door behind her after a last head-to-toe scan of Tristan, as if trying to block a demented vision. Not only was her patient's sudden reappearance eerie, it was also the first time that she had seen him standing up.

Tristan walked up to the door and opened it casually, as if he knew that Silvia had not locked it. He stepped into a small kitchen separated by an open door from the living room in which he had sat with Victor on the day he dropped Silvia there. Victor's sister stood stilted by the sink. She watched Tristan sit down without a word at the kitchen table.

"Caf e...?" he said while pointing his chin at the coffee machine.

Silvia pulled a blue mug from the cupboard and filled it with coffee before bringing it to the table along with a spoon and a small tin cup containing several lumps of sugar. She returned to her stand by the sink and watched Tristan sip his coffee while his eyes stared into the living room and probably out the front window of the house. When she understood that he was waiting for something, or someone, she turned her back to him and resumed her dishwashing in silence. She felt veins pulsating wildly at her neck and wrists. After she wiped off and put away the dishes, she sat at the table next to Tristan and stared out the front window with him, in total silence. Twenty or so minutes later, she recognized the familiar humming of Victor's car approaching the house. Tristan stood up, pushed the door to the living room half closed, and then

went to lean against the sink, where he could not be seen from the living room, even if the door was to be pushed fully open. He then signaled to Silvia to come stand by his side and placed his index finger across his lips to instruct her to remain silent.

Almost immediately after they entered the living room, Victor directed H el ene to sit down and he stepped out of the room. He had a start and instinctively clenched his fists when entering the kitchen and discovering Tristan by the sink. He immediately looked at his sister who reassured him with a gentle nod and in turn placed her finger across her lips. Victor hesitated for a brief instant and then stepped between Silvia and Tristan to open a cupboard from which he brought back a loaf of bread and a box of tea bags. He grilled two slices of bread while Silvia poured hot water from a kettle into two cups. Victor's face had turned wan and tense but H el ene did not seem to notice anything when he returned to the living room with a loaded tray.

Tristan listened sternly to the exchange that ensued between Victor and a very distraught H el ene. He learned of her bad reputation in the village. He heard of her father calling her a whore and sending her and her son away. His jaw contracted violently when the young woman referred to their embrace at the fort as rape. The moment Victor agreed to keep H el ene's son with him, Tristan decided right then and right there that he would from now on watch over his son and let H el ene return alone to her life. As the meeting came to an end, Victor called his sister from the living room. Silvia looked at Tristan; he nodded. After introducing his sister to H el ene, Victor asked her to stay with the child while he drove the young mother back to the train station. Tristan heard H el ene kiss her son after a trembling "Mommy will be right back. The nice lady is going to play with you a little, okay?"

The front door squeaked open and seconds after it closed, a guttural scream erupted outside the house that wrenched even Tristan's guts. He stepped into the living room and walked by the window. Victor was pulling H el ene towards the car as her cry intensified further and one of her arms kept reaching back for the house. Victor let go of her as he opened the passenger door of the car. She kept screaming with a face distorted by pain but did not run back to the house. Victor gently pushed her into the vehicle and closed the door behind her. When the car pulled away, H el ene's son, inside the house, noticed that the two grown-ups stood by the window and did not pay any attention to him. With a mischievous smile, he climbed on a chair to grab another chocolate from the open box sitting on the table. He greeted Tristan with a big smile when he sat across the table from him.

"I guess it's just the two of us now, Aur elien," said Tristan, returning the smile.

Chapter 19

November 13, Year 4.

The roof light of the car was put out after only a few seconds. The vehicle took off and glided down the steep alley with a faint engine purr. I never got as much as a glimpse of the driver's shadow; in fact, I had not even thought of looking at him. The vision of my daughter's face had petrified me and turned me into a pitiful scarecrow in a night robe with a rusty shotgun hanging from its right arm. The idea of going after the car never crossed my mind either. They had my daughter and by coming to challenge me at my own house, they had made it clear that they knew exactly how much leverage that represented. When the damp obscurity finished dissolving the back lights of the car, I closed the door, laid the shotgun on the living room table, and sat in the armchair by the fireplace, whose ashes still radiated sickly warmth.

Jessica's image had been seared onto the inside of my eyelids and I could not have winked it away had I wanted to. After seeing the face in that car, it had taken a few seconds for me to recognize my daughter. A daughter for whom the sparkles of face glitter and Tinker Bell bracelets had without warning been replaced by the steely reflections of dental braces and handcuffs. A daughter who was no longer the pretty, bubbly child who could draw amused smiles from the sternest grown-ups. A daughter on whose face the shockwaves of early adulthood had been hard at work dismembering the vestiges of childhood. A daughter who had become a real person; a young woman with eyes that had gone flat and a jaw that had squared up a bit too much for a girl.

Instead of focusing on the fact that I had found her shackled in a stranger's car, my mind was fixated on Jessica's new face. It drew a cryptic truth that I was not quite able to decipher, even though I sensed that it was of great importance. That frustration compounded the shock brought about by the brutal reversal in the course of my life. Three years of survival; three years of revival; three years of a vital journey only to be kicked back to square one, where I would once again have to forego my life in order to care for the domestic stranger that was my daughter.

I closed my eyes, nestled my head in a corner of the back cushion of the armchair, and started counting very slowly the wood slats of the ceiling. I needed to create some buffer in my head between the past and the present; I was unable to process their colliding in front of me moments earlier. I was also aware that all I could do now was to stand pat and wait for the next act to be delivered to me.

A scratch on the front door, followed by a vague whimper, drew me out of my vegetative state after an hour or so. I stood up, grabbed the shotgun, and opened the door in a brusque swing... before slamming it right back closed. My back propped against the door, I coached my nerves

back into their grooves before trying to figure out what had spooked me on the other side. It was, after all, only a dog, but I had never been comfortable around these animals and the one standing on the other side of the door was a mixed breed of ghastly and ghostly. Perched on long and flimsy legs, the mutt's scraggly body was covered with patches of short gray hair and areas of bold and reddish skin. The animal was shaped like a tall coyote. Its thin, elongated muzzle and beady yellow eyes, on the other hand, would have qualified it for retirement as a gargoyle on the roof of Notre Dame. I would have loved to ignore the dog and return by the fire but the animal had an additional characteristic that mandated that I reopen that door. A clear plastic bag clipped to its collar that contained a white piece of paper.

I pulled the door open just a couple of inches and looked down at the beast. It had not moved. It was even scrawnier than in my first impression and his stare was still and empty. I kneeled behind the door and very slowly, inch by inch, extended my arm out until my hand reached the plastic bag. The dog did not move but the instant I released the bag from his collar, it turned around and walked away into the dark. I picked the sheet of paper out of the wet ziplock bag and unfolded it.

We are not predators. We have temporarily restricted your daughter's freedom but she is as safe and comfortable as can be. For now. You have three days to bring Madame here.

The four sentences were handwritten in old-school cursive lettering of a dark red tone, probably with a fountain pen. The disjointed nature of the statements made me feel as edgy as the choice of the term "predator." I had pretty much already figured out that blackmail was somehow at play, but between the use of a stray dog as a messenger, the anachronistic handwriting, and the blunt demand for Madame, I was now scared that on the other side might lie a deranged mind; a mind with which I might not be able to negotiate.

I contemplated turning the problem over to the police, but only for a brief instant. Jessica was a bridge to my past; a past in which I was still a fugitive, not only from my family but also from the international police. If I brought the village cops into the matter, Interpol would knock at the door next. That meant serious trouble for me without any guarantee that it would help rescue Jessica. I could not see any other option than to contact Madame; I needed her take on the whole ordeal even though I hated the idea of pulling her into a quicksand area.

Madame was the woman who had revived me at the end of a mad run during which I had driven my life over a cliff. She had rescued me after I had landed in Argentina alone, destitute, and on the run from international police. I had spent my first night there hiding from the local authorities in a

bush after being tricked into invading someone's apartment by a young woman who had also managed to snatch the little money I had left. After having me picked up, Madame had hidden me for over a year on her beautiful estancia on the Andes foothills and spent countless evenings reeducating me and reconstructing me into a worldly gentleman. By the end of my renaissance, I had fallen in love with Madame, but despite elusive signs that she might have grown close to me as well, she had never encouraged my advances, for reasons I had never comprehended. Instead, she had offered me a brand-new start in life by handing me the management of her late father's wine estate in southwest France.

It was just over four in the morning—eleven at night in Argentina. Hopefully, Madame would still be up. I changed into warm clothes, slipped into a long nylon raincoat and rubber boots, grabbed the satellite phone, and stepped out. The narrow trail that cut through the vine rows and led to the top of the hill was as shiny under the beam of my flashlight as it was slippery under the soles of my boots. Every Sunday night, in order to contact Madame via the secure satellite line that protected the covert aspects of our exchanges, I had to climb to the hilltop just to have a passable connection. That night, the curtain of rain dampened even further the satellite signal and the sound was already very scratchy as I listened to the rings on Madame's end. She picked up on the fourth one.

"Dígame," she said, instinctively using the Spanish greeting.

"Madame; it's Richard. They have my daughter and they want you," I said in one breath.

"Richard...? We definitely need to work some more on your small talk skills," Madame replied calmly after a brief lull "Who has your daughter and why do they want me?"

I went on to explain the sequence of events that had taken place since I had been dragged out of sleep not even two hours earlier. Madame listened without a word. I finished the account with the question that I burned to ask since she had picked up the phone.

"Do you know who these people are?"

"There are a couple of possibilities, but I'm not going to speculate at this point. What puzzles me is how they made the link between you and my group."

"Can you connect me with some members of your organization here who could help get my daughter back?"

"The guys who managed to get your daughter there all the way from San Francisco ran a pretty bold maneuver; they are probably playing high stakes with solid resources. That means that if I don't show up there within the next three days, it could get very serious for your daughter—"

“And if you come here, it could get very serious for *you*, Madame.”

“I’m not a teenager and I’m not without defense. I have to get in touch with several parties in order to prepare a proper landing in France, but I’ll be there before the three days are over.”

Madame hung up before I could raise any further objection; it suited me just fine that way. I was hugely relieved to know that I would be fighting that battle with her by my side. She was the one who had taught me to stand my ground on a battlefield but in this case, I did not have any handle on the situation and she seemed to have at least some idea of the lay of the land.

Just as I started descending the muddy trail, I slipped and fell backwards. Before I hit the ground, my arm swung around wildly and the beam of the flashlight swept across a wan face that floated between two vine rows. I wrestled in the mud for a couple of seconds before standing back up and immediately pointing my flashlight in the direction of the pale head.

“Victor?!” I yelled with frustration while scanning the old farmhand’s body in a silly reflex, just to make sure that all its parts were actually present under the head. The man had always spooked me. “What the hell are you doing here?!” I asked. “You were spying on me?”

“Madame isn’t coming here, is she...?” The man asked while wiping the rain off his forehead with his knotty hand. There was not the slightest hint of contrition in his voice, just a massive anxiety.

“That’s none of your business!” I replied and started going down the trail again. Victor was the last person I needed to see at that moment. I had only taken a few steps when I felt pressure at the back of my neck, instantly followed by a choking sensation as the collar of my raincoat closed tightly around my neck. In an attempt to break free from the hold, I fell on my knees, but the hand clasped on the scruff of my coat followed the movement and in seconds, a nasty breath blew into my nostrils.

“Madame isn’t coming here, is she...?!” repeated Victor’s voice, very close to the side of my face.

I could have broken loose. Despite his frail build, the man was strong but he was also thirty years older than me. I chose instead to cool things off.

“Yes, Victor; Madame is coming to settle a few matters about the estate—”

“Don’t play me for a fool! I’ve heard several of these calls. You hardly ever discuss the property. You keep talking about *the group* or *the organization*. Call her back and tell her not to come here. If she does, she’ll fall into a trap!”

I did not respond. Victor’s grip tightened.

“Call her back!” he pressed.

“She’s already made her decision, Victor,” I replied firmly.

“Oh, no...” Victor sighed and let go of the back of my collar. By the time I got up and turned around, he had disappeared. I pointed the beam of the flashlight down the trail and saw him already twenty yards away, descending the slope in huge strides, as if fitted with seven-league boots. I decided to ignore the whole episode; I had much more important matters at hand than the ravings of an old farmhand.

I returned home and lived in a haze there for the next sixty hours. I did not hear a word from the kidnappers, neither did I expect one. I knew that everything would be suspended until Madame arrived. Nearly three days after I had discovered Jessica’s abduction, in early afternoon, three firm knocks at the door dragged me out of a tormented snooze in the armchair by the fireplace. I opened the door onto two women.

Two women from two stations of my life without any connection to each other. The mother of my children and the woman who had reconstructed me after I had deserted my family.

Alana and Madame, side by side.

Chapter 20

November 16, Year 4.

I stared back and forth at the two women, stunned by the fusion of the only two worlds that I had ever known and that were never meant to collide.

“Won’t you invite us in my house, Richard?” said Madame softly. I stepped aside. Madame invited Alana to sit down at the living room table and walked out of the room and into the kitchen. I stood by the door, looking out at the bare winter landscape in an attempt to collect my thoughts. Madame came back from the kitchen carrying a bottle of white wine and three glasses.

“It’s cold, Richard; could you please close the door and help me open this Jurançon? We could all do with a drop of relaxant.”

I pushed the door closed and picked up the bottle and corkscrew that she had laid on the table. As I rotated the handle of the corkscrew, I could sense Alana’s stare, planted into my face. She had not said a word or expressed the slightest emotion since her arrival. She just stared at my face, as if trying to assert that I really was her missing husband. I poured wine into the three glasses without a look at either woman and finally sat down across the table from them. Madame took a long sip from her glass.

“Where’s my daughter?” said Alana suddenly and proceeded to pour the wine in her glass back into the bottle, which forced her to take her eyes away from me.

“She is close by, Alana, but I don’t know exactly where,” I replied, very tense.

Alana’s hand started trembling as the last of the wine fell into the bottle.

“Did she seem hurt?” she continued with a clear effort to control her voice before laying down her empty glass back on the table.

“No; she seemed fine, but I only saw her for an instant. There was nothing I could do.”

“Don’t worry; no one would expect you to do anything—”

“Have the kidnappers been back in touch with you?” Madame interrupted Alana with a pacifying smile while taking her hand. “Did they send you new instructions since we spoke?” she asked me.

“No; nothing. I guess they were just waiting for you to arrive.”

“Well, I’m here now, so they’ll probably make a move soon. Alana and I have been traveling for the past twenty-four hours. We’ll go upstairs and get some rest while we can.”

“I’ll get your bags from the car,” I said, glad to have a chance to step out of the situation and regroup a bit before the next round.

Madame had arrived with three monogrammed cream leather suitcases. Alana was still using the same cloth one that we had received as

a wedding present. It still looked new; it had never seen much action. When I made it up the stairs, the doors of the two guest bedrooms were already closed. I left the suitcases in front of them, slipped on a raincoat, and inhaled as far down as I could reach as I stepped out of the house.

Since I had opened my door on Alana and Madame, I had been squirming in a puddle of conflicting emotions. The nude and frigid vineyard that enveloped me as I sat in the middle of one of its alleys eventually started mopping up some of these feelings. When it did, one emotion surged and smothered all the others. Anger. How could Madame, *of all people*, have violated my trust and forced on me a reunion with my estranged wife? Once that obsessive thought started spinning around my mind, no other could enter it. I stood up and headed back to the house. As I approached it, I noticed Madame's silhouette right behind the window of one of the upstairs bedrooms. She watched me approach the building and as I was about to enter, opened the window and leaned outside slightly.

"I'm coming down," she said and sprung right back inside the bedroom.

I waited for her in the kitchen, which was at the end of the house opposite that of the bedroom in which Alana was resting. Madame walked in and proceeded to make coffee on the counter.

"I'm assuming that it is safe to turn my back on you..." she said with an ambiguous tone of voice.

"How could you...?" I replied and approached her.

"You know how much respect and affection I have for you, Richard. But there's a part of your past that resembles too much a part of mine for me to accept it. I hate to say this, but, as a mother, the instant you told me that your daughter had been kidnapped, in my mind it instantly ceased to be about you. It ceased to be about the parent who had walked out on the child and became about the parent who had stood by her. It became about her mother. If my son had gone missing, I would have prayed for someone to help me locate him. I answered that prayer for your wife."

"What purpose did it serve to bring her here? She could just have stayed in California while you briefed her over the phone?" I argued.

"When a child's life is threatened, a mother would rather breathe the same toxic air as her kid than breathe fresh air in a safe place. I realize how uncomfortable this situation is for you, but believe me, of the two, you are the one who breathes the easiest right now."

Madame's calm voice deflated my anger and even though I resented a couple of her statements, I could hardly dismiss them as wrong.

"Did you travel here together?" I asked as Madame handed me a coffee cup.

"No. I called Alana while still in Argentina, two days ago. I had learned her first name when reading your journal when you arrived at my estancia. I took a chance assuming that she would have kept your last

name—for the kids’ sake—and found her in the San Francisco phone book. I didn’t even try to explain who I was; I knew that in her situation, she would have taken a collect call from the devil himself. I just told her that I wanted to help her find her daughter and asked her to meet me at the Paris airport the following day. Our first encounter took place this morning, just a few minutes before our connecting flight for Pau was set to take off. During the short flight, I just let her know that we were on our way to meet you. She became so pale that I thought she was about to faint, but she didn’t. She asked the flight attendant for a soda and remained pretty much silent all the way to this house.”

“What are we going to tell her now?”

“The little we know, there’s no point in—”

Madame’s sentence remained suspended as her eyes suddenly pointed to the window and a blend of gravity and emotion redrew her face.

“Victor...” she murmured before standing up and walking out of the kitchen. I followed her to the front door that she opened wide. Victor, her father’s old farmhand, was walking toward the house, stern and straight as ever, but when he discovered Madame by the door, he froze on the front steps as his eyes teared up. Madame stepped outside and took him in a tight embrace.

“Oh God... It is so good to finally see you again, my friend,” she said while holding the back of Victor’s head in the palm of her hand. The man stared down to hide his emotion, his arms shyly hanging by his sides.

“It is such a blessing to have you back on this land—your land, Hélène. Such a blessing to all of us...” he said with a whimpering voice.

Madame let go of her hold and grabbed the farmer under the arm to guide him into the house but he resisted.

“I’m all muddy... I cut through the vineyard,” he said with embarrassment. His boots were covered with shiny yellow clay all the way to the ankles. Madame smiled and did not push for him to remove them; she knew that his old bachelor socks would probably put him at an even greater discomfort.

“Let me grab a jacket, Victor; I’ll meet you in the cellar and we’ll toast our reunion after nearly thirty years of long distance friendship!”

“I’ll wait for you there!” cheered Victor, relieved, before switching to a grave facial expression and adding as he walked away, “I also need to talk to you about something very important.”

Madame swiftly climbed the stairs and disappeared into her room, from which she came back a couple of minutes later cocooned in a white skiing coat.

“Come Richard, I want you to be a part of this. That good man raised my son. I have employed him ever since, but I’m so glad I’ll finally have a chance to thank him face to face.”

I followed Madame to the back of the house. The cellar door was open; we walked right in. The lights had been turned on in the front part of the structure—the wine-tasting area—but it was empty.

“He must be checking on the vats; he can’t stay idle for a minute,” Madame said with a chuckle and walked through the small arch that led to the back area of the cellar. She came back a few seconds later with a puzzled expression on her face.

“He’s not there. Maybe he misunderstood...”

We stepped out and looked around the cellar without success before returning to the front of the house.

“There!” I said pointing my finger at a grapevine patch a hundred yards downhill. Victor’s silhouette was fleeing down one of the rows.

“What in the world got into him?”, asked Madame squinting to follow the man’s flight.

“He’s an older fellow. Maybe too much emotion for one day?” I replied, unconvinced; the man had seemed so genuinely thrilled to reunite with Madame and eager to speak to her.

“Yes, probably,” said Madame. “Let’s give him a couple of hours to relax and we’ll pay him a visit at home.”

Only later would my mind register the image that had been furtively imprinted a minute earlier on a peripheral area of my retina. The vision of a yellow dog that stood still on his long scrawny legs atop the flat cement roof of the half-buried cellar.

Chapter 21

November 16, Year 4.

Madame took a nap while I went shopping for groceries; I had just realized that I had two house guests and hardly anything to eat. Considering the circumstances, for us to leave the place and have dinner in town would probably not have been a very good idea. The village butcher and grocer greeted me with their usual cheerfulness; the baker's wife's stare seemed to me just a tad more insistent but then, she was nosey and had a sixth sense for juicy affairs.

The house was still silent when I returned. I prepared a leg of lamb for roasting with an assortment of vegetables and spent extra time cutting and arranging on a plate my best block of foie gras. Madame had probably not tasted that local delicacy in years; what a better way to welcome her home. Since Alana would without a doubt cringe at the idea of eating fattened goose liver, I had planned smoked salmon on toasts—her favorite appetizer—for her instead.

"You are serving foie gras in the middle of a battlefield, Richard? I have to admit, I taught you well."

I turned around and was surprised to find a mocking Madame two feet behind me, looking over my shoulder at the dishes on the table. Her eyes were puffy and her feet bare on the cold tiles.

"Hold on; I think I have a pair of extra slippers lying around," I replied and fetched the shoes back from my office. She put them on and stared at them with amusement.

"Thanks," she said, "I forgot mine."

She picked with her fingers a small piece of foie gras from the plate, placed it in her mouth, and emitted a long sigh of delight.

"It would almost make one forget that they stand on a heap of trouble," Madame said with a sad smile. "Is there anything I can do to help with dinner?"

"No; everything is good to go. I'll just put the leg of lamb inside the oven in a couple of hours."

"Since Alana seems to have gone into deep sleep, why don't we drive to Victor's for an *aperitif* before dinner? We'll leave her a note."

We drove into the early November dusk the mile that separated Madame's house from Victor's. The lights were on inside the small cottage when we approached it. Madame pushed the horn once to warn her friend of our arrival and opened her door before the car had even come to a full stop. She descended from the vehicle and walked toward the house while shouting, "This time, Victor, there's no running away. Here I come!" I decided to turn the car around to make it easier to leave after nightfall and stepped out of it. When I started heading for the house, I noticed Madame's silhouette, frozen in the yellow light of the door frame.

"What is it...?" I asked, as I approached her. She did not react. I grabbed her by the shoulders and looked inside. From one of the massive ceiling wooden beams hung Victor's frail body, his head folded down on his chest, his open hands facing the door. I rushed in, grabbed my pocket knife, climbed on a chair, and cut the cord while bending Victor's body over my shoulder. I brought him down and laid him on the floor. His body was still warm and elastic but his wide-open eyes and horrible facial rictus left little doubt as to his condition. The lack of any pulse at the neck or wrist confirmed the farmhand's passing.

Madame was still prostrated in the door frame; the expression on her face was one of disbelief.

"It's over, Madame," I said and stood up. I wrapped my arm around her and forced her to turn away from the macabre scene. "I'm taking you home. There's no need for you to be involved in this. I'll come back and call the police alone."

Madame did not resist. She remained silent all the way back to her house. Only when she stepped out of the car did she talk again, "Be careful with the gendarmes, Richard. Speak little. For some reason, it is quite common around here for old bachelors to commit suicide. It shouldn't be anything more than a routine report for them."

I nodded and watched her get inside before heading back to Victor's. I dreaded entering alone a house in which I would be greeted by a cadaver. When I did enter, my eyes scanned the room for a phone, only brushing over Victor's body swiftly. The gendarme who answered the call was courteous and to the point. The moment I described the situation, he asked me to stay put and not touch anything before they arrived. I stepped outside to wait for them.

The police van pulled up in front of the house less than fifteen minutes later. Two officers descended from it and shook my hand before entering the house.

"Did you take him down?" asked the younger officer, who also seemed to be in charge.

"I did; I was hoping that there was still time—"

"That was the right thing to do," the gendarme said as he kneeled by the cadaver and performed the same vitals check as I had earlier. "Call back the firemen," he added, now addressing his colleague, "and tell them not to bother driving up here. We can take the body to the morgue ourselves."

The two men took turns sketching the layout of the room on a notepad before asking me to write down a brief account of my actions from the moment I had arrived at the house. While I complied at the living room table, they took Victor's body out on a stretcher and loaded it into their vehicle. They waited patiently for me to finish writing and asked me to sign at the bottom of the form.

"Sorry you had to find him," said the young officer as he stepped out of the house. "This time of the year is always bad for these single old guys," he added. The officers never asked why I had come over in the first place; obviously, they already knew that the old man worked for me. I stood on the front steps as the gendarmes headed back to the van. Just before climbing into it, the older one turned back to me.

"By the way... Victor's sister lives here, too. Did you check if she was around?" he asked.

"I'm pretty sure she isn't," I replied. "She would've heard the racket. I'll double check before I leave."

"Good. You may also want to leave her a note asking her to contact us so we can inform her of her brother's death."

I watched the van take off and inspected every room of the small house. The only living creature there was a young cat that napped on top of the dryer, which was still running. I left a short note for Victor's sister on the door before leaving.

Madame was sitting on the doorsteps when I pulled up to her house; she stood up as I came out of the vehicle.

"How did it go?" she asked as we stepped inside.

I answered with a brief account of the officers' visit as we sat down in the armchairs by the fireplace.

"The only aspect that seemed to bother them a little was the fact that Victor's sister was not around," I said as I wrapped up the story.

"Silvia... of course. In the heat of the moment, I didn't think of her. Poor woman; she had been living with Victor for over two decades. She'll be crushed..." replied Madame while massaging her temples with the tip of her fingers.

"I left a note on the door instructing her to call the police as soon as she got back."

"That's cold, Richard. I'll drive back there and wait for her to return. That woman helped Victor raise my son; the least I can do is assist her through this."

"But you don't even know when, or even if she'll come back tonight."

"Silvia doesn't drive and she seldom goes out. Victor was always lamenting about her lack of social graces. She might just have walked to a neighbor's. It's eight o'clock already; she'll be back home anytime now."

"Okay, let's make a deal. You just got here after a long trip; you need to sleep. I'll finish making dinner; you'll eat and go rest. I'll return to Victor's and bring Silvia here as soon as she comes back."

Madame hesitated for a second and then fought back a yawn before replying, "Thank you, Richard. That sounds like a good plan but I want you to wake me up the moment Silvia gets here. For dinner, let's keep the food for tomorrow. I'm afraid I lost my appetite."

Back at Victor's house, I inspected the dwelling once more; the cat had not moved even though the dryer had stopped. I decided to wait for Silvia in the car. The sole thought that a man had hanged himself in the small house just a couple of hours earlier spooked me. It did not, however, prevent me from falling asleep in the vehicle after I had wrapped a blanket around me. It had been a hell of a day.

The thrusting of the stick shift into my ribs woke me up. The night was still dense around the car though it was past seven in the morning already. I took another peak inside the house to make sure that Silvia had not returned and I drove home. The lights were on in the kitchen. As I passed in front of the window, I saw Madame and Alana both already dressed and engaged in an animated discussion, judging by the amount of hand waving. The conversation stopped abruptly a second after I opened the front door. The two women stared at me as I entered the kitchen.

"Where were you?" asked Madame with an impatient attitude.

"I was at Victor's, as we had agreed. I waited there all night."

"We called you at his house half a dozen times! We even tried to come get you, but the rental car wouldn't start because of the cold."

"I was inside my car. I didn't feel comfortable—"

"We got this!" said Alana and handed me a half-sheet of paper with an impatient gesture.

"Where did you find it?" I asked as I started reading the handwritten message on it.

"Some vagrant dog had it attached to its collar; it barked at the front door until we came down."

Jessica for Madame. Exchange tomorrow at 17:00 at your house. At first sign of trouble, Jessica gets her wings.

Same cursive handwriting as the first note; same chilling style.

"We can't ask you to do that—" I said to Madame.

"Why don't you let her speak for herself?!" Alana interrupted and threw an incensed stare at me. "It's pretty clear that it's her they wanted all along. You couldn't possibly consider leaving your daughter with these guys in her place!"

Madame stood up and left the room. Her footsteps resonated up the wooden staircase and dissipated inside a bedroom. Alana's eyes pointed at me three years of stockpiled wrath. I had a hard time owning up to the cause of that wrath; I had a hard time even relating to it. I felt like following Madame upstairs but at the same time realized that it was long overdue for Alana and me to start talking.

"Listen, Alana," I said without emotion. "I understand how mad you are at me. After abandoning you and the kids, I've now somewhat dragged you into something even worse—"

“And yet, you still manage to question the one opportunity we have to get Jessica back! I will not allow that! When you deserted us, you did not give me a chance to fight back, but this time, I’m here, and I have no intention of letting you jeopardize our chances.”

“I want Jessica back just as much as you do,” I replied forcefully, “but by handing Madame to the kidnappers, we may lose our best weapon and there’s no guarantee that they’ll keep their word to release Jessica in exchange.”

“It’s our option and we’ll take it. I don’t want Madame hurt; if it weren’t for her I would still be in San Francisco, left totally in the dark, dying with worry.” Alana punctuated her statement with a reproachful look before continuing. “She seems like a good woman, but you and she are somehow accountable for Jessica’s abduction, so I expect you both to do whatever it takes to make things right again for *my* family.”

The emphasis on *my* stung me more than I expected. Nevertheless, I nodded in approval, stood up, and went upstairs. The door to the bedroom in which Madame had moved was open. She sat on the bed, painting with great application her fingernails in a dark red shade. She smiled without turning her head when she sensed my presence outside her door.

“I have to admire your cool,” I said, a bit puzzled by her attitude.

“For some reason, doing this has always helped me get centered, and I could use the help right now. In a few hours, I’ll have traded friends for foes...”

“Does that mean you have decided to go on with the exchange?” I asked.

Madame raised her hands, palms facing her face, fingers apart to dry the polish. Through ten long fingernails pointed up and tinted in a dark blood shade, she looked straight at me and replied, “Anything else you’d like me to do instead?”

Chapter 22

November 17, Year 4.

We spent most of next day apart. The women in their respective rooms and me downstairs cleaning with frenzy in an attempt to occupy my mind till the time would finally come. We did have lunch together but few words were exchanged, most of them in the “pass the salt” register. Madame was in a zone of her own, preparing mentally for the trial that she was to face at dusk. Alana’s tense face left no doubt as to her state of mind; I was beginning to worry that her nerves might interfere with the exchange. The women retreated to their rooms immediately after eating. Madame came down around four-thirty in the afternoon carrying the smaller one of her suitcases, soon followed by Alana, who had probably heard her footsteps down the staircase. We instinctively assembled around the living room table, close to the front door of the house.

“I would never have thought of packing a suitcase for an abduction...” I said without thinking while looking at Madame’s luggage on the floor.

“A woman ought to dress her best for the occasion, even if that means coordinating with chains and bars,” Madame replied with forced perkiness.

“Would you like a glass of wine before going?” I asked.

“No. I need to be alert. If there’s a split-second opportunity for me to escape right after you recover Jessica, I’ll have to take it.”

“Do you have a clue as to why they’d want you?”

“Why, I’m not sure, but I’m starting to have an idea of who they are. Last night, I called two members of my organization here, in France. They are both getting returns from the field that suggest that a right-wing party might be planning some underhanded action to further their agenda.”

“The People’s Front?” I asked, by now well acquainted with the French political landscape.

Madame nodded and continued.

“In the past ten years or so, they’ve grown from a fringe faction to a highly organized political party that won 25% of the votes in the last French elections, ahead of all the traditional parties, even the one in power.”

“Don’t they owe most of their popularity to the crisis in the economy and the high unemployment rate in France?” I asked.

“Not just that. Globalization of business and outsourcing of jobs to developing countries, elimination of national borders, a rise in crime rates due in large part to immigrant populations in precarious situations, cultural and religious clashes between the locals and some of these populations; all these factors feed into the People’s Front’s basic message, which is to blame foreigners for all evils and advocate a return to French cultural integrity.”

“But isn’t the protection of cultural integrity one of the key tenets of your group’s mission as well?”

“It is, but the comparison stops right there! Where the People’s Front wants to deprive immigrants of all rights until they wilt in poverty here, we want to build channels for them to return to their home countries and help them develop those countries. See, the process of emigration is a great filter of character. It takes more than extreme disarray to drive a man or woman to leave their home and their country to expose themselves to a harsh journey and a very adverse life abroad. It takes courage, determination, and a hunger to fight for a better future. We, as a group, believe that these may be the men and women best suited to build a new world in their native countries and we are devising approaches to give them the means to do so after helping them return.”

“Is that how you restore cultural integrity here, by sending anyone who doesn’t fit in, home?”

“Anyone who wants to embrace the values of their adoptive country should be encouraged to stay. The problem is that in France, like in most European countries, the vast majority of immigrants will end up holding jobs at the bottom of the social ladder. They will quickly realize that a strong glass ceiling will keep them down there all their lives. Because of the very qualities that I described earlier, they will resent being treated as second class citizens. As a result, they’ll cling to their native culture as a pole of pride and identity rather than embrace the host culture that belittles them. Remember, my group has branches all over the world and in every country, no matter how poor, there are immigrants or refugees even more destitute than the natives. It is time to concentrate on stopping emigration flows and giving each country and culture a chance to survive and grow other than through labor exploitation or ill-assigned international subsidies.”

“Do you think French citizens will respond as positively to your message as they do to the People’s Front’s?”

“It will take a bit more effort to explain our ideas, compared to their black and white, angry populist rhetoric but keep in mind that it’s only a quarter of the people who vote for them. There are still plenty of citizens here who are willing to listen to more humane solutions to the country’s problems.”

“Will you, like the People’s Front, promise a return of France to its past grandeur?”

“They promise time travel without a means of transportation. Our purpose is to restore true intellectual elites and stem the erosion of traditional values that western societies have been suffering these past decades. If we only achieve partly that goal, France will definitely know sunnier days.”

“Right wing versus right-right wing; who’d have thought French politics could be so fascinating...” said Alana with a cynical attitude. She had remained quiet all the way to that point of the conversation, but I had noticed from the corner of my eye a nervous fidgeting on her part. Considering that we were minutes from a situation that could further threaten her daughter’s life, she was annoyed by the mundane conversation that Madame and I had been carrying. Somehow, I sensed that she was also bothered by the ease with which we traded arguments with one another, leaving her on a dull courtside bench. I could still sense her, just like she probably could still sense me.

“Why don’t we start discussing our respective roles during the exchange,” I said as a diversion, this time looking at Madame and Alana with equal weight.

“The only roles we’ll have are the ones they’ll give us,” replied Madame with gravity. “They run this show. Until Jessica is recovered and safe, we go with their flow. *It will be advisable not to stir forth, but rather to retreat, thus enticing the enemy in his turn; then, when part of his army has come out, we may deliver our attack with advantage.* Do you remember this quote from your class on Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, Richard?”

I stared at Madame with anguish. Had Alana not been sitting at the table, I would have shouted, “I remember that class as if it were yesterday. I remember that hot summer night in the mezzanine of your hacienda that you had turned into a classroom under the stars. I remember the white pencil dress that you wore that night, with a thin, bright red line that crossed your heart and matched your pumps. You joked that you had dressed the part of a wounded warrior and by the end of the class, I had understood exactly what you meant. I remember every one of the classes, every one of the dresses, every one of the synaptic connections that you engineered in me during that blessed time on your land.” Had Alana not been sitting at the table, I would have forbidden you to go through with the exchange because even though my daughter’s life was at stake, yours was just as vital to me.

I said nothing. Just plain nothing. Alana gave Madame a grateful look in response to her statement and never noticed the shine in my eyes. I am not sure Madame did either. From there on, we just waited in silence, paced by the inexorable ticking of the eight-foot tall grandfather clock nestled in a corner of the living room. Just as if it were an instrument of fate, seconds after it rang five crisp, metallic strokes, a diffuse roaring rose up outside. In response to it, we all stood up and waited. The roaring intensified until it sent small vibrations through the front door. Madame grabbed her suitcase.

"Whatever happens, do not call the police," she said. "If I'm right about the identity of the kidnappers, they have many supporters in the police ranks who could warn them. After that, they'd just go to extremes to get rid of any evidence..." She stood by the door until I opened it. The same long sedan that had brought Jessica three nights earlier was parked at the same spot, facing sideways. The tinted windows did not allow any hint as to whether Jessica was actually inside. Out of the driver door came out a balding, middle-aged man with a thin mustache, rather short and stocky, who somehow did not look at all the part of a criminal. He walked to the back of the car and opened the trunk without a word. While I stood on the front steps, Madame walked up to him and placed her suitcase in the trunk. The man closed it and immediately proceeded to open the passenger-side front door for Madame. She got in without hesitation.

"Where's Jessica?!" yelled Alana as she pushed me aside and stepped out of the house.

Surprised, the man reached under the flap of his jacket and brought back a large handgun that he pointed immediately at us.

"Who's she?" he asked me, ignoring Alana who had suddenly turned very pale.

"The girl's mother," I responded. "We had a deal, where is she?" I said and started backing up the front steps—I had left the shotgun inside, right by the door, just in case. The bang stopped me cold and I instinctively ducked as small fragments of cement fell over my head and shoulders. The man had shot at the wall above the front door.

"The girl's mother..." he repeated while pointing the barrel of the gun back toward my chest. "This is getting better and better."

He tapped at the rear window with his fingernails. The window came down half an inch. The henchman murmured something into the slit, nodded, and addressed Alana "Come on, Mommy; your daughter has been crying for you. She'll be so happy to see you."

Alana started walking toward the vehicle like an automaton.

"Get in the back," the man told her while staring at me. When she complied, I got a glimpse at the shadow of another man on the back seat. No Jessica in the vehicle, for sure. I was overwhelmed by the turn of events and unable to come up with a good plan to alter the flow of events.

"I'm coming too, then," I said and took two steps forward. The driver pointed his gun at my legs.

"Don't force me to shoot you in the thigh. You'll need your legs if you are to earn your women back."

I did not insist. The man's voice was poised and firm; he was not bluffing. He got inside the car and this time, the vehicle took off after a furious screeching of the tires on the gravel.

Chapter 23

November 17, Year 4.

I followed the same downhill path as the car, only in slow, uncertain steps. I was expecting to find Jessica along the trail somewhere, maybe by the stretch of forest that separated the vineyards from the main road at the bottom of the hill. I made it all the way to the road and only after looking in both directions at the empty stream of wet asphalt did I begin to realize that the exchange sequence had been completed and that I had given all without receiving anything in return. I headed back up the hill, crossed the forest—which had already flushed out most of the daylight—and climbed back up the trail through the vineyards. From a distance, the house was now just a tall shadow in which the living room lights projecting out of the front door created a rectangle of dull, yellowish light. At the bottom of the rectangle lay an irregular, dark mass. I approached with some hesitation until I realized that the mass was a dog lying on the front steps; the yellow dog. It stood up clumsily when I approached. Its collar was free of any message. It was just a raggedy old dog who stared at me for a moment before heading towards the trail. It stopped after a few yards, turned its head back to me, and waited again for a long moment. I got into my car and turned on the engine. The dog started walking again at a slow pace. I released the hand brake, let the vehicle glide a few yards behind the animal, and followed it down the hill. When it entered the forest, instead of proceeding straight toward the road, the dog turned into a narrow dirt trail that paralleled it. The trail that led to Victor's house.

Trapped inside the pale beam of my headlights, wobbling atop his scrawny long legs through the dark forest, the dog started looking more and more like a specter and the fact that he was leading me to a hanged man's home did not do anything to relieve my angst. We ended up entering the front yard of Victor's house, at which point the dog vanished from sight. The lights in the bungalow had been turned on, but I could not see any shadow through the window. I honked twice, as much to create some noise as to announce my arrival, but nothing moved inside the house. I was scared; just plain scared. I stepped out of the car and waited for a few seconds by the vehicle before walking to the front door. I knocked; no answer. I turned the door handle and pushed slowly on the wood panel; it yielded without resistance.

Sitting at the table was a very slender middle-aged woman whose plain black dress was buttoned up all the way to her chin.

"Hello, you must be Silvia..." I said, going by the description once made of Victor's sister by a neighbor. He had also mentioned that she was known in the village as an overly devout loner who only left the house to attend church services. I had never seen her; on the couple of occasions

when I had stopped by Victor's to pay him his wages in person, he had not invited me in.

Silvia was not the old maid that I had pictured in my mind. While the deep wrinkles on her swarthy face branded her with the passing of time, her hands were long and smooth as those of a young woman. The luminous intensity of her dark eyes contradicted the austerity of her gray hair, which was tightly pulled back into a thin, long ponytail held by a red rubber band. The woman was a splice of spring and fall. She kept on eating her soup from a large clay bowl when I appeared, but greeted me with a benevolent look.

"I'm so sorry to intrude," I continued, "but I'm the one who left the note on your door last night and I wanted to make sure that you knew—"

"I know..." she said without apparent emotion, in between two spoons of soup."

"So, you already talked to the police?"

"The police...? No."

The woman spoke in French but with a thick foreign accent; the exact same as her brother's.

"Where did you go? We looked for you everywhere."

Silvia laid her spoon inside the bowl and pushed it aside.

"You are a man of many questions, Richard; unfortunately, I won't have many answers for you. I'm just here as the representative of the people who host your wife, your daughter, and... *that woman*. I had the dog fetch you so we could get started. Once you get into motion, I'll be close by to make sure that you execute the mission properly."

"Mission...? What mission?"

"The one that you will have to complete in exchange for the safe return of your family."

"Me?! I thought it was Madame they were after."

Silvia ignored the question.

"Why don't you go home and pack a bag for a short trip?" she replied. "First thing tomorrow morning, you'll drive to Lourdes; a room is reserved for you at Hotel Saint Alma. Now, I have to confess, I'm really tired; I didn't get any sleep last night."

I stood up brusquely and was about to shout at the woman when something stopped me. It may have been the suddenly weary face of my interlocutor or just the recognition of a situation I knew well. During my three-year drift, I had several times been stripped of all control over the immediate course of my life and I had fared better when I had gone with the flow than when I had tried to resist it.

I pushed the chair under the table and said with a neutral attitude, "I'll be in the hotel by noon," as I walked out of the bungalow. Oddly enough, I slept well. The bed felt great in contrast to the car seat of the previous night. I also felt less confused than earlier in the evening and I was glad, in

a way, to be pushed into action. That would insert me back into a loop from which I had been kicked out and hence give me at least a chance to affect the course of events.

It was not even a one-hour drive to Lourdes and I was familiar with the road. Shortly after my arrival to southwest France, I had discovered with much excitement that just a few valleys away from my new home rested one of the world's most prominent Catholic Marian shrines. Incensed by my newly restored faith, I had driven to it at the first opportunity. Millions of pilgrims travel every year to the small town where 14-year old peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous is believed to have witnessed multiple apparitions of the Virgin Mary in a small grotto. During one of her ecstatic trances in front of the grotto, Bernadette dug up the earth with her bare hands until a small puddle appeared, which within days became a spring. The locals immediately endowed the spring with healing powers and since, all year long, the grotto is a scene of an unrelenting, heartbreaking procession of ailing and disabled bodies seeking to find healing through immersion in its water.

As I entered for the second time the narrow valley in which Lourdes is encased, I experienced the same feeling of oppression from the massive, tall hills that encircle it. The somber, heavy November sky seemed to have dropped as a lid onto the hilltops, which induced a claustrophobic sensation. There always was an extraordinary atmosphere—intense and dramatic—to that place, regardless of the season.

Hotel Saint Alma was a small building near the town center. A standoffish young woman confirmed my reservation and signed me in before pointing to the staircase with a laconic, "Room twelve, second floor." I was already halfway up the first flight of stairs when the woman called out while waving a large white envelope, "Oh wait, I have something for you; a courier dropped it for you early this morning." I locked the door of the room behind me before opening the envelope. It contained a yellow sticky note affixed to the cover of a thin manual for a device named *Mistifier 1201*—some sort of humidifier.

Read the brochure, with special attention to the "Tank Replacement" section. Meet me in front of the Cimetière des Roses at three this afternoon. Dress casual.

The note was not signed; the handwriting was tiny and definitely not the same as the one on the letters I had received at home. I followed the instructions and made myself familiar with the device described in the manual; a fridge-shaped industrial humidifier designed primarily to be used for bread products. The left compartment hosted a five-gallon plastic

reservoir in which water was to be poured. An ultrasonic unit generated a thin mist that would be sent over to the wider right compartment in which a dozen shelves would receive the bread or other materials to be hydrated. Replacing the water tank was just a matter of disconnecting a couple of tube fittings and sliding it out. When I placed the manual back into the envelope, I started trying to figure out how a humidifier and a cemetery could possibly fit in the same story, but the first speculations that came to mind were so grim that I rapidly dropped the guesswork.

After a quick lunch at a cafeteria around the corner, I walked all the way to the grotto sanctuary. Despite a light drizzle, over a hundred persons stood up or sat on benches in front of it, praying to a statue of Mary that was nestled in a ten-foot tall, narrow cavity in the rocky wall. It hovered twenty feet above the ground, surmounting a larger opening, which was the entrance of the grotto itself. The air smelled of candle fumes and wet soil, a perfect blend to interface earth and skies. I prayed on a bench for nearly an hour before returning back to the hotel. I never actually stepped back into it; instead, I asked a passerby for directions to the cemetery and jumped into my car.

The Cimetière des Roses was located just outside town and all the parking spots in front of its tall metal gates were empty. Though I had only driven for a few minutes, the damp air had already fogged up the windows. Shortly after my arrival, a small white car parked next to mine. I nervously wiped off the side window and was disappointed to see a nun step out of the vehicle and head towards the cemetery gate. When she reached it, though, she did not push it open. She pressed her face against the metal bars—as if trying to peek inside the graveyard—before turning around and heading straight toward my car.

I was dumbfounded. The nun's coif encased Silvia's face. A stern, resolved face. She glided along smoothly in her habit—as if she had always worn it—opened the passenger door of my car, and got in, dragging in with her a strong scent of mothballs.

"Good; you were on time," she said casually while wiping the rain off her face. "Did you read the brochure?"

"Yes; just in case we'd need to humidify the day some more," I replied. She ignored the sarcasm.

"In a few minutes, we'll drive a hundred yards down the road to the Visitation Monastery—"

"Monastery?"

"Please don't interrupt me. We just have the required time to prepare our visit there."

I waited silently for her to continue.

"I called the sisters at the monastery two days ago pretending to be a member of the diocese's safety committee and informing them that I would visit them today to supervise the replacement of the tank in their humidifier. See, sisters in this monastery live from the production of communion bread; you may know that as *the host*, which people receive in the form of small round wafers at the end of the service in Roman Catholic churches. The nuns bake large numbers of thin sheets of unleavened bread that they place in storage. The bread tends to dry out rapidly, so when they receive an order for a batch of communion wafers, for instance from a local church, they pull out an appropriate number of sheets of unleavened bread and rehydrate them in a humidifier—using holy water from Bernadette's spring—to make it easier for them to cut out the disks that they will deliver to the customer."

"How do you know all this?"

"From an article about the sister community in the paper. I always felt very close to that world and read quite a bit about it. My aunt in Portugal was in a Benedictine sisters' order."

"But you never were a real nun, were you?" I asked, perplexed by the woman since our first encounter.

Silvia looked away with a vague air of distress. Raindrops now zigzagged faster down the windshield. I took advantage of the silence to gather my thoughts and immediately realized that although I had now placed the humidifier in some sort of context, my own role in the whole affair remained as obscure as ever.

"I will introduce you as a technician from the company that makes the humidifier," continued Silvia after the brief pause, "and serve as your escort inside the monastery—you could not go around on your own."

"Why would I want to go inside a convent in the first place?" I objected.

"I'm not allowed to discuss these matters with you. For now, let's just say that the path to your family goes through the corridors of that monastery, and you need to gain access to them. For that, we have to become familiar to the nuns. That's our only objective today; to introduce ourselves to them. Replacing the humidifier tank is just an excuse for us to be there."

Silvia opened the vehicle door, stepped out, and grabbed from the trunk of her own car a large plastic carboy that she placed behind me on the back seat.

"This is the new tank;" she said as she sat back next to me, "I trust that you have learned how to put it in." I nodded without enthusiasm. "Let's go then," Silvia continued. "Just follow the wall." She referred to the nine-foot-tall stone wall that encircled the cemetery. About a hundred yards down the narrow, deserted road, the wall was interrupted by a tall metal gate whose cast iron bars ended up in very pointy finials.

“Stop in front of the gate and blow the horn,” said Silvia. Half a minute after I complied, a nun appeared up the alley inside the complex and ran to the gate with a surprisingly athletic form despite her habit. Silvia popped her head out of the window and shouted, “I’m Sister Marie Cecilia; Mother Superior is expecting us.” The portly young nun behind the gate stared at me with hesitation but ended up responding to Silvia’s forceful tone by swinging the wide portal open. Again in running mode, she guided us to a small gravel area at the end of the alley where she gestured to instruct us to park the car. We followed her in silence as she proceeded toward the center of a two-story gray stone building that might have been over fifty yards long. We climbed a small flight of stairs to approach the only door in the whole façade. The entryway only opened onto a long, dark corridor flanked by closed doors on each side. It was even colder and more damp in the corridor than it was outside. The nun escorted us to one of the doors, knocked, and before any answer could be heard, pushed it open, and invited us to step through. In a large room paved with irregular flat stones stood as sole furniture a wooden desk behind which an older nun was busy writing in a notebook. She did not acknowledge our entrance.

“Reverend Mother Marie Louise...?” said Silvia with an audible tension in her voice. “I’m Sister Marie Cecilia. We spoke on the phone two days ago...”

The nun raised her eyes with a rigid facial expression.

“A surprising call indeed, Sister. It is not in the habit of the diocese to interfere with our operations,” she said with a chilly tone of voice.

“I can understand how unusual that may seem, but the diocese has just implemented new safety rules and be assured that this is the only area of operation in which it will intervene,” said Silvia, regaining some confidence as she spoke.

“There are no safety issues in this monastery.”

“Actually, new European Community directives mandate that all plastic tanks in humidifiers used in the production of foodstuff be replaced yearly.”

“Foodstuff!” the nun exploded. “You have the audacity to call communion bread foodstuff?!”

“I apologize, Reverend Mother; I was just using their lingo...” said Silvia with tears in her eyes, surprisingly true to her role of the nun scalded by the mother superior. Taken aback by Silvia’s reaction, the old woman sighed and relaxed her face.

“I know, my child, I know... These technocrats will run us into an early grave.” She stood up. “Come on, I’ll show you to the humidifier.”

The device was in one of the rooms closest to the front door. The mother superior started chatting with Silvia the moment I put down the carboy and opened the small toolkit that I always carried in the trunk of

my car. I removed the old container and installed the new one in a matter of minutes, all the while under the discrete monitoring of the head nun. Just as I closed the front door of the humidifier, Silvia interrupted her small talk with the mother superior and approached the machine.

“Richard, did you also replace the head tubing?” she asked.

“The... head tubing?” I repeated, confused.

“Yes, the head tubing!” Silvia insisted, seemingly annoyed. “The tubing that carries the mist into the bread compartment. That’s in the contract that we signed with your company. You are to replace the tank and the head tubing, since these are the most likely parts on which mold will grow.”

Her back turned to the mother superior, Silvia widened her eyes briefly to signify me to play along. I replied after a short hesitation.

“I am so sorry, I forgot that part; I do not have the tubing.”

“Well, that means we’ll have to order it and come back to finish the job,” Silvia said.

“But that can’t be!” said the mother superior with a wince of frustration. “We have a batch of communion wafers to cut and deliver for tomorrow night’s mass right here at the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes!”

“Please don’t worry, Reverend Mother,” calmly replied Silvia. “The humidifier is functional; you can use it right away. You’ll just have to add water to the new tank. In order for you to be fully compliant, though, some tubing needs to be replaced as well. With your permission, we’ll come back in a couple of days, the time for us to get that part.”

The mother superior nodded with some annoyance and escorted us out. I waited until Silvia and I both got inside the car to vent my irritation.

“What the hell was that tubing stunt back there?!”

“Do not swear in my presence, Richard, especially on church grounds,” replied Silvia with a stare of reprobation.

I remained silent, waiting for her to answer my question.

“I tested your ability to improvise,” she finally said, “and the test was not very conclusive.”

“Oh, please, I just went through three years of daily improvisation and survived just fine, so spare me your s... —silly tests. When the time comes, I’ll do what’s needed. By the way, do we actually have to go back in there?” I asked just as we passed the front gate and got back onto the road.

“Of course,” replied Silvia. “The tubing issue was not just a test; it was an excuse for us to legitimately enter the monastery again at the end of the week for your real mission. You may not have noticed, but the surroundings of the building are monitored with a pretty advanced security system; the sisters don’t take chances with intruders.”

I parked the car next to Silvia’s in front of the cemetery. Before I even had a chance to ask about my *real* mission, she stepped out of the vehicle,

got into hers, and turned on the engine. While she backed the car toward the road, she lowered the window and signaled me to do the same.

“Tomorrow night, you will attend the church service at the sanctuary that mother superior mentioned. You could do with some blessings. Abstain from communion, though. You’re not through sinning yet.”

Chapter 24

November 19, Year 4.

The evening mass took place at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, a mighty gothic church built right on top of the grotto. I felt especially taken with the religious service, maybe because of the realization that I had embarked in yet another bout of shady life. Following the handing of the communion wafers to the churchgoers, most of whom were seniors since that specific service was intended for them, a group of men loaded onto their shoulders a wooden platform on which stood a five-foot tall white porcelain statue of the Virgin Mary. The priest and several nuns in habits bearing torches escorted the statue out of the church, immediately followed by the churchgoers. A small army of nuns was scattered throughout the crowd to assist the attendees who had a hard time walking or to push their wheelchairs.

I ended up near the back of the procession, which was so slow that it took us a good half-hour to make our way down to the entrance of the grotto, less than a hundred paces away. Once the most handicapped of the attendees were installed on benches and the rest of the crowd had gathered in a large crescent in front of the illuminated grotto, the priest resumed the worship, often interrupted with religious songs that all devotees seemed to know. The light drizzle did not dampen in the least the fervor in their voices. Bathed in that atmosphere of simple, almost childlike faith, I thought of running away again. Away from Silvia's prediction that I was not through sinning. Away from a destiny that threatened to part me from my newly recovered faith. Luckily, this time, I did not have a chance to wallow in that thought for long.

A powerful baritone voice suddenly rose from the center of the crowd. The attendees turned toward the source of the solo as one. I did not know the song but despite the use of many slang words, I could understand its meaning and I had a hard time believing what I was hearing. The song was a joyous ditty that could have been a lullaby had it not counted the adventures of an innocent maiden, who, on her way back from the farmers' market, ran into a horny old peasant here, a randy sailor there, a libidinous old maid by the spring, and even a well-endowed gorilla with a predisposition for cross-species frolicking. Needless to say, by the time the maiden made it home, maiden she was no more. To top it all, her father would send her back to the market to get the pound of butter that she had forgotten, which started the whole series of creepy encounters in reverse mode.

Strangest of all in that shocking disruption of the procession, there was little reaction from the crowd to the lewdness of the baritone's performance. I could detect surprise on a few faces, but no indignation, even on the nuns' faces. On the contrary, amused smiles were surfacing

right and left and even a few dissonant voices rose here and there to sing along with the meddler. The moment the priest himself began to whistle along—on a very discrete mode but with much amplification from the small microphone pinned to his chest—I understood that the disruption was not going to simmer down right away. A minute or so after the man started singing, two security officers in gray uniforms finally extracted him from the crowd and escorted him quite roughly to a nearby van as he kept carrying the tune at the top of his voice. As soon as the van took off, the priest launched a collective prayer—as if nothing had happened—which instantly returned peace to the pilgrim crowd.

For about five minutes. That is, until one of the two nuns flanking the priest on the small stage in front of the grotto started spinning herself, faster and faster, deploying her arms and wailing loudly, much in the way a little girl plays spin the top to enjoy the resulting dizziness. The other nun on the stage rushed to assist her friend, but appeared to have coordination issues of her own as she staggered across the stage with a duck-like gait and as if in slow motion. She did manage to reach her friend and stop her spinning by taking her into her arms, but the two women ended up entwined in an odd hug, immobile, as if they had fallen asleep into each other's arms.

The priest, oblivious to the nuns' behavior, by now leaned slightly forward and seemed mesmerized by the pendulum motion of the smoking thurible that he had been swaying during prayers. A broad, dumb smile formed on his face as he increased gradually the swinging range of the incense vessel to the point where he was able to actually rotate it above his head like a lasso. Encouraged by a few claps from the crowd, he started swinging the device with even greater energy on each side of his body in the manner of a martial arts expert with a nunchaku. His performance, now supported by many cheers from the audience, came to an abrupt stop when a false move caused the metal canister to hit his knee at full speed. Under the shock, the priest let go of the thurible, crouched, and started rubbing his knee with a dumb expression of confusion on his face.

Though brief, the two incidents somehow unknitted the fabric of the procession. Half the audience did not even face the grotto anymore, but that was not the biggest problem. Following the priest's performance, silence had never resettled over the crowd. Instead, grunts, howls, and downright questionable groans popped up from all sides to mix in with disparate chants intoned with exaggerated fervor by pilgrims scattered throughout the congregation. At the same time, undulating or arm-waving silhouettes disrupted the tightly packed crowd at multiple locations. In the bleak glare of the street lights, the faces of many of the elderly were transfigured by ecstatic grins for some, or wide-eyed stares reflecting utter panic for others. A woman rocked her head with her mouth wide open

while another slowly explored her face with the tips of her fingers while her eyes oscillated rapidly.

The crowd started scattering around in all directions without any kind of coherent pattern. No matter which way I turned, I met with a complete breach of reality; to the point where I began wondering whether I might actually be the one losing his mind. I lifted my eyes to the statue of the Virgin Mary and found some comfort in the realization that she, at least, had kept her frozen, peaceful composure.

The alternate reality lasted fifteen, maybe twenty minutes before a cohort of siren-blowing EMS and police vehicles invaded the plaza. From these jumped out very determined paramedics and officers who immediately began assessing one by one the people in the outer fringes of the crowd. I spotted a policeman heading toward me just in time to shove in his arms a tottering old lady who grabbed his lapel with a moan. While he helped her to the ambulance, I retreated toward the right side of the grotto and climbed the steep hill all the way to the back of the church. I listened for an instant to the clamoring, sirens, and door slamming arising from the small plaza below before hastily making my way to the hotel.

The desk attendant looked at my muddy shoes with such insistence that I removed them before climbing the stairs. After unlocking the door of my room, I realized that I had left on the small lamp on the bed table. Chilled to the bone, I immediately pulled over my head my damp sweater and shirt and threw them on the bed.

"You may want to stop there, for now..."

I had a start and swung around. In a shadowy corner of the room sat Silvia, in dark pants and sweater, her back straight, her hands rested on her lap. Without a word, I rushed into the bathroom and put on a white undershirt. By the time I came back in the room, my anger at the woman's intrusion had deflated just as fast as it had spiked.

"Don't do that again," I said. "I don't like to be spooked. How did you get in?"

"The receptionist is under the impression that I'm your mother. That's one of the rare benefits of having gray hair; people tend to believe you."

I sat down on the bed to remove my socks and for some reason felt the need to justify myself, "My feet are wet... It was raining at the procession."

"I know; I was there. I left as soon as I heard the sirens being turned on in town. I got here just a few minutes before you."

"Did you see what happened there?! Some sort of collective hysteria took hold of the crowd. It was crazy!"

"It was indeed and by morning, it'll be all over the national news. I even saw a couple of bystanders recording the scene with small cameras."

“Is this a common occurrence? Are pilgrims getting overwhelmed to the point of taking leave of their senses?” I asked.

“Of course not. You’ll often see people breaking into crying spells or fainting as a result of the emotional impact of the moment, but what you saw tonight was totally different. The pilgrims got trapped in an artificial bubble created by the man who sent me here—don’t ask how; you know I couldn’t answer—” said Silvia hurriedly just as I opened my mouth to interrupt her. “Tonight’s exhibition,” she resumed, “was a show of force whose sole purpose was to give you ammunition for a negotiation that you will have to carry out tomorrow.”

Silvia and I spent most of the night together; her, talking; me, listening. She was not an educated woman, but she was an intelligent woman. She had perfectly assimilated the message that she was to pass on to me and though she sometimes seemed uncomfortable with its nature, she took great application in making sure that I understood it clearly. In the drone of her soft, monotonous voice, her discourse evolved from the uncanny breach of sanity that had affected the crowd in front of the grotto earlier in the evening to a scalding discourse about French president Xavier Mouland.

“In his run for the presidency, Mouland’s staff mounted a communications campaign on the motto of ‘The Ordinary Presidency,’ this to oppose a serene image to the flashy, arrogant ways of his predecessor that had much upset the French. Since his election, Mouland has been just that; an overly ordinary president, who has failed in pretty much every requirement of the function. Weak, indecisive, and overwhelmed by the gravity of his position, he has been unable to push any of the reforms that he had so liberally pledged during his campaign.

“He turned promises into electoral lies faster than any leader before him, which explains his current approval ratings under fifteen percent. He is mocked by the media, and ignored by his wife and the members of his own government alike. In his confusion, he has gone as far as to seek comfort in the arms of an actress after sneaking out of the presidential house on a scooter; caught by paparazzi coming out of her apartment building with a helmet on, he has become a laughing stock on the international scene as well.”

I nodded often as Silvia recapped the wanderings of the president, which I had followed through the French press and TV news. The guy was likable enough and even though it was clear that he should never have entered such a high-sphere of power, it was not all that surprising that he had. He had just been another successful product launch; a very ordinary, malleable man, artfully packaged and sold to the masses as a statesman with great success thanks to a clever marketing ploy. Confronted with reality, he had almost immediately become a fish bouncing desperately at

the bottom of a dried out pond of illusions. I knew how it felt; luckily for me, someone had opened the flood gates back onto my pond just in time.

Following her review of the presidency, Silvia entered the heart of the matter. Her instructions were as unsettling as their purpose was clear. I did not say a single word from there on; across the arch of that endeavor lay captive my wife, my daughter, and Madame. When Silvia finally stood up, very late in the night, and slipped into her raincoat, she asked, "Will you be okay...?"

I escorted her to the door in silence.

As instructed by Silvia, I took a bus to the cemetery in late afternoon to meet her there. She had once again donned her nun outfit.

"We realize that much of the negotiation will be left to your improvisation," she said as we drove down the street, "but we know that you are the right person for it."

"Why did you choose me?"

"We'll discuss that later," replied Silvia as she already pulled up to the monastery gate.

We met the mother superior in her office, just like the first time. She was in a better mood than during our initial visit. She inspected the piece of tubing that Silvia had brought along and escorted us back to the humidifier room. The women chit-chatted next to me while I took off the old tubing, but only a couple of minutes after our arrival in the room, Silvia suddenly grabbed the mother superior's shoulder as her knees seemed to buckle. The old nun immediately caught her under the arms, but Silvia gently pushed her back, straightened up, and said, "I'll be okay... Just a bit of hypoglycemia. I didn't have anything to eat today; we've been so busy."

"Come on, my child," said the mother superior while escorting Silvia out of the door. "Let's walk to the kitchen and get you a couple of cookies." She looked back at me with hesitation for a second and added with authority, "Just finish the job; we'll be right back."

I peeked into the corridor to make sure that the women were walking away and rushed to attach the new tubing. Just as I pushed the door of the humidifier back into closed position, the front portal of the building squeaked open and several lively female voices resounded in the corridor. I waited for them to fade away so I could sneak out of the room, but their owners did not seem in a hurry to move on, as they giggled about the odd shape of a bush that they had just trimmed. I knew that Silvia and her escort would return quickly; the mother superior had not been keen on leaving me alone in the room in the first place. Unable to proceed discretely down the corridor, I walked to a large metal cabinet that stood against the wall behind the humidifier. In it had been stored a few plastic

shelves and flattened cardboard boxes. I moved these items to one side, slipped into the other, and sat on the chilly bare metal before pulling the door closed.

"Where did he go?" echoed the mother superior's voice inside the room a couple of minutes later.

"He must have finished and returned to the car," replied Silvia's voice in a pacifying mode. "See, look out there, he is in the car already. I know he is in a hurry today; he has to attend his daughter's engagement party tonight."

"What kind of manners are these? He could have waited around to say goodbye," mumbled the mother superior.

"Let me run," Silvia said. "I don't want to hold him back. Thank you for the cookies, Reverend Mother. We'll see you again in a year!"

Silence reset in the room almost immediately but I had not heard the door closing, which meant that I was condemned to hide in that closet until night time, if I wanted to be sure to remain hidden from the nuns. At least though, the Trojan horse part of the plan—as Silvia had called it—had worked just fine. Some accomplice of hers had managed to sneak inside our parked car while we were in the building and the mother superior had indeed believed his shadow to be mine.

The metal walls against which I leaned sent chilly waves through my thin sweater—I had stupidly left my jacket in the car. Shortly after Silvia's departure, several nuns had come by to load and start the humidifier but once more, they had left without closing the door of the room. Since then, I had heard voices resonate up and down the corridor, but that was the extent of my entertainment. The fluorescent hands of my watch only indicated seven-thirty in the evening. I had been locked up for over two hours; my back hurt and I was running out of postures to try.

Yet, the physical discomfort was not my greatest challenge; the return of guilt was. The moldy smell inside the closet transported me back into a tunnel in which my life had been charted without my consent nearly two decades earlier. The memories of that night, following Alana's sudden resurgence into my life, exhumed the guilt that I had kept buried for several years. For the following three hours, I simmered in a broth of conflicting sentiments running the gamut from shame to resentment, until beautiful chants reached me that resonated throughout the building, probably originating from the evening mass at the convent's chapel. Chants that transported me into a more peaceful space, and helped me to center back around the teachings that Madame had passed on to me during my reeducation on her South American estate.

The chants ceased around ten. Shortly after, the sound of bells resonated loudly over the monastery, followed by some shuffles in the corridor—but no voices—and soon after, a total silence. I waited an

additional half hour to make sure that the nuns had retired to their quarters before sneaking out of my cage. After several stretching exercises to flush the stiffness out of my body, I felt my way around the humidifier and to the door. The obscurity was total, and, to my great dismay, the same applied to the corridor area; not even an exit safety light. Silvia had described to me the layout of the convent; a very large square around an open central patio. The corridor went all the way around the patio. I was supposed to follow it to the north-east corner. I had a good sense of direction but without the slightest glimmer of light to help me, the operation was akin to finding the exit of a labyrinth with a blindfold on the eyes.

I stepped cautiously while running my hands along the rugged stone wall, taking great care not to touch the doors that interrupted it. If I were to alert any of the occupants of these rooms, my mission would stop instantly and open onto a great mess. At some point, I turned by mistake into a room whose door had been left open and stumbled on what sounded like a metallic stand. Petrified by the noise, I waited a long minute, dreading for nuns to surge into the corridor but no other sound echoed my clumsy move. When I finally reached the north-east angle of the corridor, I felt my way around looking for a door panel with a handle in the shape of an owl's head. I rapidly found the door and its rounded handle with two circular depressions in it. I pushed my ear against the door and did not detect any sound on the other side. I rotated the handle very slowly.

Chapter 25

November 20, Year 4.

A pungent scent of camphor assaulted my nostrils when I pushed the door open. Not the greatest omen... And when planning that moment in my head while in the locker, I had always imagined that there would be light behind the door. There was not. I had just opened a wood panel between two pitch black compartments. I took a hesitant step inside the room and slowly pushed the door behind me until it clicked closed, before starting to feel the wall for a light switch.

"I don't know who you are—"

Startled, I froze.

"—or why you just sneaked into my room in the middle of the night, but there's one thing *you* should know: you just locked yourself in with me."

Panicked by the woman's voice, the words, the darkness, I feverishly ran my hands all over the wall until they tripped a light switch on. I was facing the door; indeed, there was no handle on the inner side. I swung around, electrified by an adrenalin surge. My first mental record was to notice the lack of a window in the small room, but, on the bright side, almost everything in it was white; a luminous white. The walls, the nightstand, the sheets, the skin and skull of the woman on the bed. Popping out of all that white were two bright red, lace-up boxing gloves that seemed to swallow the stick-like forearms of the woman on whose hands they were bound.

"Don't scream," I whispered.

"That should probably be my line, considering the expression on your face," the woman replied, imitating my whispering with a mocking smile. She was right; of the two, I was the one most frazzled by the encounter.

The woman was bold. She lay on top of the sheets in a thin, partially sheer sleeping gown that exposed a shocking intimacy. There was hardly any soft flesh on her body; she was a skeleton wrapped in livid skin. Bulging out from the emaciated face, her big, round, brown eyes pointed at me with a disturbing fixation. Her whole body was so distorted by gauntness that it was hard to give her an age; mid-thirties maybe? As to her gender, it would have been equally questionable had it not been for the two large brown areolas that seemed pasted directly onto her embossed ribcage. In an attempt to rationalize the whole surrealist image, I looked down at the boxing gloves.

"I won't hit you; I promise," the woman said with a voice surprisingly deep considering that there was very little in terms of lungs to power it.

"How should I call you?" I asked, disconcerted by the contrast between the lady's carcass and her playful attitude.

"Feel free to call me anything you'd like. Or you could just use my name, Kontxesi."

"Is that your real name?"

"Did you break into the monastery in the middle of the night just for the sake of asking bright questions like these?"

"No; I'm sorry... I don't know what I'm saying. I just didn't expect—"

"This?" the woman said looking down at her body.

I nodded with a vague embarrassment.

"Kontxesi is a Basque name that refers to the Immaculate Conception," she said.

"Are you a nun?"

"Did you come here to visit a nun?"

"I was sent to talk to a guest here; a guest who also happens to be the key advisor to the French president; that's all I knew coming in," I replied in an effort to reconnect with my mission.

"Guest? Is that the word that was used?"

With a quick eye scan of the room, I verified with much worry the absence of a window and a door handle before answering, "Are you being held here against your will? Can you leave this room?"

"Not unless someone opens the door from the corridor side,"

"Oh... shit," I said under my breath. The woman pretended not to have heard me. "How often do they come?" I asked.

"They'll be here at six in the morning to take care of my toilet needs. After that, different nuns stop by from time to time throughout the day to bring me water and chat for a few minutes."

"What do you do between these visits?" I inquired, after noting the total absence of entertainment in the room—not even a magazine."

"I do what people do in a convent. I pray; I meditate. That keeps me very busy," the woman replied with sudden emphasis. When the nurse comes for my morning toilet, she usually brings a radio and I listen to the main news from the outside, so I won't be totally cut off from reality."

"Can you stand up and walk around the room?"

"I probably could if I wanted to. I'm not sick."

I stared at her in disbelief. She lived in a quarantine mode, could not have weighed more than sixty pounds, and by her own account did not stand up from the bed. Yet, she considered herself healthy.

"Do they feed you?" I asked.

"They offer me food several times a day. I'll peck here and there; I get everything I need."

"How long have you lived in this room?"

"A little over thirteen years."

"But what about... the gloves?" I finally found the courage to ask. Kontxesi tilted her head to the side and briefly contracted her prominent eyes before replying with a forced smile.

"A little fashion statement, of course. Just because I pray a lot doesn't mean I stopped being a woman."

I did not insist. It was clear enough that she could never unlace and remove the gloves by herself; why her hands had been caged inside them continued to elude me. I suddenly realized that—under the creature's spell—I had lost track of my mission. I made an effort to refocus my thoughts.

"Please don't take it the wrong way... Kontxesi, but you don't exactly meet the description of a presidential advisor. May I ask how you came into that role with the president?"

"He is not the president to me; he is Dad."

"Dad?!" I said. "But... I never heard about the president having a daughter. He only speaks of his two sons."

"You just pointed out—rightfully—how I don't look the part of an advisor. Do you think I'd look any better as a daughter in the family picture of a presidential candidate?"

For the first time, the woman's voice let through a hint of resentment.

"So he keeps you locked up here?"

"That's the end result, yes, but the line between the two points isn't a straight one."

"Your father was only elected president three years ago. The people who sent me here said that you engineered every single step of his successful run up to power. You did that from here?"

"I have a phone," the woman replied and slowly pulled to her a towel that covered an old, black rotary phone on the night stand.

"I don't mean to sound rude, but why would your dad run the country's affairs by you, when he has a huge staff to advise him?"

"For three reasons; first, he is so insecure that he always ends up surrounding himself with lame technocrats that won't threaten his position. Second, I am actually qualified to help him; I was just about to graduate from the top political studies institution in France, when I... had to stop. Third, he knows he can trust me wholly."

"I don't get it though... You were smart enough to guide him all the way to the top and ever since he took office, he has been an utter disaster."

"The moment he got elected, his ego blew up out of control and he stopped listening to the voice of reason. Before, we used to speak two or three times a day; now, we hardly communicate once a week and he always manages to keep it very short. I think he realizes the error of his ways but he is too proud to ask for help."

I jumped into the opening.

"An increasing number of voices, including in his own party, are calling for his resignation and the set up of advanced elections. Your father may not even be able to cling to his position through the end of his term."

"It's a serious threat, yes. He fears that more than anything; that would be the ultimate disgrace."

"What if you delivered to him on a platter a way to restore his popularity and launch a new page of his presidency?"

"And what way would that be...?"

"Convince him to announce a referendum on whether France should remain a part of the European Community."

Kontxesi shook her head in disbelief.

"Is this what your visit is all about?! Your friends want a referendum?"

"They are not my friends."

"Fine. Now, I know who they are. Only right wing activists would push such a senseless and antiquated concept. They play on the nationalistic fiber of the people and their nostalgia for past French glory. In a rough economic context with high unemployment rates and rising poverty, that always works great."

"What's so crazy about asking the people to decide the course of their country, when the one set by the technocratic elites has so miserably failed them?"

"It's as crazy as the concept of time travel is crazy. There's no way back. In a global economy, a small country like France cannot stand on its own. The very people who sent you here are aware of the economic simulations addressing the hypothesis of a withdrawal of France from the EU. A return to the franc from the euro would mean a devaluation of the national currency by twenty to thirty percent. The country's GDP would drop and the national debt and unemployment would jump. That's even without counting the dire effects on the economies of the neighboring countries, which are France's prime trading partners. Despite all these arguments, if the president called for a referendum, the French are so disgruntled right now that a majority would probably vote in favor of an exit from the EU and my father would suffer the terrible legacy of having brought France down to its knees. I will never advise him to pursue such a plan, even if, in the short term, it may indeed save him from early termination."

I patiently waited for Kontxesi to complete her impassioned tirade; now, I had seen the political advisor. I had hoped to convince her with minimal coercion, but the time had come to regain some ground.

"Unfortunately, I have not come here to politely ask you to talk to your father, but to alert you of the consequences of not complying with our request."

"Blackmail...? What do you have?" Kontxesi asked with a defiant stare, even though her voice had suddenly lost a little vigor.

"You must have heard what happened last night at the grotto?"

"The collective hysteria incident? Yes; a nun briefed me about it this afternoon. A friend who actually attended the event had called her."

"It's all over the news; you can imagine how damaging this can be for the image of Lourdes."

"But it's not their fault, and even less Bernadette's or the Virgin Mary's!" Kontxesi said with fire in her globular eyes, while an odd, thick vertical wrinkle creased the center of her forehead.

"No, it's not. But imagine a few more incidents like these, at the grotto or elsewhere in Lourdes; laics and naysayers would be prompt to jump on the opportunity to bash the city and what they consider to be an immoral business plot that exploits people's beliefs."

Kontxesi's jaw contracted; I had struck a nerve. I continued pounding on it, "The group that sent me here engineered last night's collective hysteria. Don't ask me how; they did not share the details with me. If you do not comply with their demand to convince your father to announce a referendum, they will continue to attack Lourdes' sanctity as they did last night for as long as it takes for you to execute their order."

"How...?" asked Kontxesi with tears in her eyes.

"Again, I don't know, but I was at the grotto last night and I witnessed the whole ordeal. It was extremely insidious and remarkably powerful. A very unusual, well executed plot. I would not doubt their potential to create harm."

"What about the police?"

"They are at a total loss. They are interviewing the pilgrims affected and running both psychological and blood analyses on them—according to a local journalist on the radio—but even assuming that they find something, it'll be days before they get the first clues."

"When will your group strike again if I don't call my father?"

"Tomorrow." I improvised. In reality, Silvia had not mentioned any specifics about that. I was the one in a hurry.

At that point, Kontxesi turned on her side, away from me, in a slow, seemingly painful rotation. I walked up to her, covered her mid-section with the towel that she had left by the head of the bed, took two steps back, and waited in silence for what seemed an eternity, although it was probably just a handful of minutes. I could only see her jaw line, along which rolled down a big, clear drop. I assumed that it was a tear but when she turned back around, I realized that her face was covered in sweat, this despite the chilly temperature of the room.

"What is your name?" Kontxesi asked, clearly struggling to control herself.

"Richard," I replied.

“Richard, I’m afraid you’ll have to run back to your friends—”

“They are not my friends. They have my wife and daughter,” I declared, playing the honesty card mostly out of shame for what I was doing to the defenseless woman.

“In that case, I’m afraid you’ll have to run away from your friends and try to free your family on your own, because my answer is *no*.”

“What do you mean *no*?! You’ll let them destroy the sanctity of Lourdes and all this to protect a man who’s already a has-been?”

Kontxesi hesitated for an instant; her night gown, now getting drenched with sweat, fused with her skin as an indecent shroud.

“The people who sent you were well informed,” she finally answered with a raspier tone of voice. “I love this city and what it represents with a passion, to the point of having buried myself alive in it—no one forced me into this room. But I will not push the rest of the country over a cliff to protect it; it is not my right. It would create too much hardship for too many people. As for Lourdes, the group that sent you may spit on the image of the Virgin Mary, but her soul lives in the heart of every pilgrim who visits her here. It will prevail in the end.”

The woman had started shivering at the beginning of her monologue; by its end, her whole body was shaking frantically.

“You are not well,” I said, suddenly worried that the situation might get out of hand. “Why don’t you try taking a nap? When you wake up, you may see the situation in a different light.”

“You don’t understand, Richard,” the woman replied as her teeth started chattering. “I see everything very clearly; the blackmail and the consequences of my decision. You’ll just have to find a way to get out of here if you don’t want to get arrested.”

I watched the emaciated body convulse on the bed with profound distress. I had no idea what was taking place inside it. Just as I had no idea what was going to happen now; to me or my family. For the first time since the beginning of the ordeal, I was confronted with the realization that failure was an option and so were its dire consequences. Of the three hostages whose lives depended on my success, it is the face of the more estranged to me that popped into my mind at that precise moment. The face of a child that I had never really recognized as a daughter until the night she had been exposed to me as a captive teenager. I had still not figured out why, but my connection with her had been soldered for the very first time on that night. Yet, in the terrible spectacle of the remains of a body convulsing on the white sheets in front of me, it was my daughter’s plight that I felt with much pain.

That sentiment instantly transformed my compassion for Kontxesi into an ice-cold, incisive determination against an enemy that refused to surrender and threatened to destroy my world with its last salvos. I watched for a moment the bouncing on the mattress of the bright red

boxing gloves at the end of the woman's convulsing arms and from that absurd vision rose up an equally odd thought. I approached the bed, imbibed a corner of the sheet with water from a glass bottle on the nightstand and wiped off Kontxesi's face as it jerked inside the palm of my hand. She stared at me with an expression of extreme distress, her jaw clenched.

"I'll take the gloves off after you make the call to your father," I said without malice.

Her eyes teared up and she turned her head away from me as the convulsions of her body slowed down to a mere shiver. I grabbed the phone handset and held it to her ear.

"What's the number?" I asked.

Chapter 26

November 20, Year 4.

Kontxesi's conversation with her father took less than five minutes. A bedridden cadaverous woman with a trembling voice convinced with very little effort the leader of one of the world's top powers to engage into a suicidal path for his country in exchange for an extra two years of reign. A stern reflection of the quality of modern Western leaders and the communication strings that had dropped them onto the power stage and kept them gesticulating vainly on it.

The moment I hung up the phone, Kontxesi extended her arms in front of me with a feverish glow in her eyes. The sweating was returning; the shaking was rising again. I started unlacing the first glove.

"As soon as both gloves are off, hide under the bed," she said with an accelerated breathing. "The nuns will arrive shortly after. I hope you can free your family," she added and turned her face away with an absent expression on her face, as if her mind had suddenly left her body. The instant I pulled the second glove off, I dropped on the floor and rolled under the bed.

It went so fast and so hard that I froze in response to the sequence of events. The sound of a bottle shattering, glass shards raining to the side of the bed, and, just a few seconds later, a horrifying scream that saturated the confined space. Just as it started to wind down a little, a second scream—even louder—exploded and went on relentlessly for a couple of minutes, as I now covered my ears to dampen its shrilling sound. The door slammed open and three pairs of loafers invaded my field of vision, surmounted by the floating hems of white flannel night gowns. Kontxesi's screams turned to a hoarse growl.

"Oh my God... Not again!" said one of the nuns.

"Just as she had started healing from the last time."

"I cannot believe this! Who left that glass bottle in the room with her?!"

"I forgot it there at dinner time. I'm so sorry... But she had her gloves on! I don't understand how—"

"Come on; quick! Let's take her to the infirmary. We'll call an ambulance from there."

The loafers stampeded close to the bed for a moment and then all turned toward the door at once. As they left the room, I saw Kontxesi's body being carried out by the nuns. Her head swayed along with the nun's steps. Her arms dangled freely. Bleeding from gaping puncture wounds at the center of the palm of each hand created two dotted trails of blood onto the rough stones.

I barely had enough time to roll out from under the bed and stick my foot into the door before it would swing closed. While holding the pane

ajar, I waited for the commotion in the corridor to subside. I took a look back and saw, lying on the bloody bed sheets, the broken neck of a bottle smeared with dark red streaks as well. After a couple of minutes, silence had returned to the corridor and I was able to sneak out of the room, blessing this time the ambient obscurity. I was lucky not to meet with anyone in the corridor on my way to the front door, and I slipped out of the monastery by climbing to a tree in a darker corner of the front yard and jumping over the wall.

Once on the road, I realized that I did not have any transportation back to town. It would be at least a two-hour walk but I had no intention of catching a ride with anyone. I did not want to be seen and possibly reported wandering around the city at that time of the night. A few minutes after getting started, I actually blessed that long trek home. I needed to purge my mind from the torments that I had experienced in the monastery and a long walk on a cold winter night on a deserted country road felt like the right therapy.

I had a very hard time freeing my nerves from the echo of Kontxesi's screams and the vision of her mutilated hands. I had caused her wounds and pain, just as surely as if I had broken the bottle myself and pushed the resulting shard through her flesh. When I had finally made a vague connection between her sweating and shaking and the boxing gloves, I was still unsure how they related to one another. I sensed that I had induced her crisis by applying tremendous mental pressure to her through blackmail and I had gone out on a limb when offering to remove the gloves. I was determined to defeat Kontxesi to secure my family's return, but had I known the consequences of my actions, I was not sure I would still have gone through with them. I had mistreated an ill woman without defense. An intelligent woman whose wings had been clipped by anorexia and self-mutilation. Mental illness, excessive religious zeal, or self-destructive response to past abuse, I had no idea what pushed Kontxesi to reopen the Christ's stigmata in the palms of her own hands. I only knew now why she was cloistered in that monastery with lace-up boxing gloves on her hands and a body that rejected all expression of life. And after violating her world, I had managed to reopen her wounds.

It was after three in the morning when I reached my hotel. I expected to find Silvia in my room; she was not there. Since I did not have any way to reach her and I was exhausted, I resolved to sleep until morning, when the flow of events would probably resume on its own. The following day, I got up early by fear of not being ready for whatever would come next, but the morning dragged on without any sign of Silvia, or even a note from her. At noon, I went out for lunch and grabbed the local paper on my way

back. After flipping through the pages to verify that there was no mention of an incident at the monastery, I came back to the front page, which was still dominated by the pilgrim hysteria story. The police had announced the discovery of traces of LSD in the blood of all the pilgrims affected by the phenomenon. LSD...? Though perplexed by the finding, I was relieved to hear that the scene I had witnessed by the grotto could be explained by a chemical intoxication. It put to rest my vague concerns of mental manipulation of the same order as the one to which I had been confronted during the early months of my drift.

I rushed back into the hotel and immediately sat in the guest office where a computer with an Internet connection was available. An Internet search quickly returned the information that I needed: LSD typically took less than an hour to start producing the initial effects on the user. The first behavioral changes at the grotto had occurred a good hour and a half after the beginning of the service at the church that night, which meant that the pilgrims had most likely been contaminated with the drug while in the church. My next search focused on the most common mode of delivery of LSD. *LSD is usually taken by ingesting small tabs of paper (frequently placed under the tongue) which have been soaked in a water or alcohol solution of the chemical.* From there on, the dots were not very hard to connect and the resulting pattern sent a massive chill through my spine. Behind the collective LSD intoxication were most likely a batch of communion wafers rehydrated with a mist of LSD-laced holy water and I was the fool who had installed the tank that contained the LSD powder in the humidifier. The same fool who had been played all along by Silvia and whoever was behind her. And by now, I had already completed my mission for them. Irreversibly.

By mid-afternoon, Silvia still had not shown up. I lay on the bed rehashing the whole mess and anxiously waited for any kind of news regarding the release of Alana, Jessica, and Madame. I turned my head in response to chatter outside my door.

"Can you believe it?!" a woman's voice said. "I can't wait to vote for that referendum!"

"Same here," a second female voice echoed. Who would have expected that slug of a president to take such a bold chance? Did you see how cocky he was all of a sudden during his press conference? 'I have decided...,' 'I call on every French citizen...,' 'We'll turn this country around together...,' What in the world got into him all of a sudden?!"

"Who knows? Maybe he finally found his ball bearings! I'm just glad we'll finally have a chance to free ourselves from those stupid EU technocrats!"

"That's right. They claimed we'd be doomed without them; let's prove them wrong. They'll see what the French people can do when it rises to its feet!"

The women's impassionate tirades were contagious. I turned on the radio and quickly found myself jumping from one special broadcast to another. The news was abuzz with Moulard's announcement, and although the journalists tried to convey a sense of gravity, they did a poor job at disguising their excitement. The president had just handed them a fireball that would heat up their wires for weeks to come. Street-side interviews of regular French people left little doubt as to what the outcome of the referendum would be. A majority of them agreed to say that the European construction had adversely affected their way of life. Like the woman at the hotel, they just wanted their country back, and would take their chances with it as a people, no matter the odds and economic predictions.

I could not help but feel somewhat good about having been a hidden catalyst for that change, albeit under constraint. Yes, the dire forecasts for a France left to its own devices might have been sound, but they ignored the possibility that the French, after regaining their sovereignty, might be more ready to fight and accept real sacrifices in order to put their country back on track. Whatever the future brought, it felt good for me to have helped return a country to its people and to think that they would soon moon the "global economy" from the rear seats of their Peugeots.

The waltz of newscasts kept me distracted for a while, but the dimming of the light outside the windows brought me back to a dire reality. Silvia and her group knew by now that I had succeeded in my mission; yet, they had not contacted me in any way to deliver their half of the bargain. That night, I just sat in an armchair in my room for hours waiting; I did not even go out to dinner for fear of missing Silvia's visit. Having had very little sleep the two preceding nights, I ended up dozing off in the chair and later on dragging myself into bed.

I jumped off the bed the next morning after waking up and realizing that it was almost noon. My first reflex was to look under the door for a message. Nothing. Something was not flowing right and I felt an urge to get back closer to the action. I showered, packed, and got into my car in less than fifteen minutes. An hour later, I reached home with the faint hope that my family would be waiting for me there. The door was locked; no one was around.

I grabbed the sawed-off shotgun that had once before helped me scare off a bad guy, and immediately headed for the only other hot spot I knew was tied to that whole affair: Victor's house. I drove up the dirt trail that led to it at a very low speed and parked the car between two oak trees fifty yards away from the dwelling. From a distance, I had noticed a blue moped leaned against the front wall, close to the door. I grabbed my gun

and approached the house from the side. After sneaking up to the open front door, I listened in. Faint sounds were coming from one of the back rooms. I peeked into the living room; it was empty. The door to one of the bedrooms behind it was open and its panel was animated with slight variations of light. I slinked over to it and pointed my gun into the opening.

"You're sure you're not forgetting anything?" I said.

Silvia jumped and let out a small squeal before freezing as if playing statues. In front of her on the bed, a nearly full suitcase. She still held a couple of garments in her hand. I lowered the gun.

"Why don't you finish packing and I'll come along with you to... wherever you were headed without me."

After an initial stare of sheer panic, Silvia managed to collect herself and ended up sitting on the bed in her favorite position: with her hands flattened on her lap.

"I don't know what's going to happen now," she said candidly, as if speaking to herself.

"My wife, my daughter, and my friend were supposed to be returned to me; *that's* what *was* supposed to happen," I replied, raising my voice. Silvia looked at me with apprehension.

"That's what they had me believe as well, but I'm afraid that was never the plan. The women know too much about this whole ordeal; I have the feeling that they are... at great risk now."

A massive cramp contracted my stomach.

"Where are they?" I asked and raised the barrel of the gun to point at Silvia's face. She lowered her eyes in a submissive manner.

"Where are they, Silvia!" I shouted, walked up to her, and pressed the end of the barrel against her forehead. She trembled under the contact of the cold steel.

"I am prepared to die for him, Richard..." Silvia murmured.

I pushed the gun harder against her skull.

"Every second of my life, I want to hold him like a child wants to hold the venomous snake in his mom's garden..." Silvia said as if in a trance. "He was a good man; she corrupted him—"

"Shut up! I don't care about that nonsense. All I want to know is where the hostages are kept!" I screamed again, so mad with angst that I pulled my finger away from the shotgun's trigger for fear of pressing it instinctively.

"She was his Eve..." Silvia continued as if she had not heard me. "

I threw the gun against the wall with rage; Silvia instinctively covered her ears in response to the noise. Her head remained bowed down. On that day, she had not combed her long gray hair into the usual ponytail; it dropped down the sides of her face in two sad curtains. I stepped away from her; picked the shotgun up, removed the two shells from it and

shoved them into my pants pocket before dropping the weapon onto the bed with disgust. I was tired of scaring defenseless women. Silvia sobbed as I left the room and stepped outside for a breath of fresh air. I could feel I was too close to my personal edge and I felt like throwing up. Three women might be killed anytime now—I did not even want to think that it might already have occurred—and I was at the end of my nerves' sheath and clueless about the next step. I sat on the front steps and inhaled deeply the cold, humid air of the forest. I did not even have a chance to exhale it. A mild pressure at the back of my skull preceded a few, very calm words.

"I'm sorry, Richard... The police took Victor's guns but they didn't bother to take the shells."

Chapter 27

November 21, Year 4.

I did not try to grab the shotgun back from Silvia when she instructed me to return inside. I was too busy being mad at myself for leaving the weapon within her reach. She had me sit on a chair in the living room, my back to an old cast iron furnace to which she tied my hands using zip ties that she had pulled from a drawer of the cupboard.

"You've done this before," I said bitterly.

"Certainly not. May the Lord forgive me for it."

"For someone who was almost a nun once, you seem very comfortable dealing with evil deeds."

"*So much good can be done with a dash of evil.* Do you remember that statement?" Silvia asked.

I did not respond.

"That phrase has guided and comforted me ever since our group launched this difficult mission," she continued. "Yesterday, the announcement of the referendum has demonstrated its success and confirmed the role that I played was in every way justified by the greater good, even if it's hard sometimes for me to go through with certain tasks."

"How do you know about that statement?" I asked, suddenly confused. That was a key tenet of the teachings I had received from Madame; a tenet that I had put into practice myself just weeks after leaving her hacienda in a daring plot designed to expose the insanity of global food processes.

Silvia went back into the bedroom and responded from there.

"Shortly after your arrival here, the leader of our group—who had enrolled Victor despite his reluctance—asked him to investigate you since he had access to the house. For some reason, he was very interested to figure out who you were and what had brought you to that house. One day when you had gone out of town, Victor searched your office and your bedroom for clues. He found your journal, took it to the village, copied every page of it, and brought it to the group. That's how we got the information about your daughter and the address of your house in the US where we sent her the letter in your name. It's also through the journal that we learned the story of your past three years; an amazing story that immediately incensed our leader. You may not know this, but the organization to which you and Madame belong has been trying to block us, here in France, at every turn. Whatever initiative we take, they make sure to stand in our way; all that behind the scenes of course since both our groups operate in the background of French politics."

I violently pulled on the zip ties and only succeeded in scratching my wrists. Silvia continued from the bedroom.

"We also got the idea of lacing the wafers with a drug after reading about your spiking ground meat with human blood," Silvia continued from the back. "In short, your story filled the gaps in a plan that we had been trying to frame for months without success, and you were the perfect candidate to carry it out for us."

"How so?" I asked and looked around for any kind of cutting object within reach of my feet.

"Only a very resourceful man could have made it through three years of turmoil the way you had. We needed that kind of talent to execute our plan. You just proved that we picked the right candidate, and on top of delivering the most important feat our group has ever achieved, you gave us a chance at a direct hit at Madame's organization."

"What does her organization have to do with this?"

"You heard about the LSD found in the pilgrims?"

"I did yesterday. They got it from the communion wafers?" I asked just for confirmation.

"Yes," replied Silvia with a surprised tone of voice. "You're quite the clever man, indeed. The drug had been placed as a powder into the humidifier's reservoir. When the nuns added the spring water to it, it dissolved and ended up being misted over the wafers. By now, the police have probably made the link with the wafers too, and it should not be long before they hear about the odd visit from that nun and technician to update the humidifier. And guess whose fingerprints will be found on the water tank...? There's a good chance that they'll cross-reference them with the Interpol database, after which you'll move back up their most wanted list really fast, and at the same time drag the authorities around Madame and her group's activities."

I noted for the second time the animosity with which Silvia pronounced the word *Madame*.

"They don't have me yet..."

"They will by day's end. Let me just call our leader to let him know that you are captive in this house. He'll figure out where to take it from there."

She headed for the phone that sat on a stool in a corner of the room and picked it up.

"Do you know why your leader brought Madame here?" I said in a desperate attempt to buy time. Silvia was the weak link in the chain; once the man who controlled her stepped onto the stage, I could not imagine a very happy ending to my part in the play.

"Of course, I know," replied Silvia snappily. "To get her under control and prevent her from interfering with our plan."

"The instant I realized that you had kidnapped my daughter," I continued, "I stayed put and awaited instructions. I would never have called Madame or anyone else for fear of compromising my daughter's

safety. I would have gone through with the mission and Madame would never have been aware of anything, so how could she have been a threat? Yet, the first *and only* instruction I received that night from your group was to bring Madame here. Your leader is the one who wrote that note to me, right?"

Silvia nodded.

"Then, once again, why did he demand that I bring Madame here?" I insisted. Though I had initially gone out on a limb, I was now discovering some rationale to my point as I pushed it. So did Silvia. She slammed the handset back on the phone and walked back to me.

"What are you trying to say?" she asked nervously. "That he brought her here for another purpose?"

Her mouth had closed onto the fishhook.

"Have you met Madame?" I asked.

"No; he never let me near any of the hostages. He and another of our men take care of them."

"Madame is the most fascinating woman I've ever met."

"She's a heathen! She destroyed his life. It's a true miracle from God that he survived her evil ways."

"If she is such evil, Silvia, once again, why did he scheme to bring her back here? It had nothing to do with the mission. He wanted her back by his—"

Silvia slammed the palm of her hand on my lips.

"Shut up! You're just trying to trick me. Shut up!"

I stared at her patiently as she fought back tears. When she finally removed her hand from my face, I said, "Why don't you step out for a moment and get some fresh air."

She obeyed me, and, without a word, walked out of the living room through the front door, leaving it wide open behind her. A chilly draft rushed in. I suddenly felt uneasy. Silvia was very upset. If she jumped onto her moped and left without untying me, I could end up drying up on that chair. Luckily, I never heard an engine being turned on and ten minutes or so later, Silvia reappeared in the door frame. She stood in it staring at me with odd intensity. The redness in her eyes was the only color on a face bleached out by the cold. I had prepared my words.

"Madame loves me," I lied. "That's why she rushed here when I called her to my rescue, even though she had vowed never to return to this place."

Silvia took a step in and closed the door behind her without ever letting go of her stare on me.

"Take me to them, Silvia," I insisted. "Madame and I will run back to South America; as you said earlier, the police will soon be on our tails, we could not stay here even if we wanted to."

Silvia nervously shook her head sideways, as if fighting herself to resist my pull.

"What else can you do?" I pressed on. "Kill Madame? If you did, your man would never forgive you. Take me to them; that's your only chance to get him back. Once Madame is gone, he'll turn back to you, just as he did once before."

"You'll kill him for what he did to you!" Silvia said.

"You've read my journal; I've never killed anyone, even when I would have had a valid reason to. I'm just like you, Silvia, trapped in a dirty pit with snakes and good souls, trying to find my way out. I don't care about that man of yours. What he had me do wasn't all that bad; no one died and that referendum might actually do some good in the end. All I want is Madame back and to take her to a place where no one will bother us ever again."

Silvia abruptly left the room and came back a couple of minutes later with the suitcase in one hand and the shotgun in the other. She put her luggage down, leaned over me, and pushed the barrel of the gun against my chest at heart level. I closed my eyes with pure, childlike panic. A second later, my hands swung loose behind my back and I felt Silvia swiftly stepping away from me. I reopened my eyes onto the razor blade in her hands. The shotgun was still pointed at my chest.

"Where's your car?" she asked.

We headed west, toward the coastline, engulfed in November's thickest shroud of gray. The truncated stalks in the harvested corn fields, the naked branches of the plane trees flanking the road, the facades of the houses in the small villages that we crossed; all reflected the ashy hues of the dark skies. We had not said a word since leaving Victor's house half an hour earlier. I took my eyes off the road from time to time to peek at Silvia's face in the rearview mirror. Immobile on the back seat, she stared out of the window with a disturbing fever in her eyes. I decided to break the silence before she got too wound up in her head.

"You can put the gun down now," I said. "The trigger is very soft; if you pressed it by mistake, that'd be the end of both of us at this speed. I have no intention of playing tricks; without you, I would not have any way of finding Madame."

"Don't worry; the safety is on," Silvia replied with a distant attitude.

"How did you meet that man who is so important to you?" I asked in an attempt to keep her engaged. She did not reply and as we progressed toward the ocean, she would only speak to give me directions with a monotonous voice. We entered Saint-Jean-de-Luz, a quaint little coastal town that was flooded with tourists during the summer season. On that

dreadful winter day, it did not escape the ambient gloom, and few locals ventured out into the cold drizzle. Silvia instructed me to follow the signs to the harbor and ended up having me park at the back of a convenience store close to the sea front. She got out of the car and waited for me to do the same. Draped in her long raincoat, she headed toward the docks, walking ahead of me, as if she no longer cared whether I followed her or not.

“Were you planning to ride your moped all the way here?” I asked, just to confirm that I was behind her.

“There was a train; I would just have ridden it to the station,” she replied, increasing her stride.

The majority of boats in the water—most of them fishing boats—were painted with bright green, bright red, or a combination of the two, in a tribute to the Basque flag colors. They popped out of the ambient gray with devilish insolence. Silvia headed toward a long, tall fishing boat. On its deck, an older man was mounting a line on the biggest fishing pole I had ever seen. Silvia walked past the boat without a look at the man and disappeared behind it. I ran to catch up with her and saw that she had already gone down a few cement steps at the bottom of which was anchored a very small motor boat—ten, twelve feet at most—with an oversized propeller engine at the back whose weight made the front of the skiff slightly tilt up. Silvia had already sat on the back bench, by the tiller. She seemed to know what she was doing and when she gave me a curt head swing to signify me to get on the boat, I obeyed and tottered my way to the front bench.

Silvia pulled from a pocket of her coat what looked like a portable GPS, pressed its screen a couple of times, and then started the boat’s engine and revved it up to a raging roar. The front of the skiff lifted further under the mighty push and immediately smashed into a pretty strong incoming wave, even though we were still sheltered within the confines of the half-circle harbor. Once we got out of it, the ocean gave us a fair warning; it was not in a good mood and there was still time for us to turn around. My butt already sore from slamming repeatedly onto the bench, the rest of my body soaked by the drizzle from above and splashes from under, I heard the warning loud and clear.

“It doesn’t look good, Silvia!” I shouted. “Let’s turn around and wait till the tide goes down.” I had no idea what I was saying; boating had never been part of the accounting curriculum at school.

“Be quiet and let me concentrate!” Silvia replied. Somehow, that did not reassure me.

At every wave, the shock with the boat kicked me up, right, left. My hands were getting tired of clawing up to the underside of the bench and I was scared; very scared. Of all the ways to die, asphyxiation—as in drowning—was the one that had always spooked me the most. After what

seemed like at least a mile on the water, we could no longer see the seashore behind us. The thought started germinating in my mind that Silvia was not taking us anywhere but to our death. An ultimate sacrifice to free her loved one from both of us. Our frail skiff was often tilted sideways to near-capsizing, or so it felt to me. The equally tormented low skies and rough seas fused around us to trap us into the giant dripping mouth of a gelatinous sea creature. A wave taller than the ceiling of my bedroom and charging toward us with foam at the mouth wreaked havoc with my nerves.

"Turn around, Silvia! Turn around!" I yelled and looked back at her. I saw the panic on her face a fraction of a second before the boat kicked us both up in the air like a mad stallion, and our destinies suddenly became dissociated from it. In near-slow motion mode, I saw Silvia let go of the tiller and reach out to me. Under the shock, one of my hands had already let go, but the other was still clamped to the bench. With my free hand, I grabbed Silvia's raincoat in the middle of her chest and yanked her against me. Her head hit mine just before a mass of frigid water slapped us down as one onto the bottom of the boat.

I never lost consciousness, but I was groggy enough that another tall wave would have easily kicked me out of the boat. Luckily, behind the one that had almost taken us out was a patch of strangely calm waters, only rippled by small undulations. Silvia lay inanimate at the bottom of the boat. Her face was half immersed in the water that had pooled there. I lifted her head and slapped her on the cheek. She gasped and opened her eyes, disoriented.

"It's okay, Silvia; it's okay..." I said and wiped the water off her face with the palm of my hand.

She tried to sit, but instantly lay back down as she crossed her arms onto her chest with a wince of pain.

"My side hit the bench when we dropped," she moaned.

"Broken ribs?" I asked.

"I don't think so... Just very sore."

I helped her to sit against one flank of the skiff. Her eyes anxiously scanned the boat up and down.

"Where's the GPS? I let go of it, but it should be somewhere around the floor."

I scooped most of the water out of the skiff before looking under the benches and in the corners of the boat without success.

"It's not there; it must have flown overboard."

"Oh, no... In this weather, we could be a hundred yards from the island and not see it."

"An island? That was our destination? I thought we were headed for a larger boat stationed offshore; or..."

"Or what?"

"That you were just planning to get us both killed."

"It would have solved two problems at once for the man who sent me, but I am not prepared to give up my place yet," Silvia responded with a feisty tone of voice as the boat suddenly started spinning on itself. I immediately moved to the back bench and grabbed the tiller to keep it straight.

"Okay, so no GPS; what now?" I asked.

"We are probably within viewing distance of the island, but in this soup, we can't even tell which way we're facing. It'll be night soon. Let's just pray that the skies clear up by morning and that we haven't drifted off too far by then."

"You mean we'll just sit here without food or water all night in the dark? If a bad wave heads for us, we won't even see it!" I shouted, very unsettled by the prospect.

"If a bad wave heads for us; it won't do you any good to see it coming," replied Silvia with a grim tone of voice.

"It was stupid to take us out here in this weather; completely stupid!" I screamed and slammed my hand on the side of the boat. "You follow orders like a puppy, no matter how much harm they may cause. You react with the foolishness of a jealous teenager to the news that your man may have his sights set on another girl. Don't get your hopes up about competing with Madame, Silvia. You're no match at all for her; no match at all!"

I aimed to hurt; I aimed right. Silvia shriveled into herself and buried her face between her knees. I held on to the tiller—as if it made a difference—while the light rapidly dimmed down inside our cold, gelatinous shell.

Chapter 28

November 22, Year 4.

I woke up at the bottom of the boat, drenched. I had spent the evening in claustrophobic darkness, nauseated by the constant rolling of the boat, petrified by the fear of dying. After hours of anguish, I let go of it all, sliding down from the bench, leaning my cheek against the skiff's rough hull, and passing out from fatigue. Now, at what looked to my puffy eyes like first light, a frigid wind was sweeping my face as to peel the skin off it. Yet, that was not the cause of my awakening. The sudden roar of the motor was. I rolled around to find Silvia on the back bench hunched over the tiller, her eyes on the horizon. The water was rippled by tiny wavelets and the sky had bleached down to a very pale blue. The freezing wind seemed to have flushed away clouds and waves alike, to leave behind a still, lifeless space. Though she had probably seen me move, Silvia did not give me as much as a look. Her face was wan and her wrinkles even deeper than usual.

"Where are you headed?" I asked, worried about her mental state.

For a sole response, she pointed a finger at a tiny, clear spot by the near horizon that seemed to catch the first rays of a sun that had yet to appear to us.

"That's where they all are?!" I said. This time Silvia turned her head to me.

"They moved the hostages there two nights ago. I don't know why. I was just told to join them. They left the small boat for me at the harbor."

"So you don't know exactly where on that island they are?"

"You can hardly call that an island; it's just a huge rock in the middle of the water. It's not even half a mile long. It's a blessing we got so close to it before losing the GPS or we would never have found it."

"So what do we do when we get there?"

"We can't get to the rock without them hearing the sound of the engine. They expect me, so that's okay, but as for you, you'll have to hide at the bottom of the boat as we get closer."

"And then?"

"And then... and then! How do I know?! You figure it out!"

"Do you carry the shotgun under your coat?"

"No. I left it in the car. I did not want you to harm my friend in any way once you got there. That was our deal, remember?"

"How many of your people are there with the hostages?"

"Two. Our leader is never armed but the other guy is. He's not actually a member of our group; he's some tough guy recruited just to help with this mission, especially to keep the hostages in check. I'm sure he won't have any problem using his gun, so whatever you try, be very careful."

I was about to deliver a cynical reply, but decided to pass. The only—and very small—advantage that I had going into this confrontation was Silvia's collaboration, and after my tirade to her the night before, it was a small miracle that she would still be willing to go through with her part of the bargain.

We rapidly approached the island; a convex, jagged rock formation—a hundred feet tall at the highest point with small patches of dark green vegetation in some of its nooks and crannies. I flattened out against the bottom of the boat and waited in silence.

"I can see a man's shadow approaching the shore," muttered Silvia under her breath. "Yes... That's the hired gun waving at me; he must have heard us approaching."

After five minutes or so, a male voice echoed from a distance.

"Hey, I'm right here! Why are you taking the boat over there?!"

"Too much current around here; I'll berth in that little grove to the right, where the slope is not as steep!" Silvia yelled back.

I felt the boat maneuvering around a few times before bumping against a hard surface. Silvia turned the engine off and hastily jumped out of the skiff.

"Why in the world did you guys have to come to this God forsaken place?!" She said as she walked away from the boat. "I almost died trying to get here!"

"I don't ask the boss that kind of question."

This time I recognized the voice of the armed man who had handled the so-called exchange at my place. It sounded like he was but a few yards away; I flexed my leg muscles, ready to spring out of the boat.

"Let's go see him, then. He'll tell me himself," said Silvia.

"He's no longer here. He left with the yacht yesterday, heading for land. He told me to wait for you to get here with your boat. It's only me, the mother, and the girl here, now."

"What about the other woman?"

"He took her with him. Something about a small trip to celebrate the success of our mission."

"He took her with him..." Silvia repeated with a stern voice.

"Come on; let's join the party! This way..." the man instructed.

The sound of footsteps displacing small pebbles followed and quickly faded into the whooshing of the wind. I peeked over the hull of the boat and saw Silvia following the man uphill, along a small groove between two rock faces. As soon as they disappeared around a corner, I jumped out of the boat and ran after them. I trailed them from a distance for about ten minutes, making sure to stay out of sight, as they proceeded along a ledge halfway up the rock. The roaring of the ocean against the shore covered the sound of my footsteps, but it also prevented me from hearing the conversation between Silvia and the man, even though they were less than

a hundred feet ahead of me. They made a sudden turn downhill and once again vanished from sight.

I ran up to the corner, and when I reached it, instantly froze and took two steps back to hide behind a white rock spur. Since the beginning of the whole ordeal, I had refused to think about any violence that might have been inflicted on the hostages. My dealings with the abductors, though tense, had been somewhat civil considering the circumstances. I felt nausea take a hold of me. The scene I had just witnessed in a flash had dropped straight down onto a stomach that had not seen any food or water for a full day. Silvia and the henchman stood side by side at the edge of a jaggy, semi-circular cove cut into the rock and into which poured a foot or so of seawater at every reflux of the ocean. Sitting at the bottom of the basin—at sea level—with their backs propped against one of its walls, Alana and Jessica shook frantically under the assaults of the frigid wind that compounded the chilling brush of the water that covered their legs at every wave. Fluorescent pink rope tied together their ankles and knees, and probably their hands behind their backs, judging by their awkward postures.

The instant I retreated behind the white rock, the rising sun blinded me, and I had to crouch in response to a sudden fainting spell that threw a dark curtain over my eyes. The shocking scene, the paralyzing fear, the crouching position; I had once again been slapped back into the damned tunnel. Only this time, I did not cover my ears and I was close enough to the scene to hear Silvia screaming at her accomplice.

"... lost your mind? There's no way I'll be a part of this; I don't care what the boss said! Give me something to cut their ropes and come help me bring them back up. The tide is already rising!"

"I don't enjoy the thought any more than you do," replied the kidnapper calmly, "but it needs to happen. You know very well that we can't set them free. Just like we can't set *you* free..."

"What do you mean?!"

"I like you Silvia, but sorry... boss' orders. I'm afraid that I'll have to ask you to step down and join the girls down there."

"Never! And if you think that gun is going to scare me—" screamed Silvia.

"Now, now..." the man said. "You should follow your brother's example; he went along with it without much drama."

"What do you mean? Victor committed suicide; he hanged himself!"

"Assisted suicide would be a more correct description; he was not very excited about the prospect, to tell the truth. I had to pull him up to heaven

myself as a matter of fact. He was about to talk; just like you would, sooner or later.”

“You, bastard! I’ll—” Silvia yelled before stopping on a strange gasp.

Instinctively, I unfolded, stood up, and jumped out of my cover to run to Silvia’s aid. Well, at least that was the idea. One of my legs had fallen asleep from being twisted in a foul position and gave up on me at landing. I crashed heavily on the craggy stone surface and felt a dull pain at the hip and burning sensation at the elbow. I immediately lifted my eyes, expecting to get shot at any second, but the edge of the cove was empty. On my knees, I approached it cautiously and saw the kidnapper descending into the large depression with Silvia’s inert body in his arms. The thought that this might be the last time he would turn his back to me before high tide moved in, hit me. I stood up and, as rapidly and silently as I could, followed him down the rocky slope. I was just a few yards behind him when a cry burst out from the bottom of the arena, “Daddy!”

The henchman dropped Silvia’s body onto the slope and reached for the gun at his belt before even completing his turn toward me. I dove onto him. Not as much out of courage as to make sure that I would not back up and drop on my knees to beg for my life in front of my daughter. The top of my head slammed into the groove of his throat; he made a loud wheezing sound as he fell backwards and moved his arms to the back in an instinctive attempt to cushion the drop.

I landed heavily onto him and took advantage of his momentary breathing distress to rip the gun out of his hand, and hit him on the forehead with the grip. In a reflex, I held back just a bit before striking. The blow did not stun him; just the opposite. Under the impact, he inhaled deeply and pushed me off with rage. I fell to the side; he rolled and pinned me down with his knee before delivering a single, controlled blow under my chin. The hit was neither that hard nor that painful, but it somehow disconnected me from the instant and sent me into a mental spin. By the time I regained my senses, my opponent was already running toward his gun twenty feet away, and I could not do anything else but watch him pick it up and turn to me.

“And to think that the boss was worrying about you being at large...” he said with a broad smile while brushing the front of his shirt with his hand.

The man waved his gun in the direction of Silvia. “Pick her up and lay her down next to the two others,” he said, as his face hardened back.

“You haven’t killed anyone at this point,” I said, “and now you’re going to execute four persons at once? Sooner or later, they’ll find the bodies.”

“Believe it or not, the ropes are made from starch; in the water, they’ll decompose within a couple of weeks. No one ever comes around here; it’s not a fishing zone or a tourist destination. If the bodies are ever found, it won’t be for months, and by that time, they won’t tell investigators much more than the story of a family of tourists who capsized at sea.”

“But that’s crazy! We don’t have anything against you or your boss that we could take to the police. We’d be the ones locked up if we went. Let’s all return to land, and my family and I will leave the country right away. We’ll have to; I’m sure the police are already looking for me.”

The man pointed his gun at my leg.

“Salt on a gaping wound is very painful... It doesn’t have to be that way. Pick up the woman,” he repeated. Short of arguments, I moved toward Silvia as slowly as I could, desperately trying to come up with an instant plan. She groaned when I picked her up; a large bruise had already formed around her cheekbone. I nodded at my daughter to encourage her as I carried the woman’s body toward her. Jessica had been watching the whole scene with a startled expression and my nod only brought tears to her eyes.

“Mom is not well at all,” she said as I lowered a dazed Silvia into the water, next to her. I looked at Alana; her eyes were half-closed, but a small vein was pulsating on the side of her neck.

“She’s not talking anymore,” insisted Jessica. “We need an ambulance.”

My gut constricted as I realized how naive Jessica was about the whole situation, but her reference to an ambulance sparked a thought in my head. The kidnapper turned his back briefly to grab a roll of pink rope from the ground.

“She’ll be okay,” I whispered very fast. “Now, listen carefully, Jessie. Do you remember playing police chase with me when you were a kid?” Jessica nodded with a puzzled expression. “When I look straight at you, you go for it.”

“Shut up and tie up the old maid!” the henchman shouted and threw several pieces of rope in the water in front of me. I proceeded to attach Silvia’s ankles under the close scrutiny of the man who stood on a salient rock twenty feet or so above us. Silvia watched me with a resigned stare as I went on tying up her knees. I turned her slightly as I brought her arms behind her back and my hands—hidden from the man—feverishly dropped into the water. My left hand landed right away on a round, fist-sized rock. I took the stroke of luck as an omen and turned my head toward Jessica. In response, she started vocalizing a very loud, high-pitched sound that imitated that of a police car siren. Surprised, the kidnapper turned his eyes to her. I had one shot—one shot for the man known in high school as “Richard Butterhands” for his pathetic inability to

pitch a baseball. I took that shot with surprising focus and power; the throw of my life, literally.

The rock exploded the man's lips. Under the shock, he dropped his weapon as his hands rushed to his face. The gun rolled down the bank of the basin; I ran to it with every synapse in my body firing as my opponent staggered down the slope trying to reach it first. He was just six feet away when I snatched the gun from the ground and pointed it at him. His bloody mouth gaping on bare gums dehumanized his face; the staring of his eyes made it clear that he would not stop. I waited for him to take one more step, but I had already made my decision. I fired the gun—once—almost pointblank into his heart. He dropped onto his knees first and then on his side, without a whisper.

I ran back down into the water, knelt in front of my daughter, and took her into a long, tight embrace. Her body was shaking with violent crying spells. In contrast, I felt strangely light and appeased. It was a new day indeed. And not because it wasn't even eight on a Sunday morning, and I had already killed a man.

"Let's take a look at Mom..." I said as soon as Jessica's crying subsided a little. I took the ties off my daughter's hands and legs before crouching by Alana. Her eyes were not fully closed, but she seemed out of it. I dipped my hands into the frigid water and rubbed them over her face. In response, Alana's head wobbled around loosely but her eyes opened.

"Rich...?" she said, confused.

"Yes, Alana," I replied while freeing her wrists and knees from the rope. "Will you be able to stand up?"

She did not respond, but as soon as I untied her ankles, she held on to my shoulders and tried to pull herself up; she fell right back on her butt. On the second try, I grabbed her under the arms and she was able to stand. Jessica had already freed Silvia, and while her legs were also numbed by the freezing water, managed to drag herself to us. She grabbed her mother under a shoulder while I held her under the other. Hobbled together in a clump, we started climbing the craggy slope. I turned my head back and yelled, "I'll be back for you in a few minutes, Silvia!" before realizing that she had already gotten out of the water and was slowly dragging herself behind us at a distance.

As we proceeded toward the rocky groove in which Silvia had shored the skiff, the weight of Alana's body on our shoulders was easing up; she was slowly regaining some strength. She tripped on a stone on the way down to the boat and took us all down to our knees, but we got up without letting go of one another. Once Jessica helped Alana into the boat, we tried to have her lie down, but she insisted on sitting on the bench. Jessica took place next to her mother and wrapped her arm around her while leaning her head onto her shoulder.

“Come on, Silvia, I’ll help you in,” I said extending my arm toward the woman who stood a few yards back. She approached the boat but ignored my hand.

“You push that button to start the motor,” she said, pointing to an orange dot on the top of the engine. At the end of the tiller is a rotating handle that controls the speed, like on a moped. After that, just turn the tiller to head where you want; you’ll get a feel for it in a matter of minutes once you get going. All you have to do is head east, straight in the direction of the sun, and you’ll hit land in less than an hour.”

“You’re not coming with us?!” I asked, after waiting for her to finish. “There’s nothing here! No shelter, nothing to eat; not even fresh water; you’ll die in a few days!”

“My evil has left this rock. Maybe here I can find my God again, beg for His forgiveness, and unite with Him at last. This place looks a little like a white marble altar...” she added with a sad smile.

I did not insist. As extreme as it was, her stand made sense to me and I understood her brand new—and final—hope. She wanted to quit while endowed with free will; a privilege that she would use in death since it had never been granted to her in life. I lifted up the mooring from a stony ridge and climbed onto the boat. Silvia approached the ledge to tower over us.

“I don’t know where he took her,” she said with a cryptic tone, “but there’s a place where he used to take me every spring, had me slip into a white dress, and would call me another woman’s name all night...”

Silvia gave me specific details on how to get to that location and took two steps back to signify that it was time. I thanked her with a soft smile before starting the motor of the boat and slowly pulling away. I turned around to take a last look at Silvia. Her long, slim silhouette all covered in black stood still by the edge of the massive white rock. She would leave the world as she had lived in it; as a shadow.

“Dad, you’ll send her help once we reach the shore, right?” asked Jessica who was also staring at her.

I just turned the boat to face the sun.

Chapter 29

November 22, Year 4.

"I cannot believe you remembered the police chase game," said Jessica with a nostalgic smile as we cruised smoothly on flat waters.

"I remember everything about... *us*," I replied with hesitation.

"I thought you had left to erase us from your life."

"I left to erase myself from the life that you happened to inhabit. I never tried to wipe you out of my memories."

"How is that possible? How can you just walk away from people who love you so much and depend on you so much?"

"It is possible when you don't know how to love them back and you don't even remember how to love yourself."

"Is that what happened? You started hating your life with us?"

"Yes, but that had nothing to do with you, your brother and sister, or your mom. See, the woman on the island, she wanted to be left there even though she is madly in love with the man who left on the yacht. That's because he has, over the years—and probably without realizing it—taken her to a place where she hates herself, and now she'd rather die reaching again for her true self than live another day in a world with him."

"Does that mean you'll never return to *our* world?" insisted the girl.

"He just did, Jessica," said Alana after popping her eyes open. "If he hadn't, you and I would be lying under ten feet of water right now."

Surprised by my wife's awakening, I remained silent for a moment and watched her run her fingers through her daughter's hair.

"How were you abducted, Jessica?" I asked, to postpone the sensitive discussion.

"I received a letter from you at home two weeks ago—"

"Me?! Did you verify the handwriting?"

"No. I was so emotional about it that I just believed everything in it."

"Which was...?"

"The letter came from France. It just said: *Come meet me in Pau, Jessica. Don't tell anyone; my life depends on it. Dad.* Below that was just an Air France reservation number with the instruction 'Print your ticket online;' that was it. The next day, I waited for Mom to go to work and instead of heading for school, I took a cab to the airport. When I landed in Pau, the man you just shot was waiting for me at the arrivals. He knew my name and said you had sent him to pick me up.

"You should never have gone with a total stranger," I said, immediately seconded by a frown from Alana, who clearly had already heard the story.

"I know I shouldn't have," replied Jessica, but he was so smooth and casual about it; plus, I didn't want to turn around after coming all this way. He drove to a warehouse, just half an hour or so from the airport, and

lured me into what looked like the watchman's quarters after pretending I'd find you there. I ended up in a room with a bed and a TV, a sink and a toilet, but no window though, just a lamp."

"Did he hurt you, or threaten you?"

"No. He just locked me in there. He was okay at first. He gave me toiletry stuff and brought me meals several times a day. He just didn't speak to me anymore, and he would leave me in there all day and all night by myself. I could hear noises in the warehouse, so I knew he was around pretty much all the time, but I only heard voices on a couple of occasions; his and a visitor's—the same guy both times. They spoke French, I guess; I didn't understand a word they were saying. When they brought Mom and Madame along a couple of days later, the bad guy became more edgy. One night—"

"That's okay, honey; Dad doesn't want to hear all the details," said Alana with a cutting tone of voice.

"I do, actually," I said. "I'm trying to get the picture from all angles."

"One night—" resumed Jessica, "it was late already—the guy opened the door; he stank of booze and had a weird smile. He tried to pull Mom outside the room. Madame and I helped her resist and the guy got angry. He let her go all of a sudden and we all fell back. Madame was the first to get up and she stood between the man and us. *A volunteer?* the guy said. *I'd love to cuddle a bit with you, sweetie—you were my first pick, to tell the truth—but the boss made it clear that you were off limits.* Then, he tried to push Madame aside, but he was drunk and not steady enough on his feet to move her. He got really angry, pulled out his gun, and pointed it at her face without a word. I was still down on the floor and I saw Madame's hands shake like crazy, but she didn't move. I saw it in the guy's eyes that he was going to shoot; he did—three times—right above her head. Plaster from the wall fell all over us. The man burst out laughing and left the room. Madame fainted the moment he closed the door—"

"Was she hurt?" I asked, instantly regretting the angst in my voice. Alana did not mind my reaction; she was actually the one to answer, "No; just a bruise from the fall, on her elbow. She came back to her senses as soon as I rubbed some water on her face."

"From that night on," continued Jessica, visibly excited to tell the story, "it was all business for the guy. He never tried anything fishy again. He fed us until the day before yesterday, when he and his friend took us to the coast by car and then to the island on a small yacht."

"Do you know why they moved you?" I asked.

Alana responded first.

"The second guy—the one we had not yet seen—came by; Madame overheard him say that a local cop and friend of his had warned him that there had been a report of gun shots by the warehouse and that the police were planning to stop by later on that day to check on it."

“Did you realize that they took you to the island to kill you?”

“Not at first, but the moment his friend left with Madame, our guard stopped feeding us, and he took away the sleeping bags that we had used the night before. He just gave us a little water. First thing this morning, he woke us up, had us walk to the cove, and there, he tied us up...”

Jessica’s face tensed up as she heard the story through her mother’s voice, as if she realized for the first time the fate that they had narrowly escaped. The rest of the boat ride took place mostly in silence as we all scrutinized the horizon for any sign of a shoreline. Jessica spotted it first and shouted *Land ahoy!* with great excitement before hugging her mother. I shared their joy until I realized that the shore ahead of us, which formed a large bay, was entirely lined with trees. Not a building or sign of human life in sight. I had assumed that the whole coastline in that area was developed and never even considered having to perform a landing à la Columbus on a wild beach. Since I now had a good feel for maneuvering the skiff, I considered following the coastline until we reached a more hospitable area, but a quick peek at the gas gauge instantly quelled the thought. We were already on “E.” I pulled the boat up to the shore until it screeched onto wet sand. We all looked around with some apprehension. Ocean behind, dense pine tree forest with thick underbrush in front. In the middle, no more than a few yards of sandy beach.

“I can’t believe this...” murmured a very distraught Jessica. Do you think we’ll find water to drink here? We won’t be able to go much longer without it.”

Neither could I, but I remembered from my camping days as a student that finding fresh water in the sandy soil of this type of coastline terrain was very unlikely. I asked the women to help me pull the boat up under the canopy and convinced them to wait for me in the shade.

“Don’t worry,” I clamored with the deep voice of the protective male as I headed into the forest. “I’ll get you out of here!”

A grand exit—had it not been spoiled by my getting entangled in a thorny bush after only a few steps inside the forest, and wriggling for five minutes to free myself under the dubitative eyes of my females. Half an hour and less than fifty yards later, I was still struggling under their watch, humiliated, and not in the best of moods. The hunter had already turned gatherer; gatherer of bruises from multiple falls and of countless scratches from the bramble that managed to crisscross the whole underbrush without producing a single edible berry. And, of course, not even a puddle of water in sight either.

“Come back, Richard!” yelled Alana. “We’ll walk along the shore till we find something. It’ll be much easier.”

Actually, a fine suggestion from the alpha female, but as all females know, alpha males, when challenged in their manhood know but one direction: the stupid one that they picked in the first place. That trait may

have been the tie-breaker in God's decision to hand childbearing to women.

"I'm okay," I shouted back. "Once I find a path, I'll be on my way."

A path...?! I repeated to myself under breath with maximal aggravation. The only path I could find in this God forsaken forest would be a crop circle left behind by an alien ship! It was pretty clear that no man had come around these woods in ages. Still, I kept pushing ahead, in a litany of grunts and cuss words that probably emulated the language of the Cro-Magnon men who had preceded me on this land. At least, I was no longer submitted to the scrutiny of the rest of the clan, even though they kept periodically calling my name just to hear my voice back.

Finally, after half an hour of exhausting battle with the savage land, and as I started feeling faint from hunger and dehydration, I noticed a strange reflection of the sunlight about thirty feet ahead. I headed straight for it and realized as I approached it that it came from the backside of a shiny metal lozenge stuck onto the trunk of a pine tree. I walked around the tree to look at the other side of the artifact.

Forest Preservation Strip—Please Do Not Enter.

I stared at the white lettering on a bright orange background with astonishment before being startled by another, equally disturbing cue; audio this one: *Don't miss today's special! From five to six, three packs of odor-eater insoles for the price of one!*

Obviously, the indigenous people cared more about foot hygiene than forest management... I took two dozen steps in the direction of the spirit's voice, before bursting out of the green hell to land in front of a large parking lot half-filled with a motley array of cars.

Chapter 30

November 22, Year 4.

Alana and Jessica felt much better after drinking each a quart-sized bottle of orange juice and devouring the roasted chicken and macaroni and cheese that I had brought back from the supermarket. They were strong enough to follow me through the strip of forest and all the way to the store. An attendant at the customer service desk informed us that we were about fifteen miles south of Saint-Jean-de-Luz.

On the cab ride back to my car, I asked the driver what the long string of woodland bordering the ocean was about. He replied that it was just a narrow strip of native forest that stretched along the coast for miles and had been purchased by a rich fellow to prevent the coastline there from being handed over to developers. I translated his explanations to my wife and daughter, emphasizing with much gravity how we could have died from dehydration had we followed the coastline per Alana's suggestion, as opposed to moving inland under my leadership. Jessica bought my interpretation with grateful eyes; Alana shook her head sideways with a skeptical grin.

I drove us straight back to Madame's house. I wanted Alana and Jessica to be home after their week of trials; my home. Or what had been for a year more my home than any other place since the late teens. The possibility that the police might already be looking for me there crossed my mind, but I doubted that they would have moved that fast. The house was cold and placid when we arrived, without any sign of activity around it. Alana and Jessica rushed into the upstairs bathroom; they would not come out of it until an hour later. I used the time to clean up at the sink of the downstairs half-bathroom, changed clothes in my bedroom, and eat. I had been in such a hurry to bring food to my stranded tribe at the supermarket that I had only gulped a bottle of milk on my way back to them.

I was drinking a large, strong coffee when Alana and Jessica joined me in the kitchen. I smiled; Jessica was wearing a silky blouse and dress pants too long for her that clearly were her mom's. She caught my grin.

"What?" she said amused. "I don't know what they did with my suitcase. It's a good thing Mom was here or I'd have had to dress like... you!"

We all laughed. Me, a bit too hard maybe, but I was so grateful to my daughter. Not once since we had found each other again had she shown any hint of anger or resentment against me, as if she had jumped with both feet over the three years since my defection. She did not make any effort to hide her joy to have me back around and God knows she would have had many reasons to do so. Her heart was as plain as her face; she was frank and honest with her emotions. Even though she was only a teen, her nature

was kind and her spirit courageous. I was proud of the woman she was becoming, even though I had little to do with it. So was Alana. I could tell how much the relationship between mother and daughter had evolved since I had last seen them. Evolved probably through a lot of trial and error that I had missed as well. Evolved probably through hard times that I had completely dodged and that had welded their bond in a way I could only observe from the outside.

"I'm still starved!" said Jessica as she inspected the contents of my fridge and pulled out a big chunk of ham and a wheel of brie. She laid them by the loaf of bread already on the table before resuming her foraging in the cupboards around the range, under her mother's amused smile.

"What do we have here...?" Jessica asked as she pulled out a bottle of champagne from one of the cupboards and set it on the table right in front of me. "Open it, Dad! I just escaped death; this is the perfect occasion to have my first sip of champagne!"

"Absolutely not, Jessica," said her mother as she waved her index finger while a deep wrinkle formed on her frowned forehead.

"Dad...?" said Jessica with imploring eyes.

"Absolutely not, Jessica," I replied, mimicking the frown and gesturing of her mother.

Even Alana laughed as I shelved the champagne back in the closet and picked instead a bottle of sparkling apple cider.

"OK, Jessica; there's just a tiny bit of alcohol in this one and with Mom's permission, we'll toast your survival with it, okay?" I gave my wife a deferent stare; she nodded with gravity. She and I ended up drinking the whole apple cider bottle, while Jessica was elated just to have been granted two fingers of the bubbly. I was so tired that the small amount of alcohol in the cider warmed me into a gentle ecstasy.

"It almost feels like we were all back home," I said without thinking. "Jessica, do you remember the day you and your brother escaped to—"

Alana cut me off instantly.

"Listen, Richard. Thank you for not letting us down, back there on the rock. We are very grateful for that, but for the reminiscing about the good old days as a family, it is too early; much too early."

Jessica pinched her lips and threw a distraught stare at her mother.

"You're right, Alana. I'm sorry," I replied with a contrite tone of voice. I could have hit myself. Alana did not pursue the matter further. She stood up and started clearing the table in silence; her daughter immediately assisted her. I took the trash out. When I returned to the kitchen, Alana held Jessica in her arms. The teen was crying.

"Why don't you guys go get a little rest," I said, to diffuse the tension. "I'm sure that you could use some catch-up sleep. I'll go run an errand, but I should be back by night time." My voice had wavered slightly on the last

sentence; Jessica picked up on it. She straightened up and wiped the tears off her cheeks.

"You're going to that place that the woman said, right?" she asked.

"What place? What woman?" said Alana.

"The woman who stayed on the island, Mom; she said that the second kidnapper may have taken Madame to some remote place where he used to take her."

Alana shook her head in confusion, not much enlightened by Jessica's explanations, and turned to me.

"It's a very long shot, Alana, but I still have to go check that place," I said casually and started heading out of the kitchen.

"I'm coming with you," said Alana just as casually.

I turned around with surprise.

"Yeah, Dad; we're coming with you!" seconded Jessica with renewed excitement.

"Have you both gone mad?!" I said, raising my voice. "You almost died today! You want another shot at it?! There's no way I'm taking you along. On the remote chance that the guy would be there, it would make it even more dangerous for me, as I would have to worry about your safety on top of everything else."

Frazzled by my reaction, Jessica turned toward her mother and waited for her to reply, which Alana did with a pacifying tone of voice.

"Or we could actually help, Richard. We've just proven that we could handle ourselves under duress. And I think that it would be very good therapy for Jessica." Alana stared intensely at me. "To help put an end to a situation that she has only endured up to this point. We won't do anything to increase the risk and if in doubt, we'll stay back."

I shook my head with frustration, but if Alana—usually so protective of the kids—felt that there could be mental sequels for Jessica as a result of her bad experience, and that being more active in closing that experience would help her digest it, I trusted her mother's instincts.

"And if it weren't for Madame, I'd still be in San Francisco worrying to death about my daughter's disappearance," Alana insisted without any malice in her voice. "Jessica and I owe it to her to try if we can help."

Jessica supported her mother's words through a vigorous head shake and imploring eyes pointed at me.

"Okay, let's meet by the car in five minutes," I replied before heading upstairs to grab some shells for the sawed-off shotgun that lay under the driver's seat of the car.

By the time I came back down, Alana and Jessica were already installed inside the car. I got in the driver's seat and before I even closed the door, a powerful stench assaulted my nostrils.

"Mmm... Jessica? Did you actually take a shower?" I asked, assuming that the odor could only come from a teen.

"Yeah, Dad..." she replied after a brief hesitation.

"Don't you guys smell something strange in here?"

"Jessica, tell your dad. It's not like he's not going to find out eventually."

I looked at my daughter through the rearview mirror. After a brief hesitation, she tapped her hand twice on the seat next to her and a life form jumped on it that startled me so that I halfway stepped back out of the vehicle. I took a better look at the back seat and discovered, tottering clumsily on his scrawny long legs, the yellow dog.

"Jessica, get that thing out of the car!" I said.

"Dad, please... He came out of nowhere and walked up to the car like he wanted to join us. He has no one here; you can tell from the way he looks."

The red patches on the dog's nearly bald coat had spread even further, and his bleary eyes stared at me with a dull expression. The animal already looked like a cadaver.

"Out!" I repeated.

"Dad," Jessica persisted, "I know that dog. He was my only friend for the first two days of my captivity. He was around the warehouse every time the second man came over; I could see him wander about the back of the building through a small vent in the wall. One time, he even propped his front legs up against the wall to peek through the vent, as if he were looking for someone. He's a smart dog, Dad; he may help us find his master's trail."

Though very skeptical, I found a hint of sense in Jessica's last point, especially if we ended up searching a large building.

"This is turning into a darn Nancy Drew expedition..." I mumbled to justify backing down for the second time, and sat back inside the car. Massive, sepia-colored clouds were already starting to pile up in the sky again as I drove down the hill.

Not even ten minutes after we had left, Jessica had already fallen asleep on the backseat, her head leaning against the window. Her hand was resting on the neck of the dog, which lay immobile next to her, its stare pointing through the window in the direction of the mountains. My eyes kept flip-flopping between the road and the rearview mirror until I was finally stung by the realization of why the discovery of my daughter's new face a week earlier had perturbed me so deeply. I mumbled instinctively, "My God... It's amazing how she looks... almost like me."

Alana's face turned brusquely toward me.

“What do you mean, *almost* like me?!”

“Why are you so mad?” I asked candidly. “What did I say?”

“Who could our daughter look like, besides me and... *you*?!”

Alana’s wrath disturbed me to the point where I remained silent until I was able to stop the car and park it safely by the entrance of a harvested corn field. I kept the engine running. I just needed to look at Alana to figure out what was happening. I had never before considered the possibility that, as a defense mechanism, she might have blocked what had happened a month before our engagement. I did not have a clue on how to deal with that possibility.

“Seriously... You don’t remember...?” I asked hesitantly.

“Remember what?” she replied, still mad.

I hesitated for an instant, maneuvered the car back onto the road, and headed toward the mountain range, which was cocooned in a light haze of rain. And then, in response to Alana’s persistent stare, I reopened the wound with her; for the first time since it had been inflicted on us.

Chapter 31

14 Years Earlier

I did not want to come in the first place. I would have given a month of my work-study stipend to be able to snap my fingers and be transported back to my dorm room where a vinyl of Pink Floyd's latest album was begging to be unwrapped. Instead of immersing myself into the band's psychedelic sound waves, I was drowning in a hellish pit of noise, lust, and death. I had never been keen on parties; let alone college parties; let alone Halloween college parties. The crowd at *The Furnace*—the pub just across the street from campus—was even rowdier than the couple of times that I had been dragged there before. The air reeked of sweat and spilled beer, and though it was not even nine in the evening, many students were already staggering drunk; a couple of them even had to be escorted outside in a hurry. One of them was one of the classmates who had badgered me into going there; the others had melted into the crowd within minutes of our arrival, leaving me to stand alone by a greasy window.

The two beers that I had downed with the hope of relaxing a bit had not gone down right. Instead of easing up into the festive atmosphere, I had grown even more edgy and oddly attuned to the creepy faces, bloody chests, black lips, and exposed thighs. My senses were saturated with filth, and the pounding of the subwoofer inches behind my head finished disorienting me. A sudden dizzy spell hit me. Just as I was about to crouch on the dirty tiles to avoid passing out, a hot, sweaty hand slid into mine. It pulled me firmly into a crowd of loud mouths and reddened eyes. I yielded to the hand's lead and followed with fascination the full-faced Venetian carnival mask surmounted by long blue feathers that covered the back of its owner's head. I discovered the face of my savior as a huge whiff of fresh air welcomed us on the sidewalk.

"Alana?!"

The young woman pivoted to turn her back to me, exposing her Venetian alter ego.

"Are you sure...?" she said playfully.

"I had no idea you'd be here tonight," I said, feeling silly to speak to the ceramic face. "Didn't you say you had a mid-term exam tomorrow?"

"I do, but I'm ready for it. I'm just unwinding a bit tonight," Alana said, turning back to face me. "And I'm glad I came out; it looked like you could use the help back there."

"I don't know what got into me. The beer, the noise, the heat; I was about to drop. Thanks..."

Alana rotated her mask so it would now cover her face.

"You could at least have worn a false mustache or something for the occasion!" she said before grabbing my hand again and pulling me away

from the building. "Come, let's find a nicer place; I've had enough of this one, too."

The tumult from *The Furnace* faded out as we walked down the frigid street. Alana had not let go of my hand and though it had seemed natural during the rescue operation at the bar, the prolonged contact now felt a bit out of friendship specs. I could tell that she had downed a couple of drinks as well; she was quite animated. She ended up leading us into a cozy wine bar located in the basement of a deserted municipal building. Only three other couples enjoyed the small lounge's jazzy ambiance, sitting in tiny booths designed to accommodate no more than two persons. We sat at an empty one under an artsy Miles Davis lithograph.

"That feels so good..." Alana said after removing her boots and propping her legs onto my lap. I looked at her bare feet with some embarrassment—first the hand, now the feet; we'd soon run out of acceptable appendages to share...

"Oh for God's sake; don't be such a prude!" Alana chuckled while wiggling her toes. "You've known my feet since they were size two!"

"Well, they are a good eight now and they are no longer attached to a six-year-old," I said pushing Alana's calves closer to my knees, as their heat already started to permeate the fabric of my pants a bit too high on the thighs. Alana ignored my comment and waved at the waiter.

"Two house merlots, please," she said before turning back to me. "My treat; a little tribute to seventeen years of undefeated friendship."

"Has it been that many years?"

"Twenty-three minus six; you do the math."

"And our playground back home is still the way it was the day your parents moved into the farm across the dirt road from ours. Nothing's changed there."

"Do you think Ernest still lives?"

Ernest was the obese frog that we'd visit every day in the nearby woods and that once had Alana convinced that it was a prince charming.

"I'm sure a princess has kissed him by now. Next time we visit the folks, let's go by the pond; we may meet a bunch of mini-Ernestes there," I replied with amusement.

Alana did not respond; she stared at me with an absorbed expression on her face.

"What is it, Alana...?"

"I just realized that you have been close to me since a time when I still believed in the tooth fairy. In a few months, we'll graduate and we may never live in the same place again."

Oddly enough, my mind had never wandered down that path. Since high school, Alana and I had not been as tight as we were as kids, but we had always remained true friends and confidants. Each one knew everything there was to know about the other, for better and for—just a

little—worse. We never had secrets from one another; well, except for intimate matters, which we intuitively kept at arm's length. Just as for brothers and sisters, discussion of such matters would have felt just a tad incestuous.

The thought that we might finally be separated threw a chill over the moment, but the merlots rapidly dissipated it, and we embarked into a long sequence of reminiscing about our common childhood. A second round of wine accompanied us through the high school years, while the third pulled us up all the way to that college campus, which would soon become a mere memory as well.

After two hours of excited revival of our twin lives, we left the wine bar in silence, inebriated and strangely melancholic. We walked as one; my arm wrapped around her shoulder, her cheek rested on mine. We stopped by my dorm on the way to hers to grab an umbrella as it had started to drizzle. The moment we stepped into my room, the vertical cuddling spontaneously turned into a horizontal embrace on the bed.

For all our years of spiritual intimacy, for all of that evening's sudden affective merging, for all the merlot poured onto the embers of our inhibitions, all we were able to create together that night was pure, unadulterated... slapstick comedy. And most definitely not on purpose. Granted, neither one of us was precocious in that area and it was pretty clear from the start that the choo choo train had trouble reading the signals and that the tunnel under Mount Beaver had probably not yet been cleared up for rail traffic. Still, stage one—kissing and peripheral touching—went quite well; on that level, solid experience and frank participation from both parties. After that though, I was pretty much left to hold alone the commands of the love train.

Not to worry; I would open with a time-tested classic: the passionate kiss with half-twist à la *From Here to Eternity*. The kiss turned out to be a small masterpiece—one of my best works without a doubt. If only it had been followed by a standard half-twist as opposed to a full roll off the narrow dorm bed by two entangled bodies with a crash landing on the back of the female participant. A real trooper though—despite a slightly blurred vision and a lump the size of a pigeon egg at the back of her skull—she insisted to resume the journey. Journey rich in jolts and bumps that was soon interrupted for good when our hero, now under the spell of severe performance anxiety, inadvertently launched the fireworks well before the queen had a chance to make it to the garden party.

As soon as the love train came to a screeching halt, embarrassment filled up the tiny room like brake smoke. Under milder circumstances, we

could have laughed about it, but in less than an hour, each had lost a boat load of treasured artifacts. The crystalline nature of our seventeen-year relationship, the sanctity of our bodies, the anticipation of first time magic, the anticipation of first-time magic with one another. They had all come crashing down with us onto the brownish tiles of the stuffy dorm room. After a moment of rest in silence, Alana's first words were to announce a fast-rising headache, and, like by magic, she suddenly remembered her mid-term.

"Oh God, I didn't see the time go by! My exam is in six hours, I need to go get some rest," she said, jumped to her feet, and started wiggling back into her jeans.

"I'll walk you back to your dorm," I replied and picked my own pants from the floor.

"No need, Rich." Alana replied firmly while pulling up her boots. "You lie back down and relax. It's only a fifteen-minute walk and I'll be running. You could never keep up with me, remember?" she added with forced gaiety. I did not insist. I could understand how eager she was to step out of the scene and return to her own space. I felt just the same. She left me with a hug and a kiss on the cheek before running down the corridor.

I sat on the bed, cupped my hands onto my face, and counted ten deep breaths. The carbon dioxide eased my anxiety a bit, but the first thought to come to my mind at the end of the exercise propped it all the way back up, "How could I let her cross the campus alone at two in the morning?!" I dressed hurriedly, rushed out of the room, and ran after her. She was right though; I had never been very athletic and she was a seasoned runner. After five minutes of pursuit, I still could not see her ahead, and, out of breath, I had to switch from a lame run to a brisk walk.

I crossed paths with a group of costumed boys and girls—equally intoxicated—who screamed at me at the top of their lungs, while extending their heads toward me like crazed gargoyles. A minute later, already frazzled, I approached the one campus landmark I loathed: the underground tunnel that some quirky alumni had preferred to fund in place of a bridge to enable students to cross the small river that ran through campus. The tunnel was only fifty yards long, but it was narrow and always filled with stale, moldy air. On top of that, every ten yards or so, an arched recess about three feet deep and five feet tall had been carved out into the wall in which immature students loved to hide, so they could jump without warning in front of you as you passed by and shove in your hand a flyer of some sort or pressure you into signing a petition.

I heard voices coming from the tunnel as I descended the staircase leading to it, but since it was arced, I could not see their owners. After a brief hesitation, I continued into the underpass. The voices became louder and clearer within seconds, as I worked my way around the bend. The

second I discovered the scene taking place in the tunnel was the second I shoved my body into one of the wall recesses. From the safety of my burrow, I peeked at the four young men who formed a half circle around a young woman, whose back was flush against the wall. I knew the four burly boys; they were all members of the college's hockey team. I knew the girl, too.

The guys did not seem drunk; just the opposite, they looked soberly threatening. Clustered around Alana, they were hassling her, mostly through words, but they were getting emboldened by her fiery resistance and started poking her arms and thighs in brisk little stokes. As words became sparser and the frequency and intensity of touching increased, the one boy who looked younger than the others, tried to reason with his friends and to pull them away from Alana. One of them, a stout boy whose head was planted directly onto his shoulders, did not appreciate the interference. He threw a violent punch into the chest of his meeker friend who fell back on his butt with a strange cough. The other two athletes laughed and started kicking the boy on the ground, without hate, more in a ritual fashion. Alana tried to run away, but one of the fellows held her back by the hood of her winter coat. The half-circle reformed instantly around her, tighter and this time, in silence. The boy on the ground stood up painfully, and, after a brief hesitation, joined it. Alana looked around in panic and just as she was about to scream, one of the boys grabbed her hair and smacked his hand onto her mouth. The others instantly checked the surroundings with the deviant eyes of hyenas that have brought down their prey, and are not about to be challenged for it. I hid far back into the recess, crouched, my head buried into my knees, and pressed my hands over my ears as hard as I could.

Chapter 32

14 Years Earlier

For what seemed like hours, I buried myself into the dark, roaring space between my ears; I even drifted in and out of sleep within it several times. A violent cramp in the thigh eventually ripped me off my prostration. I jumped up and rushed out of the recess to be able to stretch my leg. The ghastly fluorescent light of the tunnel welcomed me back to a chilly late night reality. The hellish bowel was now silent. I had to limp all the way to its end before the cramp subsided fully. When I came out on the other side, the first glimmers of daylight welcomed me out of that tunnel and out of that night.

It was six-thirty. I was hungover, and the chilling drizzle already started running down my neck. I walked straight to Alana's dorm with increasing fear that in front of it might be stationed an ambulance or a police car. The building was as dull and placid as ever when I reached it. I looked up; fourth floor, third window from the left. The lights in Alana's room were on. I picked a spot under the porch of an adjacent building and waited for another eternity. Alana finally walked out of her dorm, alone, wearing a dark rain jacket whose hood encased her face. I followed her from a distance until she entered the Mathematics building where I knew she was to take her mid-term at eight. I tried to convince myself that everything was alright since she had made it to her exam, but I caught a glimpse of her face; pale, so very pale.

I headed back to my room, took a shower, and stared for a long time at my tiny TV, trying in vain to merge back with a normal stream of life. My mind relived in endless loops the events of the previous night; the sickening Halloween faces, the feathery flirting around the merlots, the damning crash from the bed, and the tunnel. The tunnel... I ended up just staring at the drizzle outside my window. A few minutes before ten, I slipped on my winter jacket and headed back to the Mathematics department. This time, I did not have to wait at all. Just as I walked up to the building's entrance, Alana stepped out of it, following a group of excited students who were comparing their answers to the test. When she saw me, Alana reacted with a furtive clenching of the jaw.

"I had an hour to kill so I thought I'd swing by and check how you did on your test," I said and instantly hated the hesitant tone of my voice.

"It was okay," Alana replied, and kept walking. Disconcerted for an instant, I took a few quick steps to catch up with her.

"Is everything okay, Alana? You seem... frustrated. It didn't go the way you had hoped?" I insisted.

"I just wasn't feeling too good..."

"Too much wine last night?"

Alana did not respond. She walked ahead of me, only letting me see the back of her coat's hood.

"Let me buy you breakfast at the student's union; it'll perk you back up," I tried again.

"No; I'm going back to bed."

I had never seen Alana so cold to me; I panicked.

"Listen, Alana, last night—"

"—was a terrible mistake, Richard," said Alana just as she hurried her pace. I stopped and watched her walk away.

I did not come out of my dorm room for three days. No one came to check on me. I wrestled endlessly with my shame, while living off a large pot of hazelnut spread and cup after cup of strong coffee, both of which only contributed to my constant diarrhea and total insomnia. I was so ashamed and so confused, that at one point I even found myself blaming Alana for making me aware, through her attitude, that she had seen me in the tunnel. In one night and in front of her, I had lost my virginity to a premature tremor and my dignity to an immature terror.

I could no longer see forward. Overnight, my destiny had been transformed into fate. The virulent change was forced into my being like a chemotherapy cocktail. It took me two days of agony to rein it in. On the third day, I finally stopped fighting the thought that my life to come would no longer be anything but the inside of the straightjacket I had woven for myself on that night in the tunnel. The diarrhea stopped; I slept. On the fourth day, I went back to class. I decided to stagger down the path until the straightjacket would be tied into my back. It happened just before Christmas.

Rich, I'm pregnant.

There were only two days left to Christmas. Returning from a dreadful finance class, I was eager to pack my bag and head home for the holidays. The note was written in blue ink at the back of a cardboard coaster from the wine bar in which Alana and I had flirted on Halloween night. It had been slipped under the door of my dorm room. After two months of anguish, my mind suddenly found peace within minutes of reading the note. I packed my bag and headed to Alana's dorm. I had not seen her, or heard from her, since the morning after Halloween night. Her door was ajar when I got there. I pushed it without knocking. She herself was packing a small suitcase. She turned her head and looked at me without surprise.

"Are you ready?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

We only exchanged a few words during the two-hour ride home. While driving, I offered marriage to her with guilt as my guide; she accepted with reason as hers. In the midst of a horrid mess, we had

independently come up with the same plan to bring joy to our parents instead of lifelong sorrow. The news of our engagement turned the first day of our visit home into the happiest day of both our parents' lives. They had been more than friends for nearly two decades; almost kin. Alana and I had grown hand in hand between their houses and each family treated the other's child as their own. Nothing could have brought our parents greater bliss than to see Alana and me transition our childhood friendship into married life.

In a way, it was for Alana and me the first act of control since Halloween. We had invented a way to turn the manure that had been dumped onto our lives that night into the most fertile ground for our parents' happiness. For me, though, it was still manure, and I dreaded the day that the seed of rape would break free of Alana's womb and demand that I love it as if mine.

Jessica burst into our lives a month after our college graduation. I never asked Alana why she had picked that name for her. Luckily, at the same time, I came across an opportunity for a first job with an accounting firm in San Francisco. Between interviews and moving plans, I had more excuses than I needed to spend very little time in the university apartment in which Alana and I had moved after our engagement. She never forced me to spend time with the baby. I was not quite sure whether she deemed me unworthy of the child. Maybe she just thought that it would take time for me to see in the eyes of that little girl anything else than the reflection of a pitiful shadow crouched in a tunnel recess on a damp Halloween night.

Jessica grew before my eyes from a crying baby to a contemplative toddler, who, for some reason, only got animated when I walked home from work. The moment I would step through the door, she would crawl or totter toward me with little yaps of excitement. I could not understand her infatuation with me, especially since it was her mother who attended to her needs day and night. I would nevertheless make it a point to pick her up and sit her next to me on the sofa where we would play for a few minutes. She played with her dad. I played for her mother. I played hubby; I played daddy; I played house. By handing me the note in which she had announced to me that she was pregnant, Alana had offered me a gateway to redemption. In return, I had opened for her the door to the future that she had always desired: a picture-perfect family life.

Her husband was a quiet, gentle, hard-working man who knew no other road than the one between his home and his office. He would spend every free minute around his wife and child, going out of his way to ensure their material wellbeing. He was neither the tenderest of dads nor the most

passionate of husbands, but he was the rock on which southern Christian families were to be built.

Only, in this case, a rock with a stone for a heart. In spite of my early fears, I had never really seen in Jessica's face any kind of testimony to my infamy. The fact that the little girl looked one hundred percent like her mother probably had a lot to do with it. But even though I did not feel any discomfort when looking at her, I did not feel the slightest bit of empathy for her either. That saddened me most when I was confronted with the joy that I seemed to bring her, whether I paid attention to her or not.

The more alert the child became, the stronger my sadness grew. It cast a shadow over my days, and soon started disrupting my sleep as well. At first, I tossed and turned for hours with tremendous frustration; eventually, I would just dress in the middle of the night, sit down at the kitchen table—the kitchen felt less deserted at night than other areas of the house—turn on the Voice of America radio for company, and I would work. That extra work time quickly earned me the unofficial title of most productive employee at the firm and a big promotion in the second year already. Just before the arrival of our second child, Anne—named after Alana's grandmother. It had been Alana's first try at a boy; she would get her wish just over a year later with Gregory, and then call her family ideal. I tried to bond with Anne and Gregory harder than I had with Jessica, but only succeeded in making them bond with me.

Alana was elated by the harmony of our family and my success in it as the father figure. While our physical intimacy during the early years had been strictly restricted for the purpose of bringing new lives into the family, she would now wander into my bedroom a few times a year, albeit always in the dark and in silence from beginning to end. During daytime, we were a fine couple by our shared conservative Christian standards. Respect, ethics, and emotional restraint were the three pillars of our relationship. On the communication side, we mainly spoke at meal times. Children always constituted the core of the discussion; household and matters around my work filled in the rest. We seldom broached lighter subjects such as books or TV shows; we had figured out from the start that our interests were diametrically opposed. That realization had given us an alibi to sleep in separate bedrooms—each with its own TV—where we would retire as soon as the kids were put to bed. As for our social activities, they consisted almost exclusively of neighborhood barbecues, fundraisers with church friends, and occasional restaurant outings with some of my colleagues and their wives.

I often thought of us as an anachronic, somewhat Victorian couple, corseted by a perception of love that could only be expressed within the framework of family and community etiquette. Only, in Victorian days, the man got to sneak into the maids' room under the attic from time to time, while the woman may have found romantic enlightenment with the

children's preceptor. In our case, we were it — Richard and Alana. For worse at the start; for a little better after it. And if I could never bond with my children, I had gradually rebuilt the love I had for Alana as a kid. I loved her again with a childish passion and the innocent desire to just be by her side. She, on the other hand, loved what I had helped her make of her life, and was grateful to me for having forsaken mine in the process. But never grateful enough to voice any forgiveness.

In our family, Halloween was never celebrated. Nor was it ever spoken of.

Chapter 33

October 4, Year 1.

On the occasion of Gregory's tenth birthday, we had for once planned an excursion for our family and our family only. It was not as much a burst of emancipation for Alana and me, as the result of a celebration on a Wednesday, when all our friends were at work. Our son's actual birthday fell on the preceding Saturday, but I had been forced to go to the office that whole weekend in order to wrap up an important financial assessment. In return, my boss had given me a day off in the middle of the week.

We rode the train to the shore and then walked the half-mile or so between the station and a small beach that our neighbors had recommended. Even in the middle of the week, it was pretty crowded, but still a nice spot in which to roll out our blanket and finally make use of a fancy picnic basket we had received over a decade earlier as a wedding gift. Despite the cloudy and cool fall weather, the kids insisted on going into the water as soon as we got settled. We watched them run toward the ocean, side by side, while taunting each other with high-pitched cries.

"Can you believe it? In a couple of years, we'll have three full-blown teenagers on our hands at the same time. We'd better start yoga classes now," said Alana with an amused smile.

"I'm sure we'll figure out how to handle them," I replied sternly. I had witnessed on many occasions the verbal and emotional abuse of some of our friends by their teenagers—abuse apparently stamped out as okay by a memo that I had never received—and the prospect did not amuse me in the least.

"Jessica asked me for tampons yesterday," said Alana bluntly, as if to punish me for my lack of enthusiasm.

"Does she...?"

We were a couple in which questions on such matters were never stated in full.

"No, she doesn't, but most of her friends do, so she just wants the box in her room so they'll see it when they come by."

This time I smiled and Alana seized the opening.

"Oh, don't laugh. I'm sure a long time went by between the day you bought your first box of... *protection* and the day you actually got to use it."

"You should know;" I replied on the same playful tone. "I broke the seal for you and I'm sure its contents had been packaged by an assembly chain worker who was humming a Perry Como tune!"

I loved Alana's laugh. It was my perception of her letting her hair down for me, which she never did by any kind of light. I was also quite surprised by her joke. She had never alluded to an intimate matter in such a direct fashion, let alone joke about it. It seemed that her daughter's first forays onto wilder trails were starting to bleed onto her a little. Alana did,

however, catch herself back right away and she oriented the discussion toward a more familiar ground—how to handle Gregory’s laziness at school. That topic had kept us engaged for hours before, and we had once again failed to come up with any kind of a plan by the time the kids returned from the water and dove into the food basket like piranhas on a drifting sailor leg.

Alana and I took a long walk by the edge of the water right after lunch, all the way to a ramshackle old pier on which we did not dare climb. Once returned to our blanket, we released the kids from their mandatory hour of board games while digestion took place; they jumped to their feet and dashed back to the water. Alana lay down on her back, covered her face with a red scarf, inhaled deeply, and fell asleep in seconds; a skill that I had long envied her.

I took advantage of the situation to look directly at her body. Alana had kept a couple of extra pounds after the pregnancies, mostly around her waist, but she had done a good job taking care of her body, even though she did not allow anyone a good peek at it under any circumstance. On that day, she wore a black, one-piece bathing suit with a tiny built-in skirt designed to shield her Venusian moldings—already covered by the swimsuit—from the potential X-ray vision of aliens on the beach.

I did not feel sleepy in the least and the two coffees I had poured myself out of the thermos bottle had a lot to do with it, as well as with a sudden pressing need. My scan of the beachfront for bathrooms did not return any lead. I checked on the kids who were bodyboarding and murmured, “I’m going to the bathroom,” in the direction of Alana, who did not snap out of her torpor. The whole beach was a natural area; it was bordered by an endless string of wood houses, each with a raised deck facing the ocean. There was not a commercial building or even a simple portable toilet in sight. I walked between two houses to reach the beach road behind them and hailed an older man on a bike who carried a long fishing rod on his shoulder.

“Excuse me; are there bathrooms nearby, or a store of some sort?” I asked.

“Strip mall; fifteen minutes’ walk down the road,” the man said without slowing down.

Since I had been walking along the beach for a good ten minutes already, I contemplated the option of making a donation to nature in the ocean, but I was not wearing a swimsuit under my pants, and the white kangaroo briefs that Alana bought for me could not have passed for swimwear, even in France. I resolved to go with the fifteen-minute walk to the strip mall, which ended up feeling much longer as my bladder nagged me more insistently at every step.

By the time I made it back to our beach spot, a full hour had passed by and everyone was gone. I walked around a bit, confused, only to confirm that I was indeed at the right place, but there were no signs of my family. I approached a small group of students who had occupied a spot thirty feet from ours since our arrival and asked whether they had seen Alana and the kids leaving. A freckled-face girl responded while the others looked at me gravely.

"You're Richard?" she asked.

Surprised, I nodded.

"They called for you; now they're gone looking for the boy," the young woman continued. "The girls came back all worked up from the water; they said their brother had disappeared; that they found his bodyboard on the shore. They all went looking for help; they headed for the pier—"

I did not hear the end of her sentence. I ran in the direction of the pier while looking around frantically for my family; in vain. I ended up climbing onto the pier to scan the beach from a higher point of view, and from there, I caught a glimpse of Alana's black swimsuit. She and the girls stood on the back deck of a house fifty yards or so down the beach, engaged in a discussion with a man in a straw hat. I ran to them as fast as I could. When I approached the deck, the man—who was probably the owner of the house—stared at me with suspicion, which caused Alana to turn. She anxiously looked at me, and then all around me.

"Gregory is not with you?" she asked.

"No, he isn't; I heard he went missing, I was just—"

"You were just what?!" Alana said, her face suddenly contracting with anger. "You were holing up in some recess while I died with fear once again?!"

I did not reply immediately. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned? Try a mother with a missing child...

"Have you called the police?"

Alana turned her back to me in an abrupt swing as to wipe me off the scene. The house owner took pity on me and answered.

"I just did; they'll be here in thirty minutes or so."

"Good; thank you;" I said, "In the meantime—"

"Girls, let's walk back to our spot once more before the police get here," Alana interrupted, grabbed our daughters' hands, and started heading back up the beach. I blurted a vague, "We'll be right back" to the owner and followed the girls, a few steps behind. As we got closer to the spot where we had initially laid our towel, Alana started running, immediately seconded by the girls.

Casually sitting in the sand was our son, with three students crouched around him. Alana broke through them, fell on her knees, and wrapped

her arms around him; her back was immediately shaken by violent sobs. The candid surprise on the boy's face showed how little of the drama he grasped.

"Where did you go, stupid?!" asked Anne with a mix of relief and jealousy.

"I went to look for a bathroom that way," replied Gregory and pointed in the direction opposite the pier. "I walked and walked down the beach and couldn't find one, so I went into the water. When I returned, you were gone, so I did what Mom taught us; in case we get separated, wait at the place where we were last together."

Alana stood back up and thanked the students for watching over the boy. We all agreed to call it a day and head back; the stress of the incident had taken the wind out of our beach excursion. We stopped by the house of the man who had alerted the police and asked him to call them back to cancel the request. The walk back to the train station took place in silence; Gregory was pouting after being scolded by his sisters, who blamed him for their mother's unsettling outburst. They had never witnessed an altercation between their mom and dad; there had never been a real one since our marriage. As soon as they climbed on the train, the kids made up and sat on the same row; Alana picked for us seats located three rows behind them, even though closer spots were available.

"I am sorry, Richard," she whispered and grabbed my hand as soon as the train left the station. "I was so scared; I thought he had drowned and... you weren't there."

I squeezed her hand and gave her a forgiving smile.

You were holing up in some recess while I died with fear once again!

When she had first spat out these words, they slipped over my mind. I had chalked them up to panic and I was myself worried enough about Gregory not to pay much attention to anything else. Now that normality had been restored, her words circled inside my skull, etching my consciousness a little more at every turn. I looked at my children; I looked at my wife who was gazing through the window. I had been incredibly blessed that such a beautiful family could have grown out of my shame.

Half an hour later, in a busy corridor of the San Francisco train station, I walked away from them.

On October 4th.

Chapter 34

November 22, Year 4.

The haze around the mountain range only got denser as we climbed the first steep slope. By the time I stopped talking, Alana had grown livid. During the story that I had been telling her for nearly an hour, she had not interrupted me once, but she had, on multiple occasions, turned around to make sure that Jessica was still fast asleep on the back seat of the car. After she remained muted for long minutes following my last words, I decided to force her hand.

"Do you remember now...?" I asked.

"For thirteen years," she replied while looking straight ahead, "you lived in my house every single day, helped me raise three children, were a husband to me all the way to the bedroom; all this on a lie? A thirteen year lie?!"

She had not raised her voice; she sounded stunned.

"What do you mean lie?" I replied, equally confused. "Are you going to tell me that you have no recollection of what brought us together as husband and wife in the first place?"

"Of course I do!" she said under her breath. "Jessica—*our child*—is what brought us together as husband and wife!"

"Not our child! *Your child!*" I said without restraint, as I suddenly felt stripped of the sacrifices I had made for Alana's wellbeing. Sacrifices of which I had always assumed she was aware. To my surprise, Alana laid her hand on mine, right on the steering wheel.

"How in the world did you ever come to think that you were not Jessica's father?" she asked in an almost patronizing fashion, as if talking to a child. "Who did you think Jessica's father might have been?"

"One of them, of course..." I replied, aggravated.

"*Them?! Them who?*"

"The hockey guys... in the tunnel... on campus."

Alana dropped her patronizing tone of voice for a surprised one.

"You thought they raped me?!"

"I was there!"

"I know! I saw you peeking out of a recess and then remain hidden while I was being bullied just a few yards away. That's why I was mad at you for a long time after that night. But there never was any rape! If the guys had raped me, I would have gone straight to the police! They were out to harass whoever came across their path. They hassled me for a few minutes and even started bouncing me between them until I kicked one of them in the groin, broke through the circle, and ran away; they didn't even try to chase me. I can't believe you didn't see all that; you had already run away, then...?"

I stared at the road in silence. When she realized that I would not answer, Alana continued.

"The incident did bother me for a few days," she said, "because in retrospect, I don't know what would have happened if I hadn't escaped, but then I moved on and never met them again."

"There never was any rape...?" I repeated, stuck on that part.

"Of course not!"

"Jessica is my daughter?"

"Of course, she is! *Has always been!* It's written all over her face. She doesn't look *almost* like you; she looks *just* like you! You, of all people, should know that our first time was my first time. She was born exactly nine months later, day for day."

"But we used protection..."

"A cracked condom; that's the protection we used! I recall that you pulled the box out of your small fridge. Who's ever heard of storing condoms in a fridge?! The cold temperature will damage the latex; I read that years later. In fact, neither one of us had any idea of what we were doing that night—at any level for that matter—and I'm pretty sure it was your first time, too."

I nodded. For the first time in the seventeen years since our first night together, Alana and I had started living in the same world.

"So you married me under the misconception that Jessica was the daughter of a rape for which you felt responsible?" asked Alana looking again far ahead through the windshield.

I remained silent.

"Oh, shit..." she whispered-- My sentiment; exactly.

"Dad, are you sure it's there...?" asked Jessica. "That place looks abandoned."

She stared up at the steep rock face at the top of which towered an all-stone structure that looked like a decrepit medieval castle. We had driven up the mountain for over an hour to reach that spot. The road between rock face and ravine was so narrow that two cars—one up, one down—could barely cross. Close to the top of the pass that led to Spain, we had finally run into the road marker indicated by Silvia; a metal pipe sticking out of the rock face ten feet above the road and that shot water directly into the ravine on the other side of it. Shortly after that spot, as instructed, we turned onto a side road that had once been paved, but that wild grasses had already reclaimed in great part. During the mile-long drive on that deserted trail, which was clearly not used anymore, not a single word had been spoken in the car.

"Yes; that's the fort alright, but I cannot imagine why the guy would have taken Madame to such a place," I said.

"There aren't even any windows, just bars; that's creepy," said Alana. "And how would we get up there?"

Now faced with yet another level of risk, we all doubted. The light was already beginning to dim, the rain kept falling, and the rocks were shiny as if smeared with clear oil. I blamed myself for allowing Alana and Jessica to come along. After grabbing the shotgun from underneath the driver's seat and loading it under the worried eyes of the two women, I said, "I think there's a trail back there." I pointed to a foot-wide, shallow groove in the rock to the left of our position. "It looks like it climbs toward the fort. I'll go up and check the place; just wait for me in the car."

I was surprised not to hear any objection. The climb was steep but not as slippery as I had feared. Once I crossed a narrow bridge that ended on a rusty metal gate, I hesitated. Seen from the inside of the square courtyard, the fortress appeared as fragile as it was massive. Rubble spilled out of several entrances to the building and one of the corner towers had collapsed. The construction was a barren and hazardous vestige of the past; no one could be foolish enough to squat it, especially in the dead of winter. I turned around and headed back toward the gate. As I walked back on the bridge outside the ramparts, just for good measure, I yelled, "Anybody here...?!" A frantic cry startled me when it instantly echoed my call.

"Yes, up here; on the top floor!"

Madame's voice! I ran back inside the fort and rushed into the arched door nearest to the source of the voice, by the end of the wall facing the void. I ran up a spiraling stone staircase, all the way to the last floor, and surged through a low, narrow corridor to finally end up, out of breath, in a large room swept by violent bursts of misty, glacial wind.

"Richard..." Madame's voice resonated from a darker corner of the room. Shivering in a white summer dress as sole protection against the elements, she sat on the bare stone floor with her legs folded underneath her. I kneeled by her side and grabbed her under the arms.

"It's no use," she said with frustration. "Look..."

She pulled one of her legs out to expose a shiny chain looped through a metal ring in the wall and tied to her ankle with a padlock.

"That son of a bitch!" I said. "Where's he now...?"

"I don't know... He stepped out when we heard the sound of your car down there. Be careful; he is not right. I have no idea what he was planning to do here with me. He had someone pick up his car after we got here, so I don't think that he has any plans to ever leave this fort. Look over there..."

By one of the windows, neatly spread out onto the floor slabs, was a large red and white checkered blanket onto which were rested a thick, half-burnt candle, a bottle of red wine, two tall glasses, and a large bamboo picnic basket.

“Six or seven times over the past two days,” Madame said, “he took me by that spot and forced me to relive every minute of a picnic that he and I had shared there nearly thirty years ago. Over, and over, and over...” Madame choked with nervous rage.

I pulled on the rusty metal ring attached to the wall; it was firmly anchored. The padlock on Madame’s ankle was a sturdy one and I had no idea how to pick it. The chain itself was new, but it was not very thick and some of its links were not fully closed. In the picnic basket, I found metal knives and forks that I used in alternation to try to pry one of the chain links open. Despite long and furious attempts under Madame’s intense stare, I could not bend the metal as much as a single degree. After ten or so minutes of that routine, the knife I was using broke in half.

“I’ll have to shoot the chain; there’s no other way,” I said.

“Don’t you have any tools in your car?”

“No; I forgot my toolbox in a convent.”

Madame looked at me with confusion. I picked up the gun from the floor.

“But that’s a shotgun...” she said. “Won’t the pellets bounce off the wall and hit us?”

I shrugged, pondered her point for a moment, and ended up walking to the picnic setup to grab the thick blanket.

“This will protect us,” I said. “If the pellets do bounce back, they won’t have that much strength.”

After kneeling between Madame and the wall, I covered us both with the blanket, and, through a small opening in the fabric, placed the barrel of the gun at an angle against the chain, close to the metal ring in the wall.

“Ready?” I asked. Madame gripped my shoulders as sole response.

The gun shot deafened us and the sulfurous scent of gun powder enveloped us. I pulled the blanket off and crawled to the wall to inspect the chain.

“That didn’t do it,” I said “but two links got badly twisted. Let me try to pry one open now.”

Using the blade of a second knife as a lever, I battled with the twisted links for another fifteen or twenty minutes. On several occasions, I felt as if the metal yielded a few precious millimeters, but when I stopped applying force to look at the chain, I found out each time that the tiny space between one end of the link and the other had not widened up one bit.

“One more shot should do the trick,” I finally sighed in capitulation. I hated to have to repeat the dangerous maneuver. On the first try, we had received a volley of pellets from the shot. The projectiles did not have enough speed to pierce the blanket or even bruise us, but the effect was scary, and I dreaded thinking about what might happen with a slightly different shot angle. Still, I resigned to pull the blanket back over our heads and fired the gun a second time after pointing it to the damaged links. This

time, no backlash. Instead, the metallic sound of the chain dropping on the stones notified us of success before I even pulled the blanket off. I immediately helped Madame up and stood in front of her filled with a tremendous bliss; I had finally been given a chance to bring to her life a contribution of significance after she had rescued mine altogether. I grabbed her hands with a broad smile on my face. She responded with a horrified stare.

Madame's eyes actually pointed slightly to the left of my face, over my shoulder. I turned around and this time felt nothing more than fatigue. Pure, apathetic fatigue, as if the vision in front of me had gutted me out of all nerves.

Slightly to the left of the door stood Alana, pallid and immobile. She stared at me without any hope; only fear. Just three feet to her side, in the center of the door frame, Jessica shrugged slightly in response to the prick of the middle prong of the wooden pitchfork that was pressed onto the back of her neck. Behind her, at the end of the pitchfork's handle, an older man in a wrinkled black suit and a two-day stubble pointed glistening eyes to Madame.

"Can you believe it, my love?" he said with a strange smile. "I found the pitchfork that Victor planted in my back twenty-seven years ago. It had been lying behind a pile of rubble during all this time!"

The man spoke too fast; too loudly. And one of his hands on the pitchfork trembled with excitement, increasing the pressure of the wood prong against Jessica's skin. I laid the empty shotgun down on the floor and took two slow steps toward my daughter.

"Sir, please..." I said with the softest voice I could produce, "It's an innocent child you're threatening..." I took a third step. I was now just ten feet from a terrified little girl. "My wife, my daughter, and I apologize for intruding..." One more step. "With your permission we will now leave and—"

I just had time to raise my arm to deflect slightly the head of the pitchfork. The old man had thrown it at my chest without warning and with unexpected force. Two of the three prongs pierced my shoulder just underneath the collar bone. I staggered under the pain and seized the wooden handle to keep it as still as I could. The old man grabbed Jessica by the hair and dragged her roughly by a tall cutout in the outer wall that reached all the way to the floor and opened onto a bluish twilight. I looked around for any kind of solution and received in return the vision of an instant frozen in time. Jessica's body was bowed down in the odd posture of a puppet whose wires had set loose. Alana's bust leaned forward in a

frozen reach to her daughter. Madame stared straight at the man, probably also searching for words. He was the one to break the silence.

"Come to me, *Hélène*," he said with a candid smile. "Come to me and we'll fly away together. The first time, my soul couldn't fly; bound to yours, it will."

For the first time, I saw Madame hesitate; I understood that he was offering her death.

"This young girl is about the same age as you were on our first visit here," the man insisted as his smile faded. "If you don't come to me; she is the one I'll take on the journey, in memory of you."

Nauseated by the pain in my shoulder, I turned to Madame. I was terrified that she might not comply in time. I was terrified that she might comply.

"She will never be me, *Tristan*," she replied and extended her hand as she slowly approached him. "Let her go back to her family. I am the one going with you." Pitchfork still sticking out of my shoulder, struggling to stand on my legs, I watched the scene with a single thought: within seconds, a woman I loved would fall through that hole in the wall and I still did not know which one.

When Madame came within three feet of the man, he suddenly let go of Jessica's hair—she dropped to her knees—and reached for Madame's hand as one of his legs already extended behind him, toward the void. Madame did not pull back when the tip of his fingers touched her skin. She simply closed her eyes. I screamed like an animal. Into that scream flew a shadow. The shadow of a long, silent, scrawny beast that traversed the air with limbs fully extended to latch on to the man's throat, and, in a single thrust, throw him back into the void. Man and beast were swallowed by dusk without a sound.

Chapter 35

November 24, Year 4.

I woke up fresh and lighthearted, not in the least troubled by the fact that I lay onto the bed of an unknown bedroom. The room was comforting in its simplicity and silence. Thin white curtains at the windows dimmed further a feeble winter daylight. A slight pressure on my left shoulder alerted me to the bulky white bandage that covered it from my neck to my elbow. A mild attempt to move it triggered a throbbing pain that instantly revived the last vision before that bedroom. The vision of a man falling backward into a dusky void under the thrust of the leaping yellow dog whose fangs were planted in his throat. That was the endpoint of my stream of consciousness until my awakening in that alien bedroom.

“Hey! Is anyone there?” I shouted, now unsettled.

Within seconds, a plump, middle-aged woman who looked a bit like Elisabeth Taylor—the senior version, with beautiful eyes set into a puffy face—barged into the room, approached the bed, and fluffed my pillows without a word.

“Thank you...” I said. “Where are we? How long have I been unconscious?”

The woman shrugged and pouted to signify that she did not understand me.

“Who brought me here?” I insisted, this time making sure that I spoke French, uncertain of the first language I had used.

The woman picked a white envelope from the night table and handed it to me before gesturing that she was going to fetch some food for me.

Richard, you are at friends of mine on the Spanish side of the border. I have gone to take your wife and daughter to the airport. They are fine and safe; so are you. I'll return by the end of the day. Do not leave the house. Madame.

I smiled briefly at Madame’s ability to get to the point in few words, but many questions soon popped into my mind that I decided to place on the backburner until her return. I devoured the lentil soup and foot-long roast beef sandwich that my hostess brought me, only to fall right back asleep.

“Richard? Richard...?”

A firm pressure on my forearm punctuated the words. I opened my eyes onto Madame’s face. She looked tired and stared at me with kindness.

“Where did Alana and Jessica go?” I asked while wiggling to raise my head higher up on the pillows.

“Home,” Madame replied softly.

“Home to your house?”

"No. Home to San Francisco."

"Without saying goodbye?"

"This morning, when the doctor said that you were healing perfectly and that you no longer needed the pain killers, your wife immediately decided to take her daughter home. Jessica didn't want to leave you, but Alana was very strong. She did, however, promise your daughter that she'd be allowed to call you here after they got home."

"If Alana knew I was going to wake up anytime, why couldn't she just wait? I don't understand..."

"I do," replied Madame. "You had—as a family—come to the end of a positive sequence. A healing cycle for her and for your daughter. She did not want to force you into a new cycle that could have resembled the one from which you escaped three years ago. I would have done exactly the same as your wife."

I chose to postpone reflection on that matter.

"Jessica was okay? She was not too shaken by what happened at the fort?"

"She had a bit of a nervous breakdown with lots of tears and screaming immediately after, but once we left the place, she calmed down. Your mother and I have helped her talk everything out over the past two days, as we all waited here for you to recover. She'll be fine. She, too, is strong and the joy of having reunited with you again will take the edge off the other memories of her journey here."

"I wish I had never brought them along to the fort. They had been shaken enough before..."

"They did not blame you at all. During a chat, while you were out, they made it very clear that you had told them to stay in the car. They ran up to the fort after they heard the first gunshot. They meant to help, but Tristan popped up behind them at the bottom of the staircase."

"That man kidnapped you and was planning to have you die with him in that fort, and yet you keep calling him by his first name. Who was he to you?"

Madame replied without hesitation.

"That man had loved my mother and raped me in that fort when I was seventeen, thinking she still lived through me. Victor killed him that day, in front of me; or so I had always believed, until I saw him—the aged version of the Tristan I had known—in the car when they took me and your wife away from you at the house. I was stunned."

"But Silvia was madly in love with that man, so Victor must have known he was alive..."

"He did, but never told me. I guess he wanted to protect me from the past. During the first evening on the rock, in the middle of the ocean, Tristan took me aside and talked to me for hours. That's when I learned that Victor had ended up rescuing him from the ravine, that Silvia had

nursed him back to life at her house in Portugal for nearly two years, that he had shadowed me for months in Paris and even killed a man who was threatening me there—”

“And during all that time in Paris, you never noticed him?”

“I lived in a neighborhood where people often wandered around at night and strange things happened every week. I thought Tristan was dead for years; how could I have imagined that he lived two blocks down from my apartment!”

“And he never tried to approach you?”

“Never. In retrospect, he understood how I may have had a different perception of our sexual interaction at the fort and might have hated him for it.”

“Different perception? Did he not realize that he had raped you?”

Madame replied with hesitation.

“I never said *no* to him that day at the fort. That’s what he kept repeating when we talked about it twenty-seven years later on the rock.”

“So, at the fort... you were consenting?” I asked, confused.

“It is true that I never said *no*, but I never said *yes* either. I was a virgin and even though I had been taught about sex, I was totally overwhelmed. I didn’t know what was happening...”

Madame stopped and turned her head away. I waited for her to regain her composure.

“I had never expected Tristan to act that way,” Madame continued after a moment. “He had been a perfect gentleman until we got inside the fort, but while we were getting set up for our picnic there, he called me twice by my mother’s first name. He corrected himself immediately both times, but I sensed that something was not quite right. We didn’t even have a chance to eat; Tristan tried to kiss me; I let him. He took that as an encouragement...”

Madame stopped again as she clenched her fists. In order to detach her from the moment she was reliving in her mind, I asked, “But how did Victor come into the picture?”

“Victor later told Tristan that he overheard us planning for that trip to the fort and had followed us there from a distance. He had parked his car at the bottom of the trail that leads to the fort and waited there. At some point he heard a faint cry coming from the fort and he rushed up there.”

“You screamed...” I murmured to myself.

“I only recall the pain...” Madame replied soberly.

“And twenty-seven years later, Tristan forced you to relive that day.”

“Yes, but this time, Tristan will never return.”

“When you left the fort, did you take his body with you?”

“No. I just went down to check on him. The dog had never let go of his throat. Tristan had bled to death,” Madame said with a choking voice. “It’ll look like an accident; a dog gone mad.”

"I can't believe what that animal did. It's very rare for a dog to attack its master..." I said, now just realizing that fact.

"It was not Tristan's dog," replied Madame with a restored poise. "It was my father's dog."

"Your father's?"

"I had seen that dog in a picture of my dad that Victor had sent me a couple of years back. It looked much better then, but that was the same dog. During one of the picnics yesterday at the fort, Tristan told me its story. Just a couple of days after my dad died, his dog appeared on Tristan's property, twenty miles away from our house. He settled around there. He would appear out of nowhere almost every day, but would walk away and disappear whenever Tristan tried to approach him or feed him."

"The dog stood on the roof of the cellar on the day that you invited Victor to have a drink there. That may be why he ran out on us; he probably knew that wherever the dog was, Tristan could not be far away," I said, closing that loop for myself. Madame nodded in approbation before continuing.

"It seems like Tristan became fixated on that dog—that he knew to be my father's—and started believing that it was the incarnation of his soul and that it had come to him to bring forgiveness and reconciliation. That's also when he started thinking about reconnecting with me, with what he now thought to be my dad's blessing. Your arrival, and then Victor's reports of our weekly conversations, finished tipping him over in his plan to get me back."

"And by kidnapping my daughter on top of that, he managed to use me to kill three birds with one stone," I said.

"Three birds...?"

"Bird one: he would have me bring you here for his romantic fulfillment. Bird two: he would blackmail me into carrying out the Lourdes manipulation which served his group's interests. Bird three: he would launch the police after me to compromise your organization, which stood in the way of his."

Madame shook her head in confusion.

"The Lourdes manipulation? What's that about and what does it have to do with my organization?"

I was stunned to realize that, during the whole ordeal, she had never caught a glimpse of the other facets of the affair and thought that it had only consisted of her kidnapping, with the abduction of my family being just collateral damage.

"I'll tell you the whole story later," I said. "I feel a bit woozy right now."

"Do you think you could stand up?" asked Madame. "The pain medication kept you sleeping for nearly two days. A bit of exercise and fresh air would do you good."

I managed to roll off the bed and stand up without much difficulty. Madame helped me put on pants and tied my shoes. She managed to slip a sweater over my head and push one arm into a sleeve, but—in response to my wincing of pain—she gave up on the arm on the injured side and let the second sleeve hang loosely. I followed her through a small corridor and rudimentary kitchen to a door opening to the backyard of the house. Outside was a long stretch of winter countryside that ran up to a mountain engulfed in low clouds. We sat on a low stone wall that had probably been a garden boundary at some point. The place was cold, colorless, and still. I took a deep breath in. It felt as if my life had finally ended its mad run there, on the southern foothills of the Pyrénées. By Madame's side.

"You know," I said after a long moment of silent contemplation, "that man in the fort might have been right in the end. The yellow dog may very well have been the embodiment of your father's soul. It saved you before finally flying away."

Madame grabbed my hand and squeezed it. I did not turn to her. I had never seen her cry. It would have been too late to start.

"I'm going to leave and go home in a few days as well, Richard," said Madame after regaining her composure.

"Your dad's home?" I asked, taken by surprise.

"No. Too many ghosts there now. Home as I made for myself, back in Argentina."

"Will you see Aurélien before leaving?" I asked referring to her son, held in jail just ten miles from his grandfather's land.

The question brought on Madame's face an affectionate smile that mirrored her son's, when—a year earlier as I had dropped him in front of the police station—he had answered my question about his relationship with her with a cryptic: "Madame is the mother I never had." Aurélien was the son she always had.

"No; he doesn't want me to see him behind bars," Madame replied. "You're the only one from whom he has accepted visits there. When he gets out, just before spring, I'll arrange for him to immediately fly over to Argentina. He's been boiling to reunite with Anya since the first day of his incarceration; so has she. She grew really lonely this past winter, so I moved her in with me at the estancia. Now she's counting the days, just like he is."

"Will you tell Aurélien how his father died?" I asked.

"I told him a couple of years ago how his father died on the day he was conceived. In his mind, he has never had a father," Madame replied.

"So he had never met him?"

“He had, many times, but he knows him as Uncle Tristan, a good friend of Victor’s. According to Tristan’s account, the day I left Aurélien at Victor’s for him and Silvia to raise, Tristan decided to let go of me and focus instead on his son. He bought a house in a village just twenty miles away, and from then on, he visited his son—under the pretense of visiting ‘his friend Victor’—pretty much every weekend; he traveled a lot during the week to set up and manage his political group.

Again, according to Tristan, Aurélien always remained as fond of him as he was as a two-year old and they continued seeing each other often for lunches and dinners even after he left Victor’s house. Tristan, however, never told Aurélien that he was his father—luckily, the resemblance was not too pronounced—probably because he did not want me to learn through our son that he was still alive. I also think that somewhere he realized that Aurélien was the child of rape, but did not want to admit it, even to himself.”

“So it was during these weekend visits that Silvia fell in love with Tristan...” I said, closing another loop for myself.

“Yes, they became lovers shortly after his arrival. When he told me about that on the rock, he claimed that he had never ceased to love me, and had only taken Silvia as his mistress to quench his sexual needs.”

“What a cold thing to say.”

“He sounded more melancholic than brash when he said it, though. His relationship with Silvia would last over twenty years; he may not have loved her the way she loved him, but I’m sure there was a real bond between them. I sensed it through his attitude when he spoke of her that night.”

“But he had left his henchman instructions to kill her,” I said.

“And he had made plans to die with me at the fort as well. From the moment Tristan saw me again, his thinking derailed.”

Madame’s words saddened me. It was a man’s derailing that had catalyzed my own three years earlier, and it had taken another man’s derailing to finally slide me back onto the rails that connected my past and my future. Not only did Madame’s words close a chapter; they also marked the return to normality for all of us and I was not sure how ready I was for it.

“So everyone is deserting me as I lie mortally wounded in this remote valley.” I joked without conviction to mask my disarray.

Madame stood up and took a few steps.

“You can stay in this house as long as it’ll take for you to regain your strength,” she replied seriously, while staring up at the mountain range, her back turned to me. “Don’t feel bad about imposing; the actual owners will still be abroad for months and as for your nursing assistant and the

doctor, they are well compensated by our organization; I'm sure that they aren't eager to see you go."

"When will I speak with you again?"

"I'll get in touch as soon as I arrive at the estancia. I've arranged for your satellite phone to be mailed here. It should arrive tomorrow. After that, we'll resume our weekly conversations."

"Why are you speaking of the future with your back turned to me?"

"Because when I'm close to you, it is my God I have to face in order to make sure to look at the *right* future."

Through Madame's earlier explanation of Alana's flight, I understood hers. I wish I could have answered her with an equally personal and strong statement, but it was too soon after the storm that had stirred us all up in the same bowl for me to try and sort out my feelings, especially when it came to right and wrong for the future.

"It's a little chilly, isn't it?" I said to ease the moment up a bit.

"I'm freezing, actually," replied Madame. "Let's get back in and pull out the dinner that has been prepared for us. It's early, but that'll give us some time to first enjoy the nice bottle of burgundy wine I picked up on the way back."

We had wine at twilight; dinner at dusk, right at the small kitchen table since the room was warmer than the rest of the house. For the very first time since I had met her two years earlier, Madame wore a subdued outfit—a gray wool sweater over black pants; no jewelry, no make up, no towering heels. She did not feel the need to change before dinner into one of her usual flamboyant ensembles or dashing dresses. Her cheeks and ears were slightly reddened by the warmth radiating out from the wood furnace and in from the wine. She now seemed relaxed and at peace.

This time, we did not speak of music, literature, or world politics. Instead, we spent several hours reminiscing fondly about the slightest details and events of my year-long stay at her estancia. We traded news of my teachers, with whom I had kept closely in touch, and I tried to tease out of her whether she had reeducated others after me. She just answered, "You were never an *other*," and changed the subject.

It was not even ten o'clock when the effects of the wine started dwindling away and reality started descending on a confused man, and—I wanted to believe—an equally confused woman. Madame sensed the return of reality as well, and called it a night on the pretense of a long day. We parted on the plan to have brunch in the nearest town the following morning. Not even an hour later, I heard a car engine rattle the night in front of the house before quickly fading away. I did not get up.

It just warmed me to know that of the few limits to Madame's courage, I was one.

Chapter 36

December 18, Year 4.

I stayed at the Spanish house for three weeks. Not as much because of slow healing as to have a chance to reflect. Just as the limb of a tree can only grow so long before branching out, I had come to a point where neither continuing on a straight line nor turning around were options in compliance with nature.

I spent my days reading, walking around the fallow land that surrounded the cottage, or listening to a French radio that transmitted from a town just across the border. The preparations for the referendum made the headlines every day. In contrast, I only heard a single and very succinct update on the story of the LSD contamination of pilgrims in Lourdes. Apparently, a mildly psychotic patient under monitoring by a local mental institution for years had rushed to confess spraying a solution of LSD onto the communion wafers as they sat at the back of the church, just before the service. Although the man had not been able to provide a single piece of evidence to support his claims, the police, "in agreement with the church," had elected to call the case closed. The church was most likely keen on avoiding the spread of a psychosis around the safety of its communion wafers and had probably applied pressure to the local authorities to sweep the affair under the carpet.

The hasty resolution of the case had kept me, as well as the sisters at the monastery, out of the loop altogether. That meant that Richard Harris was as clean and respectable as ever, and this, despite having killed a man since. Oddly enough, thoughts about these dramatic events seldom crossed my mind and when they did, I would gently nudge them aside. I was now too busy concentrating on the parts of my life I could change.

When it was too cold, I just sat on my bed and stared at the mountain range through the fogged windows. Interactions with my hostess were minimal. I had learned some Spanish during my Argentinean stint, but I never used it in her presence, or for that matter, in front of the old doctor who came every week to check on my healing progress and always left with a cheerful thumbs up.

When not reading, I reflected on the past. Three years earlier, I had vanished from my own life, without a word to my wife, leaving her with two daughters and a son in a house that had never been home to me. I had finally taken a leap out of that alien world because I felt like a runaway train that had for many years been bouncing violently on railroad switches to end up every time heading farther away from its own destiny.

My original drift away from my family had in great part been the result of my inability to influence its course. I had of my own accord surrendered the reins to Alana just two months after that ominous night in the tunnel. Instead of building a home with her, I had methodically stacked bricks. Instead of building a family with her, I had purchased premium quality school supplies for the kids. Instead of building a love with her, I had engineered a perfect fantasy world for her. I did not spend much time reflecting on the fact that the disconnect with my family had been grounded in a tragicomical misunderstanding of epic proportions. I preferred to believe that the incident that had occurred in the campus tunnel and my misguided interpretation of it had been an interchange of my destiny.

Only after severing myself from the husband and father, had I started—albeit through severe hardship—finding myself as a man. A wandering man, a hidden man, a man slapped around by mighty forces, but also an enduring man, a resourceful man, and, most of all, a man who could chart his own course and follow it, no matter the currents. Along a most intangible and jagged path, I had reconstructed, slowly and painfully, the one virtue that I had hastily trashed over a youth's fault: the ability to make decisions for myself and own up to their consequences. Ironically enough, maybe the very quality that could have made me a better husband and father.

Through my long, individual journey, I had not only restored the source of my own essence; I had also evolved from having no home to now having to choose between three homes.

On the other side of the Pyrénées Mountains stood my beloved home on a vineyard. I had treasured every minute in it over the past year, but now knew that it would never stand the challenge of the two others, simply because it was an empty home.

Across the Atlantic, on a southwest heading, stood an estancia as the home in which I had been reborn, and this, thanks to a flamboyant woman who had recreated me, all the way down to my faith, and had in the process ended up dipping not only her hand, but also a piece of her heart, into the cauldron.

Across the Atlantic, on a straight western heading, stood a suburban family home in which my childhood friend and our three children—one of whom I had finally embraced—might be hoping for the return of a father.

I dug into my books. I dug into my parents' teachings. I dug into my faith. They were all there for me, finally aligned. On December 18, late at night, eyes wide open in the obscurity of my bedroom, I reached a decision. The next morning, I asked my hostess to take me to the train station. I crossed the Pyrénées through a high pass. Once I reached my

home on the vineyard, I just grabbed a small backpack and threw in it my journal and a bottle of *my* wine; the one that had been created under my only season of leadership on the vineyard. I immediately grabbed another train to Paris, and once again, I wandered through a foreign space, but this time, without fear.

“A last minute ticket for a transatlantic flight will be expensive. Are you sure that’s what you want?” asked the counter attendant at Charles de Gaulle airport.

Richard Harris smiled one last time as he handed the woman his passport and credit card.

A day later, just before dusk, Richard Keiffer knocked at the door of his home.

Thank you for reading this far!

If the story resonated with you, I would be grateful if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or your preferred platform.

The Amazon page for this novel is at:

<https://www.amazon.com/Fierce-Fall-Three-Fugue-Trilogy/dp/150304923X>