

The image is a complex abstract composition of geometric shapes. It features a grid-like structure with various colored blocks: black, purple, pink, and orange. Overlaid on these are several large, stylized letters. A large 'C' is formed by a black circle with a pink center, and another 'C' is a solid pink circle. A large 'B' is formed by a purple circle with a black center, and another 'B' is a solid black circle with a pink center. A large 'M' is formed by a black triangle with a purple center, and another 'M' is a solid black triangle with a purple center. A large 'A' is formed by a pink triangle with a black center, and another 'A' is a solid pink triangle with a black center. The overall effect is a dense, layered visual field.

SERAPHIMA
BOGOMOLOVA

PUZZLED

Seraphima Nickolaevna Bogomolova

Puzzled

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=27432790

ISBN 9785448592881

Аннотация

A rendezvous in a Notting Hill café, a mystery of the digits 6-6-6, a snapshot taken at the Christmas reception, a stranger, looking strangely familiar, and a coincidental encounter on a snowy yacht – what is it – a number of unconnected coincidences or meaningful signs in the lives of the two seemingly different yet so similar young people?

Содержание

Prologue	6
Chapter One	7
Episode 1 – Acquaintance	7
Episode 2 – Nicolas	9
Episode 3 – What Girl?	11
Episode 4 – The Number of The Beast	13
Episode 5 – Cross My Heart!	16
Episode 6 – To Love	18
Episode 7 – An Old Friend	20
Episode 8 – Perplexed	23
Episode 9 – The Possible and The Impossible	25
Episode 10 – Déjà Vu	27
Chapter Two	29
Episode 11 – Santa Claus	29
Episode 12 – Classic	31
Episode 13 – A Snapshot	33
Episode 14 – The Magician	35
Episode 15 – My Dearest	37
Episode 16 – Hush!	39
Episode 17 – Cigar Case	41
Episode 18 – The Source of Wisdom	44
Episode 19 – Any Plans?	46
Episode 20 – Bye For Now	48

Chapter Three	50
Episode 21 – A Charming Stranger	50
Episode 22 – A Situation	52
Episode 23 – A Tail	54
Episode 24 – A Holiday Fling	57
Episode 25 – Obviously	59
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	61

Puzzled

Seraphima Nickolaevna Bogomolova

© Seraphima Nickolaevna Bogomolova, 2019

ISBN 978-5-4485-9288-1

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

Prologue

You know, I've made a wish: if we ever meet again, I'll tell you something. Something I meant to tell you, but I hadn't. I guess, I was afraid...

Chapter One

'There is a distance, a veil between us.'
– Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Ch. 6

Episode 1 – Acquaintance

Notting Hill, London, UK, 6 June

It is summer but the rain drizzles tirelessly, all day covering rooftops and pavements with its shimmering net.

I get out of the tube, open my umbrella and hurry off along the High Street. Reaching the entrance of the café, I stop and peer in – the place seems deserted. I push the door and walk in. Inside, small round tables line up along the walls. I choose one close to the bar counter. Placing my umbrella on the floor, I sit down, perching at the front of the chair.

I'm five minutes late. He couldn't have left already, could he? I take my raincoat off and look around – the cafe is not only bare of clients, but waiters are also nowhere to be seen. 'What a strange place', I wonder and sit down, this time, trying to take on more confident posture.

Some time passes.

Outside, the rain is still drizzling. I pull my smartphone out and put it on the table. Thoughts – one strangest than the other – start whirling in my head. I grab the menu and stare at it. Running my eyes over the list, I try to take my mind off him.

Out of the unseen depth of the cafe a waiter in a white t-shirt and shabby blue jeans appears.

‘Are you ready to order?’ he asks and stares at me.

Startled, I stare at him.

‘Not yet.’ I reply after a pause.

The waiter shrugs indifferently and disappears, leaving me alone again.

I put the menu down and look at the clock hanging above the bar. Almost an hour has passed since my arrival. ‘I must have mixed up with the dates’, I think and call his number. Something clicks and an automated message informs me: ‘The number is out of reach.’

Episode 2 – Nicolas

London, UK, 24 December

Outside, big fluffy snowflakes silently swirl in a magical dance. In the windows of an Edwardian house across the street a tall Christmas tree is visible. Hanging on its prickly paws are golden apples and walnuts, red bows and coloured nets with sweetmeats. Glittering in its glory, the tree twinkles merrily at me.

The church bells chime in the distance. I move away from the window. An aroma of pine tree and oranges wafting in the air, I throw a pleased glance at the Christmas tree, flickering in the dimness of my living room. A big shiny bauble on a lower branch catches my eye. The snowy Rockefeller Square¹ is skilfully depicted on it. I think of my friends scattered around the world. ‘What are they up to right now?’ I think and, taking my iPad, curl up on the sofa.

My inbox has new messages. I scan them quickly, mostly Christmas wishes but one email stands out. Intrigued, I click on the message. It opens up.

¹ Rockefeller Square is a complex of 19 commercial buildings covering 22 acres (89,000 m²) between 48th and 51st streets in New York City, United States. Built by the Rockefeller family, it is located in the centre of Midtown Manhattan, spanning the area between Fifth Avenue and Sixth Avenue.

The doorbell rings. I leap off the sofa and rush out into the hall.

The door opened, a frosty wind blows a handful of prickly snowflakes into my face. At the doorstep Nicolas stands, a Russian *ushanka-hat* on his head and a bottle of French wine in his hands.

‘Hey, you’re early.’ I say.

‘Right on time, as agreed, at seven.’ he replies, presenting me with the bottle.

‘Thanks. I must have been in my dreams then.’

‘Yeah, you must have been. The happy don’t keep account of time, as one of your Russian classics said once.’

‘Do you mean Alexander Griboyedov²?’

‘Yes,’ Nicolas says, pulling his hat off, and walks in, ‘that phrase is the only legacy left to me by my ex, a devotee of Russian classics.’

‘And the hat?’ I ask with a smile.

‘And the hat too ...’

I leave him in the hall and head to the kitchen.

² Alexander Sergeyeovich Griboyedov (January 15, 1795 – February 11, 1829) – a Russian diplomat, playwright, poet, and composer.

Episode 3 – What Girl?

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

Before me, the sea stretches out into the horizon. Above it, the dark purple clouds hang low in the sky. I hear gusts of wind, crashing against the French windows of my room. With every gust the glass trembles and sweats down glistening droplets of rain.

I sit at the desk, cocooned by the soft glow of the candle standing by my laptop. The sound of rushed footsteps and lifted voices is coming from downstairs. Maman is throwing a big reception tonight: her annual Christmas dinner. If it were for me I wouldn't attend it. I hate 'talking' to girls of her friends, pretending to be interested in nonsense they utter at me.

Directing my thoughts towards more positive subject, I Google the name, which by now has become so dear to me, and scroll through the links. A site that seems interesting catches my eye. I click on it and start reading an article she has written.

The door opens and in marches maman.

'Mum, why on earth you can never knock?' I cry out, deleting the page from the laptop screen.

'What an annoying habit to sit in darkness.' she says and turns the light on.

I squint.

‘Chéri³, why are you sitting at your desk, not ready? The guests will be arriving in half an hour and, apparently, you haven’t been to shower yet!’

‘I can’t care less for your ludicrous guests.’ I say.

‘These, as you call them, ludicrous guests are the most influential families of Monaco. At your age, I was already engaged and you don’t even have a decent girl!’

‘What girl?’ I reply.

‘Don’t play stupid. You know what I mean!’

‘All-right. But what has it got to do with anything?’ I ask, stand up and turn the light down.

‘It has to do with everything, because all you do is stare into your stupid computer and listen to your stupid music.’ she cries out, her diamonds fiercely sparkling in the candlelight.

A furiously sparkling Christmas tree ... I turn away, trying not to burst into laughter.

‘Luke, you don’t listen to me at all!’

³ Chéri (French) – dear, darling.

Episode 4 – The Number of The Beast

London, UK, 24 December

‘Shall I keep my shoes on?’ Nicolas shouts to me from the hall.

‘As you wish,’ I shout back, ‘but if you decide to take them off, I have some slippers you can choose from ...’

‘Do you need any help?’ he asks, walking into the kitchen.

‘No, thanks, it’s fine. Mum’s cook took care of everything this afternoon. She said just to heat it up whenever we wish.’ I reply.

‘I’ve got a little present for you.’ Nicolas hands me a shiny red package, tied up with a golden ribbon.

‘Thank you, I’ve something for you too.’ I say and take the present to the living room, putting it under the Christmas tree.

Coming back, I find Nicolas sitting at the bar-table, studying his reflection in the polished pans, hanging above his head.

I peek inside the oven. The roasted duck is warming up nicely. I take out plates and start arranging steamed vegetables and boiled potatoes on them.

‘Do you know anything about The Number of The Beast?’ I ask Nicolas, finishing with the vegetables and moving to French cheeses.

‘What do you need that for? Are you into occultism now?’

‘No, I’m not, just being curious. I heard about it once from an acquaintance of mine.’

‘I see,’ Nicolas nods, ‘well, as far as I know, ‘The Number of The Beast’ has got something to do with the name of the Antichrist that corresponds to a certain numerical value. The ‘mark’ can be identified by either the beast’s name, or the numerical of his name. For example, Friedrich von Hezel believed that Napoleon Bonaparte⁴ was such a ‘beast’.

‘Are you sure?’ I ask.

‘Sure, about what?’ he looks up at me.

‘Well, you know, about the ‘beast’ thing ...’

‘Oh, it isn’t I it is gematria⁵. But, personally, I’m more inclined towards an idealist view.’ Nicolas replies.

‘And what that would be?’

‘And that would be more of a symbolic, figurative, meaning. The common suggestion is that seven is a number of completeness and is associated with divine and six is a number of incompleteness. In other words, the number of the beast can represent an individual’s incomplete or immature spiritual state.’

‘What about the value itself?’ I ask.

‘What about it?’

‘Well, what’s the number that represents the numerical value

⁴ Napoleon Bonaparte – born Napoleone di Buonaparte, (15 August 1769 – 5 May 1821) was a French military and political leader who rose to prominence during the latter stages of the French Revolution and its associated wars.

⁵ Gematria – an Assyro-Babylonian system of [numerology](#) later adopted by Jews that assigns numerical value to a word or phrase in the belief that words or phrases with identical numerical values bear some relation to each other or bear some relation to the number itself as it may apply to a person’s age, the calendar year, or the like.

of the 'beast'?

'The triple 6.' he replies.

'Do you mean 6-6-6?'

'Yes.' he nods.

Episode 5 – Cross My Heart!

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The argument with maman leaves me no time for shower. I quickly brush my teeth and gel my hair, trying to style my waves into something that can resemble a gentleman's look. But instead, make it worse: the hair becomes sticky and greasy. I curse and pull on my tux, the starched collar of my shirt biting beastly into my neck. Grabbing the white bow, I fix it as I run down the stairs.

In the hall, lit by the crystal chandelier, maman, the most charming smile attached to her rouged lips, greets arriving guests. I try to slip by her unnoticed, but fail.

'Luke, darling,' she catches me halfway, 'would you please say hello to Baron Von Witte. He hasn't had the pleasure of seeing you recently.'

Reluctantly, I approach a group of newly arrived guests. Having shaken hands with the Baron, I plan on a quick escape, but maman grabs me by the arm and pulls me aside.

'What's wrong with you?' she whispers, glancing at my hair.

'Nothing, unlike with some of your honourable guests.' I reply, nodding in a direction of one of the Baron's daughter.

'Please, behave!'

'Yes, sure.'

She gives me a disapproving stare.

‘Mum, honestly. Cross my heart!’ I say.

‘Stop this nonsense at once, will you!’

‘Mum, relax, it’s just a ...’ I begin, but at this moment another group of guests arrive and she rushes towards them, leaving me alone.

I breathe a sigh of relief, straighten my bow and head to the reception room, open and decorated for the tonight’s festivity. Flames glaring on guests’ faces, the fire crackles merrily in a huge fireplace. Beside it, a tall Christmas tree is erected. The colourful baubles shine on its fluffy paws. A scent of expensive perfumes mixed with the smell of cigars and pine tree wafts in the air.

I grab two glasses of champagne from a waiter’s tray and gulp them down. Immediately feeling better, I throw a curious look around the room, but find little of interest: all the same faces, nothing of stimulating or inspiring nature.

‘Excuse me.’ I hear somebody’s mutter behind me.

I turn around meeting the eyes of a skinny girl, wearing some ridiculous haute couture dress.

‘Yes?’ I say.

‘Would you mind if I take a picture of you?’ she utters.

‘No, I wouldn’t.’ I lie.

Episode 6 – To Love

London, UK, 24 December

I put Christmas dishes out on the table, place snowy starched napkins by our plates and light up candles.

We sit down. Nicolas takes a bottle of red wine in his hands.

‘Why are you alone this Christmas?’ he asks, inserting an opener into the cork.

‘I’m not alone, I’m with you.’

Nicolas looks up at me.

‘Are you flirting with me?’

‘No, just poking fun at you. But seriously, I just thought that, for a change, I could spend Christmas here in London.’ I say.

‘What about New Year’s Eve? Set for Russia?’ he asks.

‘Missed again. French Riviera.’

‘Didn’t know you had friends there.’ he says, his eyebrows arching in surprise.

‘I don’t. At least, no one I can call that really. Just couple of people I’m acquainted with.’

Abruptly, he pulls the cork out and spills some wine on his jeans. I throw my napkin to him. He catches it and starts vigorously rubbing the stain, only making it worse.

‘Here,’ I say, pushing salt to him, ‘spice it up, it should work better.’

'I doubt it.' Nicolas says gloomily.

'Oh, really?' I smile, 'any evidence to proof otherwise?'

He sends me a glaring look and throws my napkin back at me.

'Any good toasts in store?' he asks, pouring the wine into our glasses.

I think for a second then say: 'Let's drink to sparkles in the eyes, to soft vibrations of the heart, to gentle kisses in the moonlight, to tight embraces of the loved ones. In other words, to love, the one that is heavenly, but true and real.

'Beautifully said, I have nothing to add'.

We raise our glasses and bring them together. Clinking, they meet in a crystal kiss.

Episode 7 – An Old Friend

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The room is now filled up, an invitation to dinner is announced. The red dots of their cigars flickering and the diamonds sparkling, laughing and chatting, maman's invitees start flowing into the dining room.

I find my place and sit down. Thanks God, this year the 'honour' of being seated next to the Von Witter daughters has been passed to somebody else. I glance to my right, where an elderly gentleman, cigar in his mouth, sits. I look discreetly at his card. It says: 'Monsieur Moreau'.

The gentleman smiles and gives me a slight nod.

The chair on my left is unoccupied. I hope that it'll stay this way for the rest of the dinner, but out of curiosity check the name of the missing guest on the card. It reads: 'Mademoiselle Du Monde'.

'May I introduce myself?' I hear the elderly gentleman on my right addressing me. Not waiting for my reply, he extends his hand to me and adds: 'Jacques Moreau.'

'Nice to meet you, Monsieur Moreau.' I reply, taking his hand. He gives me a firm handshake.

'And you must be Luke Edward Allen, the son of our marvellous hostess.' he says.

‘That is right. But how do you know?’ I ask, surprised.

‘Well, firstly, your name’s written on your card, and secondly, you’re an exact copy of your mother, whom I’ve had the great pleasure of knowing for years.’

‘How bizarre ... She’s never told me about you.’ I mutter.

‘Nothing is bizarre about it, mon ami⁶. There are certain things that parents prefer to keep to themselves.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like the fact of our friendship.’ he replies.

‘But this can be regarded as a lie!’ I cry out.

‘Yes, perhaps it can be. But permit me to note that your mother, like you or anyone else, is entitled to her own private life.’

‘Oh yes, but why then, entitled as she is, she nonetheless has seated you and me together?’ I say, annoyed.

‘Well, perhaps, because she wanted two of us to finally meet each other.’ he replies and takes a deep draw on his cigar.

Bottles in hands, waiters begin their rounds, pouring red and white wine. The sound of excited chatter, laughter and clinking of crystal glasses flows across the room.

‘Mon ami,’ says Monsieur Moreau, raising his glass, ‘may I suggest a toast?’

‘Sure.’ I nod.

‘Let’s drink to the essence of all essences without which our life would lack true meaning.’

⁶ Mon ami (French) – my friend.

‘And what would that very essence of all essences be?’
I enquire.

‘And that, my dear boy, would be love.’

Episode 8 – Perplexed

London, UK, 24 December

Savouring another piece of pudding, I think how lucky I am. If it were not for Nicolas, I'd sit here all alone, stuffing myself with the Mum's cook culinary work of art.

I hear the deep resonating sounds of the church clock striking midnight.

'It's late. Fancy staying over?' I say to Nicolas, stretched out on the sofa before the fireplace.

He nods.

I make his bed in a guest room, hand him a towel and, wishing him goodnight, go back to the living room. Blowing candles off, I come to the window and look out. The Edwardian house is now enveloped in darkness. The inhabitants must have gone to bed already. In the dimness of the room, broken by the glinting of the Christmas lights, I peer out into the night and think of him again.

Months have passed since our 'date', but I'm still perplexed in regard to why he stood me up. After all, it was he who had arranged the rendezvous.

The answer must be dead simple, staring me in the eye. But with so much time spent trying to figure it out, I still don't see it.

After the 'date', he wrote a rather strange email to me, mentioning 'The Number of The Beast', and then disappeared

into nowhere as quickly as he appeared from somewhere. What does this number have to do with our date anyway? Suppose, it refers to some biblical apocalyptic beast, suppose, it even identifies the Antichrist, and what?

Anyway, why does it still bother me so much?

The church clock strikes the hour. The midnight mass over, devoted parishioners are flocking out of the church onto the street.

I watch snowflakes dance in the dim light of street-lamps for a little while then come to my Christmas tree. Taking the present Nicolas has brought me, I look at it, tempting myself. 'I could open it right now', I think. The Christmas Day has already arrived. But then I change my mind. What am I? A kid? Surely, I can wait till breakfast. I put the present back under the tree and walk out of the room.

Episode 9 – The Possible and The Impossible

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

The dinner is in full swing now, but the place of ‘Mademoiselle Du Monde’ remains unoccupied.

An odd thought flashes across my mind: ‘What if we are somehow connected?’ I glance at her chair again. But what is there to be connected to? The chair? Or the black card with her name embossed in gold? Besides, I’ve never seen her in my life and most likely will never see her in the future. And yet, her absence seems to hold some power over me.

I must have drunk too much. Or it must have been the toast about love that Monsieur Moreau intrigued me with. Either way, I keep on thinking of possible ‘what if’ scenarios.

‘My dear Luke, you appear to be tormented by something.’ I hear Monsieur Moreau addressing me.

‘No, why?’ I reply, trying to focus on my dessert, a crème brûlée⁷ that I can’t stand.

‘Forgive me, but I couldn’t help but notice that while talking to me you kept throwing rather interested glances at the chair on

⁷ Crème brûlée, also known as burnt cream, crema catalana, or Trinity cream, is a dessert consisting of a rich custard base topped with a contrasting layer of hard caramel.

your left.’

My cheeks turn red.

‘I didn’t know you could read people’s mind.’ I say.

‘I can’t, but it is written all over your face.’

‘Really?’ intrigued, I look up at him.

He meets my eyes and, drawing deeply on his cigar, lets the smoke out through his nostrils.

‘Yes, really.’ he nods.

Putting his cigar aside, Monsieur Moreau takes up his coffee cup and raises it to his lips. A diamond of his cufflink flickers knowingly at me.

We sit in silence for a short while. Monsieur Moreau finishes his coffee then says: ‘If I were you, I’d take the card and would find out as much as possible about this mysterious guest... In fact, I’d find everything possible and even the impossible about her.’

With these words he stands up and stretches his hand out to me. Jumping to my feet, I give it a shake, then grab the card and slip it into the pocket of my trousers.

Episode 10 – Déjà Vu

Monte Carlo, France, 24 December

It is midnight. Finally, maman's guests start leaving. The dining room deserted, the only signs of their presence left are the unfinished wine in crystal glasses, heaps of creased napkins, and remnants of melted candles on the tables.

I go up to my room. The storm has calmed down, but the droplets of rain haven't dried out on the windows yet. I take off my tux, untie the bow and undo the collar of the shirt, finally freeing my neck from its starched clutch.

Lying down on the bed, I take the card out and study the name written on it. 'Where could I have possibly heard it before?' I think. But no matter how much I try, I don't seem to be able to recall anything of relevant nature. Yet, I somehow feel that I know the woman whose name is embossed in gold on the card. Though, I don't think I've ever met anyone called Mademoiselle Du Monde, at least not at the dinners, suppers or balls that have been organised by maman. And even outside these 'festivities' I don't remember meeting such a person. Unless, without me having realised it, our life paths happened to cross somehow.

I, of course, can enquire about it of maman. But chances are, she will misinterpret my intent. I'd better deal with it myself, I decide.

Hearing the knock on the door, I slip the card back into my pocket. The door opens a crack and in peers maman.

‘Chéri, are you asleep?’ she asks.

‘Not yet.’

She enters the room.

‘You’ve been such a darling tonight.’ she says.

I give her a grin.

‘You know, Monsieur Moreau is quite taken with you!’

‘Likewise. By the way, why haven’t you introduced him to me before?’ I ask.

‘Oh, there hasn’t ever been a right moment. He travels a lot, you know, and doesn’t visit Monaco often ...’

‘Ah, I see.’ I mutter, not looking at her.

She comes to my bed and gives me a kiss on the forehead.

‘Good-night, sweetheart.’

‘Good-night, Mum.’

She leaves the room. I turn the light down and, staring into the darkness for a while, listen to the silence of the house, pondering over the name of the stranger who seems so familiar, then pull the blanket over my head and fall asleep.

Chapter Two

It's just a drop in the ocean

A change in the weather

I was praying that you and I might end up together.'

– Ron Pope, A Drop in The Ocean

Episode 11 – Santa Claus

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

The curtains undrawn, the bright sunlight is flooding into my room. Stretching, I throw the blanket on to the floor and spring off the bed. In the bathroom, my sleepy face, the hair's sticky and dishevelled, glances back at me from the mirror. I turn away and, pulling my clothes off, step under the shower.

In the dining room, maman, as fresh as daisy, sits at the head of a large walnut table, polished to a gleaming shine. On her right, Monsieur Moreau is seated. It seems he has never left the house.

'Good morning, darling,' maman greets me, a wide smile attached to her lips.

'Good morning,' I reply and seat myself opposite Monsieur Moreau.

My appearance seems to have interrupted their somewhat

intimate conversation. Shunning their gazes, I pour myself some coffee and start on my bacon and eggs breakfast.

‘Did you sleep well?’ maman breaks the silence.

‘Quite well, merci.’ I answer, not looking at her.

‘Chéri, I’ve invited Monsieur Moreau to spend Christmas with us. Hope you don’t mind.’

‘No, not at all, on the contrary ... It’ll break our usual routine.’

‘Luke, dear, what on earth do you mean by that?’ she cries out.

‘I think Monsieur Luke might have meant that guests bring an element of a surprise into family holidays, making them more delightful.’ Monsieur Moreau joins in.

I nod in agreement.

The rest of breakfast passes in a solemn silence. Finished, we move into the sitting room where a glitzy pyramid of gifts towers under the fluffy Christmas tree, a miniature version of the one in the reception room.

Maman sits down on the sofa, her legs crossed. I flop into an armchair. Monsieur Moreau, cigar in mouth, comes and stands by the fireplace.

‘My dear Rosalinda,’ he addresses maman, ‘may I take on a role of Santa Claus in this house today?’

‘But of course! I’d be delighted. Usually, I’m the one who have to play this role.’ she replies with a laugh.

‘Very well,’ he says, ‘then I’d like to start with Monsieur Luke Edward Allen.’

Episode 12 – Classic

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

Approaching the Christmas tree, Monsieur Moreau reaches out behind it and draws out a box, in height levelling his chest. His arms wrapped around it, he comes over to my armchair and places the box before me.

‘Here, my dear friend,’ he says, ‘I hope this gift will mark the beginning of your journey in the fascinating world of music.’

Intrigued, I examine the box, then rip the golden wrapping paper off it and open it. Inside, I find a Fender electric guitar, brand new, still smelling of fresh lacquer – a real classic. Carefully, I pull it out and, laying it on my lap, stroke it gently.

‘Thank you so much, Monsieur Moreau,’ I say full of delight. ‘I’ve always wanted to have one just like that ...’

He smiles and goes back to the Christmas tree.

Soon, the pyramid of now-opened presents is transferred onto the sofa and the Persian carpet in front of the fireplace becomes littered with colourful sparkling bits of wrapping paper.

‘And now, time for a glass of cherry.’ maman announces and gets up.

She walks out of the room, leaving me tête – à – tête with Monsieur Moreau. I take the opportunity and venture out with a question: ‘Monsieur Moreau, why are you being so kind to me?’

‘Well, mon ami,’ he replies, ‘firstly, because you’re the son of Rosalinda, and secondly, I find a great pleasure in pleasing others, if I may say so.’

‘Are you saying that you’ve given me this guitar purely for the pleasure of pleasing my Mum?’ I ask.

‘No, of course not, I was trying to say that ... ’ he begins, but falls silent, as maman walks in, followed by a maid, carrying a tray with three cherry glasses on it.

We each pick a glass, filled with golden brown liquor.

‘Merry Christmas!’ maman intones, raising her glass.

‘Merry Christmas!’ we echo in unison.

Episode 13 – A Snapshot

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I drink up my cherry, take the guitar and leave, releasing Monsieur Moreau and maman from my presence.

Back in my room, I lean the precious instrument against the wall and open my laptop. Scanning new messages, I look for her reply. Not seeing it, I look over the messages again, this time, going through them one by one, but still no luck. Just to be sure, I also check my spam box, nothing there either.

I begin to jump aimlessly from one networking site to another. Landing on my Facebook page, I pause and scribble a sentence about the best Christmas present ever: my Fender guitar. ‘I’ll post a snapshot of it later’, I think, reading comments and updates of my Facebook ‘friends’. I’m about to leave the page when a photograph tagged with my name catches my eye.

‘What the heck?’ I stare at it in disbelief.

The photograph pictures me locked in an embrace with that same skinny girl, who begged me for a mobile snapshot at yesterday’s dinner.

The image must have been photoshopped ... Below it, her comment is attached. ‘My beau Luke. Together forever’, I read and break out in a cold sweat.

Is she out of her mind?

I attempt to raid her Facebook profile, but it is locked for ‘non-friends’. Her name doesn’t look familiar, so I Google it. The girl turns out to be a ‘bikini model’, whose photos occasionally end up on the covers of FHM and other mags of that ilk.

What on earth possessed maman to invite her to the Christmas reception? And I? What was I thinking when I let this ‘bikini girl’ take a picture of me?

I groan and drop my head into my hands, tears welling up in my eyes. Grabbing my jacket, I dash out of the room and down the stairs.

The library stands open, the voices of maman and Monsieur Moreau wafting out of it. Maman’s milky highland terrier rolls out of the room, rushing towards me, his tail wiggling.

‘Mum, I’ll take Domino for a walk.’ I shout and sprint out the house, slamming the door behind me.

Episode 14 – The Magician

London, UK, 25 December

I wake up, tiptoe to the window and peer out. The frosty city, painted white, greets my sight. The snow has stopped. The air is clear and still. It seems the ‘Father Frost’⁸ has done his job and retired for the day. I throw a glance at the Edwardian house, checking for my friendly tree in its windows. It is there, flickering ever enthusiastically at me.

After breakfast, I remind Nicolas it is time to open our gifts. Not that there are awfully many, just two, his and mine. My Mum never got used to celebrating Christmas and true to her Soviet past still prefers to exchange presents on the New Year’s Eve instead of Christmas Day.

‘Who will be the Father Frost?’ I ask.

‘I suppose, I ought to gentlemanly pass this role to you.’ Nicolas replies.

I come to the Christmas tree, pick up a box from the floor and hand it to Nicolas.

‘Here is one for you. You know, from the Father Frost,’ I wink,

⁸ Father Frost (Ded Moroz in Russian) – is a Slavic fictional character similar to that of Father Christmas. The literal translation is “Old Man Frost,” often translated as “Grandfather Frost.” Ded Moroz brings presents to children and often delivers them in person on New Year’s Eve.

'I had a teeny-weeny peek inside and hope you will like it ...'

He takes his present and, carefully unwrapping it, gets out a deck of Renaissance Tarocchi cards. His face lights up. I take it as a sign of him liking my present. Fanning the deck on the table, Nicolas fishes out a card and proclaims: 'And here's your Arcana for the next year! Or should I say a divinatory significance?'

He turns the face of the card to me. It depicts the Magician in a long red robe, a wand raised towards the heaven in his right hand, the infinity symbol over his head, and an ouroboros⁹ belt on his waist. The figure stands among a garden of flowers. On the table in front of the Magician laid out a Cup, a Coin, and a Sword.

'So, what does this all mean, then?' I ask with a smile.

Nicolas turns the face of the card back to him and studies it thoughtfully for a little while.

'Well, it means that there's a certain cyclicity in the manifestation and cultivation of your desires. Beware! You have a tendency of overdoing on self-reflexivity.'

'Really?' I say with a laugh and get my present from under the Christmas tree. Last night, when examining it, I had already guessed what it was. The shape of the present hinted at a book.

I rip the wrapping paper off it and get out a volume in a dark-green velvety cover. Its title reads: 'The History of Metaphysics and The Life's Great Mysteries.'

⁹ Ouroboros – a tail-devouring snake, an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon eating its own tale.

Episode 15 – My Dearest

London, UK, 25 December

‘What a wonderful present, thank you so much!’ I say, flipping through the book, ‘I love books and this one seems to be a special one!’

‘Oh yes, it looked like it,’ he nods, ‘I saw it in one of the antique shops and thought you might like it ...’

He collects his Tarocchi cards from the table and stands up.

‘I must go.’

I take him to the hall and kiss him good-bye. His bristled cheek gives me a tickle. He puts on his Russian ushanka-hat and starts out, slowly walking away. A ribbon of fresh footprints trails behind him in the snow.

‘Merry Christmas!’ I shout after him.

Turning around, Nicolas waves and shouts back: ‘Merry Christmas!’

I close the door and stand a little while in the hall then head to the dining room and start clearing the table. As I’m arranging plates in the dishwasher I think of what Nicolas half-jokingly has predicted for me. What did he say? ‘Overdoing on self-reflexivity?’

I suddenly remember that I haven’t had a chance to read the email that caught my attention before the arrival of Nicolas

yesterday.

I take my iPad. At once, the screen lights up.

The message is dated the 24th of December. I begin to read it but stop and double-check the name at the end of the letter, then the email address that it's been sent from. Apparently, it's no hallucination.

It's him.

But why now, why after months of silence he suddenly decides to reconnect with me?

I read his letter again but it doesn't become any clearer.

My dearest, been thinking of you again. Yours L.E.A.

What on earth does he mean by 'been thinking of you again'? How could he have been thinking of me again, if we haven't been in touch for months? And, for that matter, have never seen each other either.

Episode 16 – Hush!

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I walk slowly along the street. Before me, Domino treads, stopping occasionally to examine lamp-posts. The sun shines brightly, caressing my face, but my thoughts are far from springy.

What am I to do now? The stupid photo must have been hanging on the Facebook since yesterday. By now, the whole of Côte d'Azur knows 'the news'. Though this isn't what worries me most. There is another thought that drills through my mind: what if she comes across the bogus image? If she does, she might misinterpret it. Perhaps, she's already seen it and thought of me as a complete idiot and that is why she hasn't responded to my email yet.

I reach the beach. Domino begins to jump excitedly around me. Seeing no reaction, he growls and tugs me by the jeans towards the edge of the water. Reluctant, but infatuated by his enthusiasm, I give in.

The sea is calm, but the shore is littered with washed out driftwood, sticks, fancifully knotted weeds, and even somebody's blue snicker. I pick up a small stick and throw it into the water. Plunging into the sea, Domino dashes after it. Playing, we spend some time on the beach.

On returning home, I feel much better. Yet still not in the

mood to talk to anyone, I plan on quickly sneaking back into my room. But as soon as we enter the hall, Domino explodes with loud barking.

‘Hush! You, stupid creature!’ I say, but he doesn’t stop.

Monsieur Moreau appears in the doorway of the library.

‘Have you had a good walk?’ he asks.

‘Yes, I have.’ I reply, not looking at him.

‘Monsieur Luke, is everything all-right?’

His question catches me halfway to the stairs. Surprised by his shrewdness, I freeze for a second. Seizing the moment, Monsieur Moreau takes me by the arm and gently leads me into the library.

‘Come, mon ami, let’s have some coffee and a good chat ...’ he says.

Episode 17 – Cigar Case

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

We walk in. I flop onto the sofa. Monsieur Moreau sits down next to me. Crossing his legs, he turns to me and studies me for a little while. I shift uncomfortably but say nothing. Monsieur Moreau reaches into his pocket, gets a cigar case out and hands it to me:

‘Merci, I don’t smoke.’ I say, throwing a curious glance at the case.

‘I’m afraid, you’ve misunderstood me,’ he replies, smiling, ‘I’m not trying to turn you into an avid smoker, I’m offering you to experience life sensations.’

He takes my hand and puts his cigar case in it.

‘Really? And how would you suggest me do that?’ I ask, feeling the cold metal against my skin.

‘How else but by senses, mon cher ami¹⁰!’ he replies.

‘Yes, but I don’t understand. How can I experience a sensation of smoking a cigar merely by holding your cigar case in my hand?’ I ask, bewildered.

‘And who’s told you there were cigars in it?’

‘But, this is a cigar case, isn’t it?’ I say.

‘Yes, it is.’ he nods.

¹⁰ mon cher amie (French) – my dear friend

‘So, then it must contain cigars.’ I insist.

‘Well, that’s what you think, but this alone doesn’t prove it actually does.’

‘But, if there are no cigars in it why then have you given it to me?’

‘For you to experience life sensations.’ Monsieur Moreau replies.

‘But ... ’ I say and look down at the cigar case in my hands. It has four cigar channels, engraved with floral scrolls. I touch them, feeling their curviness under my fingers. The case is in a pristine condition, no rubbing or scratches on it. The cartouche has a monogram, two intertwined letters: ‘J & M’. They could very well stand for Jim Morrison¹¹. But I don’t think he smoked cigars, though. Or maybe he did?

I open the case. The strong scent of tobacco hits my nostrils, but the four cigar channels are empty. Inhaling the tobacco aroma emanating from the cigar case, I admire it for a few more seconds, pondering over life sensations that Monsieur Moreau mentioned to me, then close it and hand the case back to him.

‘You know, ’ he tells me, sliding it into the pocket of his tweed jacket, ‘when I was your age I also jumped to hasty conclusions and often ended up being tricked.’

‘Especially, in those cases that concerned women.’ he adds after a pause.

¹¹ Jim Morrison – an American singer, songwriter and poet best remembered as the lead singer of The Doors.

I blush.

Episode 18 – The Source of Wisdom

London, UK, 25 December

Not quite knowing what to make of his letter, I stare at the screen, then re-read his message one more time and start on my reply. I don't wish my message to be formal, but, at the same time, try to avoid sounding as if all I have been doing is eagerly awaiting him to reconnect.

Finishing, I read through my letter and satisfied, press 'send'. An image of a dove, slashing through the virtual space, taking my message to him, comes to my mind.

Though I have never met my mysterious 'fan', I have a feeling I've known him for centuries, as if he has come to me from my past life. The life I don't have a recollection of but nonetheless have a distinct memory of a person who once was part of it.

I put my iPad aside and pick up the book on great mysteries of life. Here we go, a source of wisdom that seems to have solutions to the perplexities bothering minds of living creatures. I wish I had it some months ago. Then, perhaps, I would have already found the answers to my questions.

I run my fingers across the dark-green cover. The short thick pile of its velvet tingles my fingertips. I open the book and leaf through pages, pausing on illustrations depicting some mysterious symbols, magicians, and castles. The answers to my

questions don't seem to jump at me, at least not for the moment. I press the book against my chest and close my eyes.

A town spreads out before me. The sun shines brightly upon it. A light scent of lilies of the valley wafts in the warm spring like air. I find myself walking along one of the town's streets. Approaching an antique bookshop, I stop and look at the window display. A huge book in the velvety cover, lying there, catches my eye. Intrigued, I study it. Under my gaze the book comes alive and opens up. Its pages, at first blank, start filling with lines of text. Attempting to read it, I press hard against the shop window and the next moment I find myself standing on one of the book's pages, huge neon letters pulsating under my feet. I try to make words out of them but the pulsating letters cascade downwards, flowing into the book.

I hear a loud chime. The letters crumble and disappear. Tearing hundreds of pages, I fall into the bottomless depth of the ancient manuscript and wake up.

The sitting room is dark except the twinkling lights of the Christmas tree. In the distance, the sound of chiming can still be heard. I realise it must be the church clock striking the hour. I count the chimes. Midnight!

Leaping off the sofa, I dash into my room. My plane to Nice leaves early in the morning and I haven't packed yet.

Episode 19 – Any Plans?

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I grab the coffee pot and start pouring coffee into our cups.

‘I hope you will forgive an old man’s curiosity, mon ami, but ... ’ says Monsieur Moreau.

My hand betrays me and I spill some coffee onto the tray. The brown substance spreads out and forms a stain, resembling a heart. Monsieur Moreau takes the coffee pot from me, dries the stain out with his napkin, then hands me a cup of coffee and says, ‘Do you have any plans for the New Year’s Eve?’

‘Nothing of definite nature ... ’ I reply.

‘I hope you don’t mean that you wish to spend it all by yourself?’

‘No, of course not,’ I mutter, ‘I’d like to spend it in a company that’s stimulating in all senses.’

‘Of course,’ he nods, ‘and such a stimulating company would be your girl-friend, I assume.’

‘Well ... I’d have been delighted ... ’

‘Pardon me, Monsieur Luke, but why do you say, ‘would have been’? Has she got some other plans for the New Year’s Eve?’

‘No, she hasn’t. The thing is she doesn’t exist ... ’ I murmur.

A short silence falls between us. I stare into my coffee cup. An antique clock ticks.

Monsieur Moreau gives my shoulder a light squeeze. I feel a sudden pang of sadness. Stay his hand a little longer on my shoulder I would have burst into crying before him: the only person who has ever taken an interest in my void of any private life existence.

‘Well, that’s quite all right, mon ami,’ he says. ‘it’s merely a matter of time. Such a handsome man like yourself won’t be left without a girl for long.’

‘You see ... ’ I begin but fall silent, scared of my own daring. ‘Yes?’

‘Nothing, I’ll tell you later.’ I reply, getting up.

In the hall, Domino breaks into loud barking. Maman must have just returned from her visits.

Episode 20 – Bye For Now

Monte Carlo, France, 25 December

I slip past maman and, taking the stairs two at a time, go up to my room.

‘Chéri, the dinner is served at seven tonight, not eight.’ she cries after me.

‘Yes, fine by me!’ I shout back and close the door behind me.

Coming to the window, I swing it open and let the cool evening air in. At the horizon the sea and the sky have become one in a scarlet kiss. Struck by the beauty of the moment, I stand by the window, admiring the sunset.

The dusk falls, enveloping the room in soft darkness. I slip my hand into the pocket. My fingers meet a pack of cigarettes and a box of matches.

I wasn’t quite honest with Monsieur Moreau, when I said I didn’t smoke. Well, technically I don’t, but I’m fascinated by the elegance he does it with. So, I’ve decided to practice on cigarettes and then move to cigars. If I manage it, I could make an impression in a club. Though, I’m not sure whom I want to impress there, certainly not those annoying the Von Witter daughters or others of the same ilk. I just wish ... Oh, well, never mind.

Taking the matches out, I light up a candle on my desk, then

take my laptop and flop onto the bed.

As usual, my inbox's full of spam. I have to change the filter settings, I think as I check through new messages. Suddenly, amidst advertising and spamming emails I see Her reply. My heart jumps. I bring the cursor over and freeze.

A breath of sea air comes in through the open window and lightly touches my forehead. I draw in and click on the link. Her letter opens up. It is short, just a few lines.

Dear L.E.A., thank you for your email. Hope to meet you soon, after my trip to Nice. Happy New Year! Bye for now, Lina.

Chapter Three

*'Maybe, I don't cry but it hurts
Maybe, I won't say but I feel
Maybe, I don't show but I care.'*
– Vitor Mota

Episode 21 – A Charming Stranger

Nice, France, 27 December

The window of my hotel room is wide open, letting a light sea breeze in.

I stand over my suitcase and, bewildered, stare at its contents. Here we go, a beaming example of hasty packing, piles of evening dresses and nothing decent for every day, just a pair of jeans and a sweater. Uttering a sigh, I pull them on and go downstairs. In a modestly appointed room overlooking the sea continental breakfast is being served.

I sit down, order a cappuccino and look around. My eyes single out a young Arab with a plate of croissants on his table. Picking his croissants, he spreads lumps of marmalade over them and sends the croissants into his mouth. His eyes half-closed, he chews on them, slowly and thoughtfully.

Trying not to stare at him, I focus on my New Year's Eve plans or rather on the absence of such. The idea of going to Nice came to me just a few days ago. Considering its spontaneous nature, I have really had no time to check on the plans of my few French acquaintances and, to be honest, have little inclination of doing so. I somehow feel my uninvited spontaneity won't be appreciated.

Finished with his croissants, the Arab gets up and walks to the exit. Leaving the room, he throws a hungry look at my table, perhaps in search of something else of edible nature. You see, the French, like their breakfasts, always leave you with a slight cramp of dissatisfaction – delicious, yet not enough. I drink up my cappuccino and decide on a morning walk.

Throwing the coat on, I grab my mobile and get out. Outside, the sun shines brightly, sending merry sparks across azure waters of the sea.

I cross the street, go down the embankment a few steps and find myself right on the beach. It's still early, it seems. There aren't many people around, just some dog owners, walking out their fluffy friends.

Inspired by the moment, I take my mobile out, frame the view and take a picture. The phone clicks and captures a local morning scene: a charming young man, his hair ruffled by the wind into wavy locks, plays with a little dog on the gravel shore of the Côte d'Azur.

Episode 22 – A Situation

Monte Carlo – Nice, France, 27 December

I wake up and think of her again. Soon, she'll be here, just some miles away in the neighbouring Nice. She will walk the same streets as I do, and breathe in the same air as I do, and admire the same views as I do ... Only in that email of hers she hasn't mentioned the date of her arrival, but I imagine it must be any day now.

I listen. The house seems quiet. It must be still early or else maman has decided to sleep in today, Monsieur Moreau, perhaps, too. I get up, throw some clothes on and tiptoe down the stairs. Whistling Domino out of the library, I grab the keys from my all-time favourite Porsche 911 and head to the garage.

I get in the car, lower the rooftop and, lightly pressing on the gas, drive out onto the street. The weather is perfect. The sun shines brightly, casting its warmth over the city, illuminating everything around.

There is no traffic and soon I find myself driving on the picturesque Moyenne Corniche. Pressing on the gas, I whizz along the coastal road towards Nice, and in twenty minutes arrive at the Promenades des Anglais¹². As soon as I park the car,

¹² The Promenade des Anglais (Niçard: Camin dei Anglés) is a celebrated promenade along the Mediterranean in Nice, France.

Domino jumps out and dashes across the promenade. Stopping by the stairs leading to the beach, he turns to me and wiggles his tail.

I catch up with him and go down.

Taken by the beauty of the day, I walk slowly along the edge of the sea, admiring the shimmering of sunny sparks on the water. Excitement brimming over, Domino runs back and forth, occasionally plunging into the sea and bringing his finds to me.

Getting out of his jaws yet another treasure, a small stick this time, I straighten up and look around. My eyes catch a sight of a young woman in a white coat. Smiling, she checks something in her mobile. The woman seems familiar. As I play with Domino, I observe her discreetly. She raises her eyes, catching my gaze for a split of a second, then slides her mobile into the pocket and walks past me. I instantly go weak at my knees as I recognise her.

Stunned, I stare at her back, trying to figure out what to do next. Meanwhile, she slowly walks away from me, moving in the direction of 'Le Negresco Hotel'. Finally getting out of my stupor, I decide to act on a hunch and follow after her. Calling Domino, I try to put his collar on him, but, offended, he growls and puts up a fight. I lose my patience, gather him up and hurry after her.

Episode 23 – A Tail

Nice, France, 27 December

Unsuspecting, she walks along the beach, stopping occasionally to take a picture. As she reaches ‘Le Negresco Hotel’, she goes up the stairs to the promenade. I follow after her. But suddenly she stops and throws a hesitant look around. Standing just a few steps behind her I hold my breath. She hesitates for another second or two then makes a move towards the Old Town.

I go up, wait until she crosses Promenades des Anglais then continue my trailing. Domino attempts to break free from my arms but, though sympathising, I don’t let him go. Right now, I have more important staff than his immediate comfort to attend to.

Following after her, I pray for her not to suddenly turn around. But she doesn’t, not a single time in fact. It makes my trailing much easier, for there is literally nowhere for me to hide, as at this hour there aren’t many people out on the streets and shops aren’t opened yet.

Finally, we reach the Old Town. She slows down, pulls her mobile out and takes some more pictures. Tired of holding Domino in my arms, I let him down but, just in case, have him on a short leash.

After an hour of walking she comes to the Cours Saleya¹³market, lined with colourful fruit and vegetables stalls and cluttered with huge buckets of fresh flowers. My stomach grumbles, reminding that I haven't eaten since six in the morning.

Manoeuvring between the stalls, I pretend to be looking at displays and at the same time try not to lose sight of her. But mesmerised as she is by the tempting displays, she seems in no hurry to leave the market. Having visited every stall and taken dozens of snapshots, she comes to a flower seller. I stop at a stall next to his. Picking through mandarins, I try to listen to their chat, but can make out very little of it except that the seller attempts to compliment her in his broken English.

'Monsieur, you've already picked through my whole box of mandarins! Are you looking for some special one?' an elderly market-woman at the mandarins stall addresses me.

'Oh, pardon me. I must have spaced out.' I mumble, turning red, and move away from the stall.

Meanwhile, having exchanged pleasantries with the flower seller, she buys a huge bouquet of chrysanthemums from him. Pressing the flowers against her chest, she leaves the market, strolls along the Quai des Etats Unis, and, reaching the entrance of the 'Swiss Hotel', walks in.

¹³ Cours Saleya hosts four different markets. The most well-known is the Marché aux Fleurs, or Flower Market. It's actually a combination of the flower market and the fruit and vegetable market but the name, Marché aux Fleurs is commonly applied to the whole thing. The fruit and vegetable stands pack up by 13.30 in the afternoon but the flower stalls stay open until about 17.30.

I wait then go in and walk up to the reception desk.

‘Bonjour, I’m looking for Mademoiselle ... ’ I begin but stop short.

‘Yes, Monsieur?’ the receptionist says.

I stare at her for a few seconds in bewilderment then finally utter the name. The receptionist types it in, studies something in her computer for a few seconds then replies:

‘I’m sorry, Monsieur, but there must be some mistake. There are no clients under this name registered in our system.’

Episode 24 – A Holiday Fling

'Swiss Hotel', Nice, France, 27 December

I get into the hotel elevator and bury my face in the chrysanthemums' heads, one of my favourite flowers. Don't even know why. It might be just because I've always loved the time of late autumn, or maybe, just because the yearly appearance of those fragile yet long lasting flowers announces, so beautifully, the arrival of winter magic.

Back in my room, I look for a vase. Not finding one, I call the reception, and soon, an artful arrangement of flowery tenderness comes into an existence on my night table: a welcome kiss of the Côte d'Azur.

Lying down on the bed, I look through photographs taken during my morning walk. The ones of the beach and the market seem to be especially good. I choose some and upload them on Facebook. Instantly, a comment from Nicolas arrives:

'Is it your take on 'the lady with the dog'¹⁴? Only in this instant the lady takes a pic of the dog ... And who's that guy next to it, your holiday fling? :-)'

I type: 'Ha-ha, have you been thinking of your literary ex

¹⁴ The Lady with the Dog (Russian: Dama s sobachkoy) is a short story by Anton Chekhov first published in 1899. It tells the story of an adulterous affair between a Russian banker and a young lady he meets while vacationing in Yalta.

again? Yes, my holiday fling. Are you jealous? :-)'

I wait, but he doesn't respond and, logging out of Facebook, I go to my 'inbox', checking for the reply from my electronic 'admirer', but no luck there. Shutting the laptop, I throw a glance out the window and see a patch of sky, the bright blue. A sun ray falls onto my face. Caressing, it warms and lulls me at the same time.

I hear a knock at the door and listen, but all is quiet again. It must have been my imagination.

Getting up, I come to the window. Before me, a shimmering ribbon of lights winds away into the night. Admiring the view, I stand by the window a while, then swing it open. A breath of cold air enters the room, immediately giving me goose bumps. Humid, the air smells of seaweeds and salt. The next moment, somebody's arms are thrown around me and I'm locked in a warm embrace, a male body passionately pressing against me.

'Chérie ... ' he whispers.

The embrace seems so cordial, so invigoratingly familiar. Trying to grasp the fleeting yet persisting memory, I'm about to turn around, but hear a loud knock at the door, then a key inserted into the lock.

I open my eyes and see a chambermaid walking in.

'Pardon, madam.,' she says, startled, 'I've knocked, but there was no reply. I thought the room's empty. Would you like your bed to be turndown?'

Episode 25 – Obviously

‘Le Negresco Hotel’, Nice, France, 27 December

I send the chambermaid away and get ready for dinner. As it turns out, lunch I have missed already. Suddenly, I feel like going somewhere chic, a gourmet establishment of some sort with white crisp table clothes, polished silver wear, menus bursting a variety of French delicacies, and accommodating staff. Inspired by the painted image, I think of an appropriate place – Le Chantecler restaurant in the opulently elegant ‘Le Negresco Hotel’.

I don’t have a reservation, but it doesn’t discourage me. I call for a taxi and go downstairs. The hotel is just a fifteen-minute walk away but tonight I’m in the mood for a bit of indulgence.

At the entrance to the restaurant, a headwaiter greets me. A sound of clinking and clattering flows out of the Dining Room. Schooled waiters move swiftly between the tables, serving their high-end clientele.

‘Bonsoir, Mademoiselle, do you have a reservation?’ the headwaiter asks.

‘As a matter of fact, I don’t ... ’ I reply.

His eyebrow flies up.

‘The thing is ... ’ I say.

‘Pardon, Monsieur, it’s my fault. I haven’t told Mademoiselle

about the reservation. It's under my name – Mohamed Al Murshidi.' the young Arab, I watched this morning at breakfast, joins in, unexpectedly appearing at the entrance.

The headwaiter marks something in his list and motions us to follow him.

The Arab lets me go before him. The Dining Room is full: the devotees of French gastronomy made up of families, couples, and groups of friends, seem to occupy each and every table.

Mohamed's table is set for one but this 'slip' is instantly corrected. The headwaiter waves his hand and as if by magic a second set appears on it.

We sit down.

'Thank you very much. It's most kind of you,' I say, 'I'm afraid without your intervention I wouldn't be able to dine here tonight.'

'My pleasure, but, honestly, even without my intervention you'd be perfectly fine tonight.' he replies, his English impeccable.

'Well, I don't know ... In this case, you might be slightly overestimating the power of feminine charm.' I say, throwing a look around. The restaurant is fully booked for tonight.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.