

Terry Salvini

CRYSTAL MASKS



Terry Salvini
Crystal Masks

«Tektime S.r.l.s.»

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Crystal Masks / T. Salvini — «Tektime S.r.l.s.»,

A night of passion wreaks havoc in the life and career of Loreley, a young New York lawyer grappling with a delicate court case and what seems to be an obvious outcome. To discover the truth, the woman decides to infiltrate an ambiguous environment, where she will discover another side of herself. Several characters revolve around the protagonist: an old love, family, friends, colleagues, but above all Sonny, a pianist and composer still bound to his past. Some of them remain true to themselves, others hide behind crystal masks that the rapid and relentless succession of events ends up smashing to pieces. A night of passion creates havoc in the life and career of Loreley, a young New York lawyer grappling with a delicate court case and what seems to be an obvious outcome. To discover the truth, the woman decides to infiltrate an ambiguous environment, where she will discover another side of herself. Several characters revolve around the protagonist: an old love, family, friends, colleagues, but above all Sonny, a pianist and composer still bound to his past. Some of them remain true to themselves, others hide behind crystal masks that the rapid and relentless succession of events ends up smashing to pieces.

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Содержание

Prologue	6
1	8
2	13
3	18
4	22
5	29
6	34
7	38
8	43
9	47
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	52

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Crystal Masks
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Tralsated by Barbara Maher

You will learn at your own expense that along your way every day you will meet millions of masks and very few faces.

(Luigi Pirandello)

No one can wear a mask for too long.

(Seneca)

To my ex-husbands

To my daughters

To my partner.

Prologue

Loreley awakened from a confused dream, drenched in sweat, her mouth furry and a painful throb at her temples. She massaged them, trying to understand the reason for that malaise, but her mind just would not cooperate.

She blinked several times before opening her eyes completely. Everything around her was shrouded in darkness; just a small annoying LED light intruded on that darkness: as usual, John had forgotten to turn it off before he went to sleep.

When she turned to him huffing and about to nudge him, she stiffened, puzzled. She looked at the red LED again. It was not opposite her, where it should have been!

That is not the television, she thought.

As her eyes became accustomed to the gloom, she forced herself to focus on some feature of the room, and could make out the dark silhouettes of the few pieces of furniture around her: not one of them seemed familiar.

This was not her bedroom!

She heard an intake of breath louder than the others, almost a wheeze; the bed moved, and she realized that her fiancé had just turned over towards her. A strong smell of alcohol puzzled her. He must have had a lot to drink, and a moment later it dawned on her that maybe she had too. She slid slowly out from under the sheets, but her legs were wobbly, and she had to sit down on the bed. Nausea joined the headache.

Several seconds went by before she tried get up again. When she felt confident that she could stand, she made her way to the LED, convinced that it must be a light switch. She touched it several times. Nothing came on.

Another doubt assailed her.

She went back to the bed, walked around it, and put out her hand towards the man who seemed to be sound asleep. Running her hand lightly over his hair and face, she looked closely at his features, taking care not to wake him.

Suddenly she pulled her arm back. Her heart seemed to stop for a moment, and then began beating again, faster than ever.

Who the hell had she ended up in bed with?

I must get out of here as quickly possible, she thought to herself.

Where had she left her clothes? She groped around and found her panties and bra under the sheet.

After an interminable minute, she also found her dress which had ended up at the foot of the bed. Her handbag was sitting upright in the armchair, the only thing in the right place.

Putting one hand out in front of her, she located the bathroom door and turned on the light. What she saw reflected in the mirror made her gasp. There was mascara was smudged around her deep blue eyes and dark circles under them. Her face had a perplexing pallor.

She sighed. It had been a long time since she had seen herself in a state like that.

The small bottles on the shelf by the washbasin, the white towels folded over the rails and two immaculate bathrobes hanging on their respective hooks, proved she was in a hotel room; how she had ended up there, however, she just did not remember.

She washed her face and fixed her long blonde hair as best she could with the tiny comb provided for guests, then turned to the window. It was still dark outside, and it was impossible to see anything, not even the moon in the sky. She took her cell phone out of her handbag: ten past four.

A shrill sound warned her that the battery was almost dead. Quickly, she lowered the ringtone and activated localization. The map indicated a spot in Uptown Manhattan, near Central Park. Not far from home, she thought, just as the phone turned off with a slight vibration.

She put it back in her bag, next to a small, round silver case: her pill holder. She stared at it as if there might be something inside that could help her think clearly again. A lifeline that could put an end to all her negative thoughts. She was about to take it out but had second thoughts. Perhaps it was also due to this weakness that she was in this absurd situation right now.

She closed her handbag; better to leave it where it was.

As she looked at her elegant dress lying on the stool, a flaky image of newlyweds toasting their future ran through her mind.

She tried to remember something more but desisted. There was no time to think. She dressed quickly and went back into the room.

Dammit, where were her shoes! She searched for them in the darkness, then stifled a cry and the imprecation that almost escaped her when she stumbled over them. Holding her breath, she listened closely. The man's light snoring continued uninterrupted and she breathed a sigh of relief.

Barefooted, she crept stealthily out of the room and waited until she was in the elevator to put her shoes on. At the front desk, she asked them to call a cab.

Outside, the night sky was dark, and the air was laden with humidity. There were very few vehicles in circulation on the damp streets which in just a few hours would be flooded with cars and people hurrying to get to work.

She had to be in the office that morning too, despite the nausea, headache, and devastated face. Her career did not allow her to miss work.

The taxi arrived within minutes. With an unsteady gait, she started towards the door the driver had opened for her; but as she stepped off the sidewalk she slipped on a small puddle. So as not to end up on the ground, she grabbed the man for support.

Hey, careful. No more falling into the arms of strangers! she told herself wriggling free from his grasp.

She saw him take a step back.

"I just wanted to help you get in..."

Loreley looked at him for a few moments, the streetlight showing a chubby face with an amused expression.

"I'll manage by myself, thank you," she replied curtly.

Moving cautiously, she got in the back seat as the taxi driver settled behind the wheel.

"Where are we going, miss?"

Loreley gave him the address, then rubbed the back of her head with a grimace of pain.

"Are you okay? I can take you to the hospital if you like."

"No, there's no need for that. It will go away..."

"A bit too much to drink, huh?"

She snorted. "I don't think it's any of your business."

"All right, but don't vomit on the seat or you'll have to pay a surcharge..."

Loreley scowled at him through the rearview mirror. "It's not going to happen. I just have a huge headache. A couple of hours of rest, a coffee and I'll be brand new."

"I hope new is better than now," the driver commented sarcastically, a moment before making a sound like barely restrained laughter.

"Go to hell!"

If I survive, I swear I will never do anything like this again.

1

Loreley got up from her chair and walked across to the window of her office. She was tired of sitting behind a desk flipping through regulations and typing on the computer, and in any case, she had to go to court soon.

Although she couldn't see the clouds, she felt that it would soon start raining again; her mood turned to gray, like the sky in those last two days, a colour she hated and that made her feel sad.

She stood there for a while with her gaze fixed on the vast bluish windows of the skyscraper opposite, her thoughts focused on what had happened the night before, trying to recall the sequence of events; but the memories in her head were like a grainy old damaged film, with the frames flowing quickly and then jamming in the same spot.

Her brother's wedding ceremony was quite clear in her mind, as was lunch at the restaurant of a hotel in Manhattan, the music and the toasts. She had received plenty of attention from the men there, many of whom she had never seen before the party, and several that she had known for some time. Among them, there was one in particular which had tormented her in the last few hours and she suspected that it belonged to the person with whom she had left the restaurant, to go upstairs to the room.

I sure hope it was not him!

She was still staring through the window at the office in the skyscraper across the way when a noise behind her put a stop to the train of thought.

"Are you still here, Loreley?"

It was Simon Kilmer, a man whose skin was as white as the little hair that remained on his head.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere. I'll get going right now."

She moved away from the window and went back to her desk. As she went to retrieve her notes, she knocked a file full of documents, which in turn slammed into the pen holder and sent it toppling over. The contents rolled across the mahogany desktop and ended up on the marble floor.

"What's wrong with you today?" Simon asked her. "Are you worried about the Desmond trial? Sorry, but you have to be in that courtroom," he said in an authoritarian voice. "It's the least you can do to help me forget that you refused to accept the case. You ran the risk of..."

"It's got nothing to do with the court case!" she interrupted him and knelt to pick up the pens and pencils. Looking up at him for a moment, she blocked the next question. "Don't worry, my problems are about my private life, that's all. And now please don't ask me any more questions."

She put the pen holder back in place, took off her glasses and put them in her bag without another word.

Kilmer brushed the dark spot on his face, a barely visible birthmark under his white beard. "I don't want to intrude. But whatever it is, try to become aware and alive again. You seem distracted, and you look exhausted. The holiday season takes away a lot of our energy..." He smiled at her, as if to make her understand that maybe he had guessed what the problem was.

Loreley did not respond to the taunt and smiled briefly. Cunning as that man was, he certainly could not have guessed what had happened. "I'll take your advice."

"Run now, or you'll arrive when it's all over. And please let me know how it went as soon as possible. I want to hear it from you and not from Ethan, okay?"

"Do I have a choice? I know only too well that if I don't, you'd make me pay in some way," she retorted, and walked from the room.

Whenever she went out on business, it was her custom to take a cab.

"100 Centre Street please, as fast as you can," she told the driver, a young man with an Asian appearance and short, smooth hair.

They had travelled a couple of miles when the vehicle started to shudder, and a strange noise seemed to alarm the driver.

What's happening here? Loreley wondered.

Cursing his bad luck, the man moved over to the side of the road looking for somewhere to stop, but more precious minutes were lost before he found a suitable place. He got out and walked around the vehicle, checking it carefully.

"Everything has gone wrong this morning!" he exclaimed with a gesture of anger. "All we needed was a flat tire!"

Oh, no! This is no good! she thought and got out of the car too.

"How long will it take to change it?"

"At least fifteen minutes, miss."

"I can't wait that long!" Her voice rose.

"I'm sorry, it's not my fault; you can see that too," he said, pointing to the almost flat front tire.

Loreley slammed the door. "Tell me what I owe you. Quickly, please."

"Don't worry about it, today is definitely not one of my luckiest days."

"It's not one of mine either."

She pulled a ten dollar note from her wallet and handed it to the man, who had opened the trunk and was taking out the equipment needed to change the tire. He thanked her with a smile.

Loreley walked until she reached the intersection with the main road, seeing dozens of cars of every model and colour hurtle past her. Spotting a taxi, she raised her hand to hail it down, but it went straight past without even slowing down.

She saw another one coming and gestured wildly in the hope of stopping it, but to no avail. Another came along: nothing doing! Those damned yellow cabs just went their merry way, indifferent to her plight.

Aren't there any of these damned cabs available?

She tried one last time, waving until she felt ridiculous: still nothing! With a sigh she turned and went back to the taxi driver.

"Listen... how much longer will it take?"

"Just a few more minutes, miss," he replied as he tightened a bolt on the wheel.

"Okay. Here's what we'll do." She took out a few bills. "If you get me to court by eleven o'clock, this will turn into one of your luckiest days."

The man stopped what he was doing to think about his customer's generous offer, then started to work faster. A couple of minutes later, he was behind the wheel again with her sitting in the back seat, looking at her mobile phone and counting the seconds that passed.

Heavy traffic around Hell's Kitchen slowed the taxi almost to a stop. They were now proceeding at walking pace, and the honking of horns revealed the impatience of the drivers.

"Isn't there a way to get out of this mess?" asked Loreley.

"I'm sorry, miss. Don't you think I'd have taken it if there was?"

"My job is at stake!"

"You have no idea how many customers get in here and every guy has his own story. Some don't talk and hardly move, ignoring me all the way, then there are others who get really agitated... as if the seat was on fire under their ass. And they jabber on like you."

In the rear-view mirror Loreley could see him smiling and forced herself to smile back at him.

"But there's one thing everyone has in common," he went on, "they're in one hell of a hurry to get to their destination."

She took a deep breath to calm down. "I've already apologized, what else should I do?"

"Nothing! I prefer customers like you, miss, rather than the mummies."

This time Loreley smiled more convincingly at him. And with all the money I gave you! she thought, leaning back against the headrest. The pain at the back of her neck had diminished just enough for her to work but had not disappeared entirely.

Maybe this was a good time for a painkiller. The doctor had told her to take one only when the pain was not too strong and to double the dose only when it was necessary. Her obstinacy and too many commitments, however, had led her to taking them haphazardly, and in the space of a few years she had found herself needing a stronger dose.

Talking the small silver container out of her handbag, she opened it, took out a tablet and closed it again, her gaze lingering on the two Ls in shining gold engraved on the lid. Once it had stood for, Lorenz Lehmann, her grandfather; now, Loreley Lehmann.

As she feared, she was late getting to the courthouse. Even though the taxi driver had failed to maintain their agreement, she left the entire amount she had already given him, to compensate for her irritation which he had been forced to endure.

She ran up the wide marble staircase leading to the foyer of the building, hoping she was in time for the verdict. Luckily, she knew where to go and there was no need to waste more time asking for information; it was easy to get lost in that vast building if you were not familiar with it.

Even before entering the courtroom, though, she realized that the ruling on the Desmond case had already been issued, as the door was open, and people were leaving.

Darn it, too late! She clenched her hand and hit it against an invisible object.

Glancing quickly around from the door, she could see the tension on people's faces which had not yet subsided; the public and jurors were leaving their seats, as was Judge Sanders, a petite elderly woman, walking out through the door at the back of the courtroom.

Loreley went in and searched for her colleague Ethan Morris amid the increasing chatter. She saw him standing beside the defendant, Leen Soraya Desmond.

As if he had sensed her arrival, Ethan turned and gave her a forced smile. A moment later Leen turned around too and her oriental-looking eyes twitched.

"It won't finish here, Lehmann!" she yelled at her. "Sooner or later I'll get my revenge!" As two uniformed officers were leading her away, she turned her attention to a dark-haired man watching the scene, a short distance away. "My father won't forget you and what you've done to me. Never!"

"I won't forget either, Leen! You can be sure of that," she answered in a strong, determined voice, though not as spiteful.

Intrigued, Loreley studied the object, or rather the subject, of such acrimony, and the moment she recognized him she stiffened and stared at him as if in a trance. The clips of the old film started to flow through her mind again, but this time they were vivid, fast, with no interruption.

Oh my God! Him!

"What's wrong? Is it because of what my client said to you?" asked Ethan as he approached her.

She unbuttoned her tight-fitting blue jacket which at that moment was preventing her from breathing, until her chest finally lifted and let some air into her lungs.

"Not really. I'm just a little tired."

The lawyer smiled at her, nodding. "I guess yesterday was a kind of tour de force."

"Yes. And seeing that woman again just now..." She looked at the doorway through which Leen had just left. "Well... it certainly wasn't pleasant. And besides, I didn't get here in time."

"Don't worry. I won't tell Kilmer you were late, not him and not Sarah. If you come to lunch with me, I'll tell you everything that was said, so in case you get the third degree you will know what to say."

"Thank you. But I wasn't late on purpose, you know, the taxi had a flat tire."

"Kilmer wouldn't believe you, but I know you better than he does. Now let's go and eat, it's the only pleasure I have left."

The dark-haired man who had just had the exchange of words with the defendant, caught up to them and blocked them just outside the door. Loreley gripped the handle of her bag so tightly that her nails dug into the palm of her hand.

"Counselor Morris, I congratulate you on your excellent defence, but I'm happy that it wasn't good enough for you to win," the newcomer said smiling at him, as she discreetly took a step back.

"That's understandable Mr. Marshall." Ethan looked awkward.

"I wish you a good day, counselor," said the other, then turned his gaze to Loreley. "Hello, Lory." He stared at her for a moment, as if he wanted to speak to her, but didn't know what to say.

Overwhelmed by conflicting feelings and thoughts, she opened her mouth to return the greeting, but was unable to utter a single word.

He smiled at her, though his amber-colored eyes had a serious look. "I'd prefer that we see each other a long way from here next time," he concluded, then turned his back on her and walked away.

Ethan scratched his shaved head. "What's wrong, Loreley? You didn't even say hello."

"I'm sorry... I don't know what got into me."

She saw him shake his head, as his eyes expressed confusion.

"Well, come on. I was so tense this morning, I didn't have breakfast, and now that it's all over, I'm feeling very hungry."

A week went by, with Loreley feeling more serene and managing not to think too much about the mess she was in. The few times that she did, especially when she alone was in bed, she would dismiss those memories, take a book at random and read until her eyes were red from exhaustion and she fell asleep; or else she would watch all kinds of documentaries on television. Anything was okay if she could focus her attention elsewhere.

She remembered very little of the hours of passion she had spent with the impromptu lover of that one night stand, but on the other hand she was starting to remember what had happened before she went up to the room with that man.

Sitting at the table of a large restaurant with other wedding guests, Loreley had been nibbling at a slice of wedding cake when he, with a glass of champagne in one hand and a chair in the other, had sat down opposite her, beside his friend Steve.

"Everyone at this table has found their other half, even Hans and Esther, and I'm the only one left," he said, accompanying that last sentence with a sip of champagne, as if to congratulate himself.

"I'd advise you to stay single for a while longer," was Steve's joking response.

"I tell myself that too, you know, every day, so I don't forget it. No romantic commitments for the next few years. I've had enough of them!"

Loreley had felt slightly uncomfortable and had looked down at her plate, realizing that the man was still hurting because of Esther, who instead looked like a bride who was happy with her choice. He had not shown any emotion all day, but then the champagne must have lowered his guard.

"You're actually not the only single sitting at this table... or don't I count?" Lucy, a curvaceous blond, had corrected him. "Unlike you, though, I still continue on my way, despite everything..." She had emphasized the last two words, as if to make it clear what, or rather, who she was alluding to with that "despite everything."

"I'll bet you do, I've never had any doubts about that!" the man had replied, sarcastically.

A frown of displeasure had appeared on the young woman's face: "Always better than feeling sorry for yourself!"

Loreley had found it hard not to giggle. Lucy enjoyed provoking him whenever she had the chance and he reciprocated as best he could, considering that he was not usually the type to be disrespectful towards women. For some reason, the girl always turned their approaches into skirmishes. It had become a ritual by now, their only means of communication, and if they had changed this habit, Loreley would have been astonished and perhaps even a little disappointed.

When she had seen Lucy leave the table to go and join the dancing, the man had turned his attention to her, and she had kept him company with a couple of after-dinner drinks, forgetting she should not mix painkillers with alcohol.

In those last frantic days spent helping Esther with the preparations for the wedding and discussing the Desmond case with her boss for the umpteenth time, the pain at the back of her head had given her no respite. The icing on the cake had arrived two days before the wedding when her fiancé had phoned from Los Angeles to inform her, as if it were no big deal, that he couldn't be with her for the wedding. The ensuing argument had accentuated her headache and she had been forced to take the medication on several occasions.

There was still a dark chasm in her recollections, between the time the newlyweds had left the restaurant followed by festive exclamations of good wishes, to when she had woken up in the middle of the night in a room on the upper floors of the hotel. A hole where there were only flashes in which she saw herself naked, wrapped around a man with tanned skin crushing her against the bed under his body as he caressed and kissed her.

Then, total darkness.

And him again, rolling over and putting her on top of himself, straddling him. She remembered his feline eyes that announced passion and the sly smile on lips that invited her to abandon herself to any unspoken desire.

And again, total darkness, followed by a befuddled awakening... and that unspeakable reality.

2

What would happen once John got home? Was it necessary to confess something to him when she didn't even know how it had happened? Was sincerity at all costs essential to keeping their cohabitation alive in the best possible way?

Questions that came back to haunt her even when she was driving through the Manhattan traffic. Questions that instilled doubts in her which she had never had before, undermining her few certainties. After all, she was only twenty-eight years old with little experience in couple relationships to be certain she had the right answers.

The sound of her cell phone drew her attention. She pressed a button on the dashboard and activated the speakerphone.

"Hello, Loreley. How are you?"

"David!" she said happily. "What a pleasure. I haven't heard from you in a while."

"Yes, you're right, but you could have called me too."

"You know, I've been very busy, and Hans' wedding took everything out of me, including the desire to get married should John ever ask me one day."

She heard a short laugh at the other end of the phone. "Still the same old story of the fox that can't get to the grapes..."

"Don't make fun of me, come on! Do you have anything to tell me, instead?"

"Yes... there is something."

"Don't string it out!"

"It's something serious and I'd rather talk to you about it in person if I can..."

«All right, I'd love to spend some time with you."

"If you're free, we could get together tomorrow afternoon, at your place."

"Let's make it three o'clock?"

"Three o'clock."

Loreley ended the conversation wistfully recalling David's gentle, smiling face. She missed the days she had spent with him, especially their university days, and the lovely carefree moments he had given her.

All things pass and as often happens, the most beautiful things are also those that last less time.

She slammed her foot on the brake and cursed, clutching the steering wheel. The car in front of her had slowed down abruptly and she had narrowly escaped running into the back of it.

For the life of me! She usually kept at safe distance, so stopped for a few moments to take a deep breath. As soon as she heard cars honking behind her she drove on again.

Everyone is in such a hurry! Sometimes she longed for her beloved Zurich, with its order and tranquility. So different from electrifying and hectic New York.

A light rain began to tap on the windshield. She scowled: she had forgotten to bring an umbrella. And yet she knew that in October the weather was unpredictable.

The following afternoon Loreley left the house dressed in a simple pair of jeans and a shirt of the same cloth and colour. Her friend David was waiting for her outside the front door.

As soon as she was close to him, she threw her arms around his neck and held him close for several seconds.

"You are enthusiastic!" he began, hugging her in turn.

"We've never been apart for so long," she defended herself pulling away. "Where would you like to go?"

"It's a lovely sunny day, we could walk for a while."

"Okay!"

Loreley adjusted her bag on her shoulder and took him by the hand, but after a few steps she stopped him. "Don't dare put your hand near your wallet," she said, raising her index finger at him. "I'll take care of it today, okay?"

"Well, what an effort for someone like you!"

"What would you be implying?" she asked, hands on hips. "I'm waiting."

"Your family's... well, they do alright."

"They're wealthy, you can say it. But this has nothing to do with me."

"I know, Loreley, don't get angry, I was just kidding."

"Let's not talk about that and relax a bit. Whatever you want to do is fine with me."

David had nothing particular in mind. They left the car and walked to Corona Park. It was quiet that autumn day, immersed in a light blanket of silence and a thin veil of fog. There were carpets of multicoloured leaves underneath the almost-bare trees, accentuating the languid nostalgic charm of autumn, despite the flowers which were still blooming in colours from deep yellow to violet.

They could have chosen to walk in Central Park, which was larger and not far from her home, instead of crossing the entire Borough of Queens, but she knew David didn't like places that were too big and crowded. To tell the truth, nor did he like going to places where wealth, and especially those who flaunted it, were in the majority, she thought, as she walked by his side. She was his only well-to-do friend.

When their legs began to ache with fatigue, they took a break and sat on a wall near the Unisphere, a huge steel monument depicting the terrestrial globe. Loreley chatted about her brother's wedding and what had happened the night before, though she did not reveal the name of the man with whom she had shared a bed. She still didn't feel ready for that, even to her friend. He seemed to understand because he avoided asking her about him, but a frown had appeared on his forehead that had not been there before.

"I know what you're thinking," she said, looking into his cerulean eyes, that seemed to scold her. "I'd could slap myself. Johnny doesn't deserve it, and I don't know how to get out of it without hurting him."

"You can't decide whether to tell him or not, can you?"

"I'm scared he won't forgive me. And I don't have the courage either..." She looked away for a few moments.

"If he knows you as well as I do, he'll realize that you would never have ended up in that bed if you'd been sober."

"You make it sound simple!"

David looked at her annoyed. "It's never easy. Do you think it didn't cost me a lot to confess my betrayal to you? I was so afraid of losing you forever, even as a friend. But then you understood..."

"I was upset all the same, even though I tried not to show it. I didn't want anything to do with men for years after that, and all that counted for me was studying and skating."

He sighed. "It's been a long time, but I can see you still get upset when we talk about it."

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, David..." She stroked his cheek. "I'm not upset about the past. I'm upset about the present."

"I just told you how I feel about it."

"I'll think about it, I promise," she reassured him, wanting to be done with that embarrassing topic.

Best to talk about something else.

She looked at him as if she had just remembered something important. "Speaking of confessions, you haven't told me the news you mentioned on the phone." She moved into a more comfortable position. "I'm here and I promise I'll listen to every word you say."

She saw him calm down and smile.

Sitting down beside her, David let a few seconds pass, and then blurted out his happy news. "After a long time... and much searching, I think I've found the right person. In a few months, maybe we'll go and live together."

She opened her eyes wide. "Oh my God, you don't know how happy I am!" She clapped her hands and hugged him, jubilant. "What's his name?"

"Andrew. We met in the clinic when he brought his dog to me for treatment."

"I'm really happy, you know?"

"Thank you! I feel a little scared though."

"I know what it's like, especially at the beginning."

"That's why I wanted to talk to you about it. I wanted to know how you got on with John. What it feels like."

"Well... I can tell you that I felt awkward at first and I didn't quite know how to behave. I was afraid that everything I did might bother him. I had to stay calm, be understanding and have a flexible mind to accept his way of doing things and his way of thinking. Sometimes I wanted to slap him, sometimes I wanted to hug him. One day I would thank heaven I'd met him and the next day I'd wish I never had. More than once, you'll feel like you can't make it and you'll yearn for your lost freedom, but I can assure you that everything settles down eventually. You just have to really want it."

"Is that how you felt with John?" he interrupted, astonished.

"I can guarantee you that I don't regret it at all." As she answered, she wondered why, if she really didn't regret it, she was unable to take on board what she had just said to her friend, to reassure herself as well.

"That's good enough for me." David laughed cheerfully and took her hands. "Things will work out for you too, you'll see; you just have to really want it, right?"

"You're such a..."

He put a hand over her mouth. "Ahhh... you mustn't say certain things." She smiled at him. "Now it's best if we go and get something to drink."

After a cool drink and a quick visit to the Science and Technology Museum, they decided it was time to look for a quiet place to dine. The sun was giving way to the moon, which soon appeared like a spotted disc of light and shadows, occasionally obscured by clouds.

They ate a light dinner of only two courses and a small portion of cheesecake. Fortunately, the temperature hadn't dropped, so they continued to wander through the streets of Manhattan until well past midnight. Feeling guilty about keeping him up late, Loreley decided to ask her friend to stay with her so she could enjoy his company for a while longer.

She was still lazing in bed when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned over and opened her eyes a little, expecting to see David, but the eyes looking at her at that moment were too dark to belong to her friend who had blue eyes.

"Johnny!" She pulled herself up, leaning on her elbows. "When did you arrive?"

"I sent you a message last night, didn't you get it?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't notice."

"Too busy doing something else, huh? I ran into David in the living room. He was leaving."

"We spent the afternoon together yesterday and it got late so I put him up here at home." She sat up on the bed. "I'll go and say goodbye to him."

"Forget it." He held her by the shoulders. "He told me to say goodbye to you. He was in a hurry."

She was about to protest, but John leaned over her and closed her mouth with a long kiss. Putting an arm around his neck Loreley returned it.

When she saw him pull away to quickly take off his clothes, she slipped out of her short nightgown, putting her body with its delicate skin on display.

"I wanted to take a shower, but now..." he said to her.

Loreley looked closely at him. His hair was untidy, and his face appeared strained, like someone trying to regain control of his senses. His dark eyes seemed to be urging her to make a quick decision. Opening her lips in a mischievous smile she held out her arms towards him, grabbed him by the collar of his unbuttoned shirt and pulled him close to her.

They would certainly be skipping breakfast that morning, and maybe even lunch, but right now she didn't care, she needed her man.

When John had fallen asleep, she slipped out of bed, put on a black satin robe, picked up her cell phone, and went downstairs to the living room. Sitting on the couch she made a call.

"Hey, Loreley!" David's voice was as cheerful as ever.

"I'm sorry about this morning..."

"It doesn't matter. I was surprised to see him come in, and a little embarrassed, as he was too, so I thought it best to get out of your hair quickly. I'm sorry I couldn't say goodbye."

"Me too. But I still don't know what to do..."

"We talked about it yesterday. I'm sure you'll do the right thing."

On the other hand, she was not sure, though. "Promise you'll come and see me again soon."

"Of course. Maybe you can come over here to me."

"I'll think about it, I promise."

"I'll take your word for it. See you soon, then."

"Enjoy your Sunday, David."

Before Loreley had time to finish the call, John appeared wearing a grey tracksuit.

"Up already?" she remarked, believing that he had fallen asleep. "How are your parents?"

"They're fine. Mom has her usual aches and pains, but nothing serious."

"And your daughter? I imagine she was jumping for joy at seeing you again."

He nodded, smiling at her.

"I'd like to go with you someday to meet them."

The smile quickly vanished from John's face. "I'm going out for a run. I hope you don't mind."

Loreley was disappointed but tried not to show it. "No, no, go ahead. Are you actually able to jog?" she asked, astonished that he had so much energy left.

He smiled again. "Of course."

"When you get back, we'll have something to eat, and if you haven't collapsed with a heart attack, we can go out somewhere."

"If you're doing the cooking, it's more likely I'll get a dose of food poisoning and then we won't be going anywhere."

She picked up a cushion off the couch and threw it at him.

John dodged it and left the house laughing.

Left alone, Loreley went into the kitchen and got to work at the stove, even though she already knew he would not be enthusiastic about the result.

She had met Johnny when she was doing her internship. He was with Ethan who had introduced John as an old friend. His attractive face, dark eyes and his kind and at the same time cheeky attitude had struck her immediately; but she had no way of getting to know him better until she met him again one afternoon in the parking lot near the law firm.

Her car would not start, and after a few futile attempts she got out of the vehicle furious and cursing like a man. Then she saw him, leaning against the trunk of the car with his arms crossed, watching her amused.

Without beating about the bush, she had asked him if he was going to help her or just stand there enjoying the show. Johnny had held out his hand, as if asking for the keys. She had looked him straight in the eyes and handed them to him, albeit with some reluctance.

A few minutes later the engine was turning over again.

"What can I do to repay you?" she had asked, relieved.

"You could put your bank account in my name," he had said, getting out of the car to give her the driver's seat.

"Or?"

He looked at her like someone who already knows he has won.

"Come to dinner with me tonight."

And that was when it had started.

3

Ethan went past her almost running, as if he were in a hurry to leave the office. "Hey, Loreley!" She was leafing through a file and stopped to look at him from over her blue-framed glasses. There was a dark trench coat hanging over his arm and the ever-present hat in his hand, a sign that he was going to court or to some client.

"The boss wants to see you in his office," he said, looking sorry for her.

"Are there problems brewing?"

"I'm not sure, but when he asked me to send you in to him, he had this strange little smile..."

"Not looking good for me, then; how much do you want to bet on it?"

"I only gamble if I'm sure of winning. But I must run now. Good luck." And with that, he winked at her and disappeared through the door.

Loreley sighed. Kilmer would be dumping a problem on her soon, she thought, heading to the office next to hers.

When she went in, he was sitting at his desk dressed in a dark gray suit. He gave her a half smile, which was more like a smirk, and handed her a folder which she took without taking her eyes off his face.

As she read the few notes inside it her anger mounted, but she continued, trying hard to remain impassive. She had already heard about the murder, near her parents' home, on the news the day before and had been surprised and disgusted at the cruelty of it. She knew the victim's family by sight, a retired business couple who had only one daughter, and the thought of having to defend the person who had snatched her from them was enough to tie her stomach in knots.

The boss was staring hard at her, almost as if to challenge her.

"Why do I have to take this on?"

"Ethan is following another case and Patrick is sick. Furthermore, the guy who contacted us to give us the job wants you; evidently he prefers women." He sniggered, but immediately became serious again. "Sorry."

You're not sorry at all!

Kilmer leaned back in the black leather armchair, which creaked under his weight. "If you need a hand, don't hesitate to let me know," he continued in a friendly voice, but which immediately sounded false to her.

He could forget that! Loreley thought. She closed the folder and held it tightly.

"Come and see me if you finish before we close for the day, and you can give me an update."

Of course! You can count on it! She would make sure she was late, she told herself, nodding at him.

"Hurry up then, your new client is waiting for you."

With a forced smile, just like the one he had given her when she came in, Loreley walked out of the room, her back straight and a sure step, looking confident and composed; but she had a great desire to kick that fat butt of his.

Having to defend what she considered indefensible had never been in her plans, nor did she consider it a means of getting ahead in her career, so the case she had been assigned was hard to swallow. If only she could refuse it, but she had already lost face when she had refrained to assist Leen Soraya Desmond, so she could not back out yet again. Kilmer would be furious and would jump on it as the perfect pretext to kick her out of the firm. She had always felt that he had a certain prejudice towards her, but in recent times it had become worse.

Her boss was demanding increasing commitment from her, more than he asked of Ethan, and she suspected that the motivation stemmed from the fact that she was privileged by birth, a girl who

only had to ask and it would be given. He, on the other hand, had been forced to work hard for thirty years to attain a certain position and a decent bank account.

Thus, the day before, she had been forced to accept that thankless job, and it had kept her awake late into the night.

What technicality could she call upon to prevent her client ending his days in prison? A 31-year-old man who had beaten his partner to death leaving her agonizing on the floor of the house, then going off as if nothing had happened. How many cases like this must she see in courtrooms? It was not for her to judge, but how could she prepare a good defence, based on reciprocal trust with her client, if she herself felt no empathy for that individual, nor any kind of compassion?

Sometimes she wondered if it had been a mistake to choose the career of criminal lawyer. Perhaps it was not suitable, she should have chosen civil law; or maybe she was just going through a period of confusion, in conflict with her own work. Who knows?

But if she wanted to become a good lawyer, she knew she needed to toughen up.

In the interview room, her client had claimed that he had only slapped the girl and did not kill her. Just before he left the house, he had seen her touch her cheeks, in tears. She was alive and angry.

A murderer who declared he was innocent, however, was nothing new.

The waiter put the coffee she had ordered on the table, bringing Loreley's attention back to where it was before: the newspaper that had printed the article about that misdeed. The names of the accused and his defence lawyer, her, were also included were.

What perverse emotion drove a man to beat to death the woman he said he loved? Or to want to keep her tied to him at all costs, when instead all she wants is to be free?

She had heard so many stories like that and there were certainly others who were still silent because the victims often just put up with it, most of the time out of fear, but in some cases because of a penchant for submission. She recalled a friend from her university days who had saved herself only because she had reported her boyfriend in time and then had turned to a psychologist to overcome her addiction.

How long can a victim be considered just a victim and not also accomplice, because she accepts to endure the violence in silence? Luckily, things were changing, but not fast enough. Not yet.

With a gesture of frustration, she turned a couple of pages and stopped when she saw a short article with the image of a tall guy with brown hair coming out of the theatre beside a beautiful red-haired woman.

Her hands trembled. Him again!

Since that man had almost died at the hands of his ex-wife, his notoriety had taken a huge leap, and he was now known even to people who had never seen him.

Not stopping to read the short piece, she closed the newspaper and threw it onto the empty chair beside her. To hell with him!

She was feeling the need to get rid of her tension, and the only thing that took her mind off work was ice skating. Yes, of course, why not? It was a while since she'd been there.

Finishing her coffee, she paid and called a cab to take her home to get what she needed. She asked the taxi driver to wait for her downstairs and in less than an hour she was at Chelsea Piers, on the Hudson River Park.

It was that very place where she had put the blades on her feet for the first time, a day she remembered very well, because it had given her a taste of what it meant to fall down and have to get up again despite the fear. She had fallen in love with the sport immediately and had become an excellent skater, winning a few local competitions along the way. But then with university she had been forced to cut back on training and after the accident had not competed again. The return to skating had not been easy. She was terrified she might have another bad fall and it had blocked her. It had taken several months before she was able to get back on the ice.

But she had won that battle.

She put on a tight-fitting full-length jumpsuit, of black stretchy water-repellent fabric, and began to wind the boot laces around the hooks. She had almost finished that tedious but important operation when her work phone rang.

The urge not to answer was so great that, before pulling it out of her backpack, she sat there for several seconds listening to Khachaturian's "Sabre Dance". Would she let it keep ringing until it stopped? But the new case required her to be available all day.

There was an unfamiliar number on the display.

"Hello, Loreley. Am I interrupting you? Are you working?"

"No, no..." she replied, trying to figure out who that male voice belonged to. She didn't want to risk making a fool of herself, but at that moment she didn't recognize it as anyone she knew.

"If you have an hour to spare, I'd like to talk to you. It wasn't possible the last time we saw each other."

"Actually, I'm really busy and..." she stopped. "Sonny?!"

She uttered that name, letting out all the air in her lungs.

"I'm sorry, I was assuming you would have recognized me."

"We've never spoken on the phone; your voice sounds a little different."

There was a brief embarrassed silence, then he spoke again: "Maybe I shouldn't have called you."

"No! You just caught me off guard. I'm at the Chelsea Piers ice rink." She had never given him her number. Oh, but he had called her work number, which anyone could find on the internet.

"Are you with someone?"

"No, I'm alone," she replied, repenting it instantly. If she wanted to avoid that man, she should have said something else.

"Then I can join you if you like. I'm not far from Chelsea, I could be there in twenty minutes."

Loreley took a moment to reflect. It was going to happen sooner or later, so best to get it over with now, so she could get on with her usual life.

"You'll have to rent some skates, because I'm just about to go onto the ice." If he didn't know how to skate, it would be fun to see him suffer a little.

"I realize that. I'm on my way."

With her hair tied in a ponytail and shields on the blades, Loreley left the locker room and made her way to the rink.

When she saw that the ice had just been smoothed, she smiled with satisfaction but hoped there would be fewer people on it, especially less children... they would make her apprehensive. It had been while trying to avoid a child that she had fallen. The resulting concussion and trauma to the cervical vertebrae had diminished her sense of direction and although she had long since healed, the pain at the back of her neck persisted.

She removed the shields from the blades and slid lightly over the immaculate surface for a few minutes, letting herself be carried away by the music. The chill of the ice under her feet rose and enveloped her whole body, but it was like a pleasant embrace, sometimes electrifying and at others relaxing.

After performing some warm-up exercises, she amused herself with some cross-steps and simple figures, and then tried some jumps. She finished with a few spins of medium difficulty, but went no further, not wanting to hurt herself.

The music became slow and gentle, as if wrapping itself around her. She lifted her face, gave herself some momentum and raised her arms to shoulder height, then lifted one leg behind her in the Angel pose. As she glided over the ice, with the cool air brushing her skin and lifting her long blonde ponytail, a whirlwind of sensations seemed to direct her towards nothingness, towards an infinite quiet.

Suddenly she became aware that she could collide with the people around her and opened her eyes. A hand touched her outstretched arm; she turned, straightened up and put her raised foot back on the ground.

"Oh... you've arrived!"

"I didn't want to interrupt you," Sonny said. He had appeared beside her almost like magic. Wearing a heavy jacket, a scarf and wool beanie, he skated beside her try to keep up with her.

Loreley slowed down. "Don't apologize, I shouldn't have been doing certain things with all these people around." She usually skated at times when she knew there would be very few people on the ice, but that afternoon she hadn't been able to respect that logical caution.

A little boy darted past, almost touching her, and she swerved to the opposite direction, going closer to Sonny, who put a hand on her shoulder as if to protect her. "Let's not stop here or we'll be run over," he suggested, looking around.

"I'd rather we didn't stop at all..." Saying that, Loreley accelerated leaving the man behind her and went to the opposite side of the rink, where the large windows offered a lovely close-up view of the Hudson River and the pier where the sports center was located.

Sonny watched her perform a slalom to get past the skaters she encountered along the way. He could easily have reached her in a few seconds but preferred not to follow her. It was clear that she was trying to postpone the moment when they would have to clarify things between them, and he didn't want to put too much pressure on her.

What would he say to Loreley? That he was sorry he'd had sex with her? Would she have believed him? He didn't believe it either. Although he did not remember exactly everything that had happened, he knew that he had never given as much vent to his basest instincts as he had that night; perhaps because he was not very sober, but that mattered very little now. What bothered him most was something quite different.

Among all the women at the wedding, I took Hans' sister to bed of all people!

He'd been drinking, but he wasn't so drunk that he didn't know who the woman was that he was dragging into the room. So why her? If Hans found out, he would not believe it was a coincidence; no, he would have accused him of doing it on purpose.

He shrugged. Who cares!

Loreley was an adult. And she had been consenting, drunk but consenting and a participant too. No one could have blamed him, and he was wrong to create problems for himself, especially since she had sneaked out of the hotel room without even waiting for him to wake up, without exchanging a single word with him.

That morning he had struggled to piece together everything that had happened; at first he had felt relieved that the girl had vanished, thus avoiding to have to give and receive explanations, but then he told himself that until they had spoken there would always be something outstanding.

He went to the side of the rink and waited for her to join him, giving her a lovely smile.

"How many years have you skated?" he asked her.

"I started figure skating when I was five years old, but I gave it up in my first year of university. Every now and then I come here to take my mind off things and get a little exercise. It's not healthy to sit for hours in an office or in a courtroom. Besides, I like skating too much. What about you?"

"I used to play hockey when I was little more than a kid. But I stopped a long time ago to dedicate myself to music."

"You wouldn't think so, to look at you."

"I think it's like a riding a bike. You get back on it after a long time, and it's like you'd been riding it just a few days ago. Now we should go and talk somewhere else; maybe we can get a drink here at the bar."

4

With her backpack on her shoulders, Loreley headed to the exit from the sports centre. She had freshened up and taken her hair out of the ponytail to hang loose on her shoulders.

After returning the locker keys to reception, she went into the vast colourful lobby where Sonny would be waiting for her. And there she stopped.

Sonny was busy with two young men who were asking him to put an autograph on their skates, and a girl was wanting to take a selfie with him. Someone had recognized him even without his trademark ponytail at the nape of his neck, wearing a woollen hat and a scarf covering his goatee. When she had invited him to join her at the ice rink she had not taken into account that, after the recent events, Sonny's face had been published in several magazines and newspapers.

This is not what we needed!

If she walked out of there with him, there was the risk that a curious fan might immortalize them together, and the next day she would find herself on social media, complete with allusions of a possible relationship. Maybe Johnny would have believed it, and that was the last thing she wanted.

She thought about it for a few seconds then, deciding she should escape, she joined a small group of people who were on their way out. Before closing the glass door leading to the garden, she turned to Sonny, who was now looking at her confused, still holding the marker pen he had used for the autographs.

The brunette at his side pointed to the surface of the skate where he was to sign, but he ignored her and kept staring at Loreley.

She shook her head a little.

I'm sorry, Sonny! she said to him barely moving her lips and opening her arms in a gesture of resignation. We'll do it some other time. Then she quickly went out and did not slow down until she was a good distance from the blue and red building.

There was a small park next to the sports centre, and although the day wasn't exactly ideal for a stroll, she stopped there for a while. Large clouds covered the sky, heralding a downpour, and the air was already damp, but she didn't mind if she got wet.

The meeting with Sonny had upset her. She kept telling herself that she had to forget what had happened between them and get on with life as usual, but she just couldn't. In any case, she cared too much about Johnny to risk losing him because of a stupid drunken escapade. She had to do something about it before it was too late. But what could she do?

Needing to rest her legs, she sat down on a bench and shook her head smiling. Sonny would be sure to give her a wide berth anyway, after the way she had behaved. Despite her good intentions to clarify things, it seemed that fate had decided it wasn't yet the right moment.

It was six o'clock when she opened the door of her apartment and total silence welcomed her. The cushions on the L-shaped sofa where Johnny was usually lying in the evening, were still in place. She called him in a loud voice and when there was no response, went to check the study to see if he was there working. Whenever he locked himself in there he cut himself off from the rest of the world. She turned on the light, but everything was as she had left it that morning, even the sweatshirt on the arm of the chair. The bedroom was empty too.

He wasn't home yet.

She picked up a pair of his black socks from the floor and threw them into the dirty laundry basket; he would never lose the bad habit of leaving them lying around.

Putting on an apron, she went to the kitchen thinking she would try and prepare something for a dinner that was half-way decent.

Finding some fish in the fridge, she took it out to clean it, and removed the scales under running water so they wouldn't scatter everywhere. Mira, her housekeeper, who was staying with relatives

that weekend, had taught her that. Loreley wanted to take advantage of her absence to spend an evening alone with Johnny, like they used to do in the early days of their relationship. She peeled some potatoes, cut them into small pieces and put them in the pan with the fish, hoping that it wouldn't all turn into a puree or charcoal.

When everything was in the oven, she took a quick shower, put on some lacy underwear and stay-up stockings, and a short blue dress. She combed her hair back and gathered it at the nape of her neck, securing it with an elaborate clasp, then finished with a light touch of makeup.

She took some care in setting the table and placed a small glass container in the middle with a candle burning inside it.

It was getting late and there was still no sign of Johnny. The dinner was getting cold and half the candle had burned away.

At eight o'clock a message arrived on her phone. Don't wait for me, I'm eating out with Ethan.

She sighed. He usually went out with Ethan after dinner, once a week so as not to "lose his friendship", as he told her to justify the evenings he spent with him. Loreley hoped that this exception would not become the rule. He hadn't even taken the time to phone her before she started cooking, knowing full well that it was a chore for her.

All she could do was resign herself to eating dinner alone. She felt disappointed: the one time she had managed to make something decent, Johnny wasn't there to appreciate it.

She didn't waste time clearing the table, and put the fish with the leftover potatoes in a container, stored it in the fridge and went to bed. She was really tired, and still had to catch up on the sleep she had lost the night before studying the Wallace case.

When Loreley woke up the next morning, she found Johnny beside her, still asleep and snoring, which happened when he drank too much in the evening. How strange that she hadn't heard him come home.

I wonder what time he got back!

She looked at the clock: half past nine. As she pulled back the blankets Johnny muttered an expletive and turned over: he didn't work on Saturdays and if he wanted to sleep in, he was free to do so.

Loreley put on her heavy blue satin robe, pinned up her hair and after washing her face went to the kitchen. She was feeling sluggish that morning, as if she still needed some sleep. And yet she had slept even too much that night. A large dose of coffee was what she needed.

She was about to pour it into her cup when she heard Johnny come into the kitchen behind her. His short hair was sticking straight up at the front, his eyes were bloodshot and there were dark circles under them, which revealed insomnia.

"Will you pour me a little too?" he asked, scratching his cheek, rough with a growth of beard.

"I didn't think you'd be up so soon."

He murmured something incomprehensible, but she didn't ask him to repeat it. Sometimes he woke up in a bad mood and this morning had to be one of them, because besides the serious expression on his face, he had not even given her the usual peck on the cheek to say good morning.

Johnny drank the coffee standing up and put the cup down on the table with a thud.

"What do you want to eat?" she asked him, looking puzzled.

"I'm not hungry."

"Do you want to tell me what's wrong with you this morning?" she asked, crossing her arms and standing in front of him.

"Just stuff to do with work."

"Can you tell me about it?"

"I know you won't leave me alone until I do." He scratched the back of his neck. "There's a project I have to work on, but the best way to do it is to go and see the place in person."

"And where's the problem?"

He made a sound which was more like a sarcastic chuckle. "Where's the problem... " he repeated, irritated. "The problem is that the place is in Paris."

"Paris? Don't tell me you have to leave again!" said Loreley alarmed.

"It's not certain, but there's a good chance I'll have to go. And I really don't want to make another trip so soon after the last one."

"When will you know for sure?"

"By Wednesday. If it's like I think, I'll have to leave next weekend."

"How long is it since you came back from California? Not even three weeks... and you're leaving again already!"

"L.A. had nothing to do with work, you know that. I'm already annoyed, so don't you start too!"

Loreley tried to stay calm.

"I'm going to get into a tracksuit and go for a run. I need to let off some steam," he announced, with one foot already outside the kitchen.

"I'll prepare something to eat in the meantime. I'm hungry, and maybe when you get back from your run you will be too."

Johnny headed to the bedroom and Loreley focused on breakfast. How did you make pancakes? Oh, that's it: eggs, flour, sugar... and something else. Damn, I can't remember! Picking up her phone, she did a search on the internet, found the recipe a minute later, read it quickly and immediately set to work.

As she making the toast, she heard her private mobile phone ringing. She turned off the toaster and ran to answer. Recognizing the caller's voice immediately, she jumped with joy.

"Hello, beautiful. Did you miss me?"

"Hans, how are you? Where are you?" She sat on the stool beside the kitchen counter.

"I'm fine, don't worry. Esther and I are back home."

"Really? It was about time!"

She imagined him smiling.

"Don't be envious..."

"I'm not. And Esther? Where is she?"

"Right next to me and she says hello."

"Give her my love. I'm glad you're back in town."

"We're a little less glad, but that's okay. I called to tell you mom would like us to go to her place for lunch tomorrow. She'd love to see us all together again."

"If it's OK with you, it's fine with me. I'll tell Johnny and let you know."

"I hope I see you tomorrow."

"I hope so too. Bye!"

With the cell phone still in her hand, Loreley began thinking about how to tell Johnny about the invitation. He liked to go for a ride on his motorbike on Saturdays and watch football games on Sunday. In the two years they'd been living together, you could count the times her parents had seen him on the fingers of one hand, despite living nearby. Only Central Park, on its shortest side, separated their homes. Convincing him to accept the invitation would not be easy.

Confirming what she had imagined, it required all her diplomatic talents and lawyer's tactics to convince Johnny to go with her. She pointed out that Hans and Esther had been disappointed at his absence from their wedding, and that the least he could do to make up for it would be to attend the lunch that her parents had arranged for the newlyweds' return home.

"Are you wanting me to feel guilty about something that wasn't my doing?"

"I'm just suggesting what you should do so as not to hurt my family's feelings."

He snorted and got up from the table. "Well, alright! But I'm just doing it for you," he said, pointing his finger at her. "You're lucky the Giants aren't playing this week."

Loreley went to him and hugged him, then raised her hand behind his shoulders and made a "v" with the index and middle fingers: Hurrah!

"Thank you! Ask me anything you want and I'll make you happy."

The next day at nine o'clock on the dot, Loreley was clinging to Johnny, sitting behind him on a large motorcycle, for a ride around the streets of New York. There was little traffic at that time on a Sunday and outside Manhattan.

"Ask me anything you want and I'll make you happy," she had told him the day before, and she should have imagined that he would propose a ride on the bike, his second passion after football. Furthermore he knew how much she instead hated the two wheels and she suspected that with that move he had wanted to force her to return the favour.

She hated the full-face helmet because it glued her hair to her head and neck and ruined her hairdo. Sometimes she felt as if she couldn't breathe properly and this made her so restless that it made the bike sway. Even though Johnny had told her she must accompany the movement of the machine with her body around the curves, and not counter it, she didn't find it easy.

Almost three hours passed before that torture ended. When Loreley put her feet back on the ground, she felt she was levitating.

It was ten minutes to noon. She ran into the house for a quick shower, and didn't take the trouble to get dressed up. Instead she slipped on a pair of heavy jeans, a powder blue sweater and a pair of suede boots.

When John came upstairs she was ready. He didn't bother about a shower: they were late enough. He just took off his vest, put on a dressier one, and changed his shoes.

They took Loreley's car and cut through the park to get to the East Side of Manhattan.

Hans opened the door to them.

Loreley hugged him. "Hello, big brother!"

"Hey, I haven't been away all that long," he commented letting her hug him.

"What's all this mushy stuff?" grumbled Albert, her father. "You're late and I'm hungry. You know I don't like having to wait for lunch."

"It's my fault. I took her for a motorcycle ride," John interjected.

"What?" Albert looked furious. "How could you take my little girl on that infernal contraption?" he snapped again. With his imposing stature he towered over the young man, making him look like a twig in comparison.

Loreley rolled her eyes. "Johnny, my dad hates motorcycles more than I do."

"You had to take after someone," he whispered him with a grimace of disappointment. "I was very careful and I didn't go too fast," he said to defend himself.

Ellen Lehmann came to her husband's side. "You're the usual grumpy old man," she reproached him in a tone that barely hid her irritation. "Come and eat, come on, everything's ready," she added, smiling at the guests.

"Loreley, I'm so happy to see you again," her sister-in-law Esther said, hugging her. "Come and sit next to me."

Once the initial annoyance had passed, the conversation among the young people was happy and serene, but between their two hosts it seemed limited to a few polite words.

Loreley looked from her mother to her father occasionally and the sensation of tension that she could feel between them took away her appetite. Johnny, on the other hand, ate as if there were no tomorrow, just like he did at home. She always tried to keep up with him and ended up feeling as if she had a large stone in her stomach; this time, however, she just picked at her food and refused the dessert.

Her stomach was bothering her. A few hours earlier she had also felt some nausea. Maybe it was the motorcycle ride.

When they had finished eating, they raised their glasses to toast the return of the newlyweds.

"I'm so happy for you," Loreley said to her sister-in-law as they stepped out onto the glass-enclosed terrace, full of evergreen plants that went all the way to the ceiling. The men were sitting on the sofa in the living room refuelling themselves with spirits.

"I'm happy too. The right time will arrive for you soon too, wait and see."

"I'm not waiting for it with any trepidation, I can assure you. And he has no intention of remarrying anyway, not in the short term, at least!"

"And who said anything about John? I was referring to a hypothetical unknown man."

"Esther, please!"

"Come on, I'm kidding! But it's true. You might find someone more willing to get involved than he is."

"I'm not thinking about taking the big step for now."

"When you find yourself in front of the right man, you'll want to do exactly what I did."

"That's what you think! I have to dedicate my time to my job now, because I'm still a rookie." The thought of having to start a family complete with children before her career got off the ground gave her a sensation of anxiety.

"By the way, how's it going with that guy you're defending? I read the papers..."

"Well, we're coming up with a line of defence that could reduce the years of any conviction. The facts point to him, so it looks like he'll end up in jail, but I have to find a pretext so he's inside for as little time as possible."

"A plea bargain would be enough to achieve that," commented the other. "Am I wrong? I've seen it happen in some movies."

Loreley smiled. "He doesn't want to know about it. Peter Wallace still can't believe that his Lindsay is dead. He claims that he only slapped her and that when he left she was still alive and well. But the evidence contradicts him. I've only spoken to him once, to try to find out more, but it was like banging against a wall of silence and reticence."

"It won't be easy for you to know the truth if he is not willing to cooperate."

"Do you mind if we change the subject? I'd like to avoid thinking about work tonight."

"I don't mind at all."

Esther looked up at the sliver of sky that could be seen above the tall buildings in front of them.

There were a few moments of silence, as Loreley looked at her sister-in-law's beautiful profile, her long brown hair hanging loose on her shoulders, her gaze lost up there, thinking about who knows what. Not knowing what else to say, Loreley jumped at the first topic that came to mind. "Do you miss your city?" she asked her.

Esther sighed. "No... that is, I can't say. Sometimes I have images, scenes that make me remember it, but I don't feel nostalgia, not enough to want to go back there at all costs. On the other hand, I miss my brother so much, even though I remember so little about him." She paused briefly, rolling a long strand of hair around her index finger. "I would love to see him again, but I don't know where he is, or what happened to him."

"There's must be a clue somewhere."

"Just the note he left for Hans before he disappeared, saying that he wanted to entrust me to him."

Jack had written a note for Hans? she asked herself puzzled.

Hans had never mentioned it to her. She had never been able to understand what had driven Jack to leave so quickly, and it had been over a year now since it had happened.

"Let's do something fun, and go and annoy our men there in the living room," she suggested to Esther.

Coming out of the warmth of the office, the cold air of late October shook her from the sensation of dullness that she had been experiencing for several hours. She had got up that morning with a nausea that had forced her to skip lunch. Most likely she was getting something, maybe it was that malaise that precedes the actual flu.

She looked up. Threatening clouds hid the evening sky and the bare trees seemed gaunt extensions of the ground pointing upwards. The strong wind forced her to close her jacket and knot her silk scarf more tightly around her neck. She didn't like winter, apart from Christmas and some time to enjoy ice skating.

A taxi was dropping off a customer a little further along, so she hurried to it and had it take her home. The smell of food hit her as she opened the door. She took off her coat and put it on the sofa with her bag, then looked into the kitchen. Mira, in her usual blue dress and a large white apron, was setting the table.

"Are you hungry?" the maid asked, and turned to look at her, the small blue eyes smiling.

"Not much really. Is Johnny home?"

"He's closed in the study. Dinner's almost ready."

"I'll go and tell him."

It took quite a while to get him away from the drawing board, but then Johnny devoured a large grilled steak and as many vegetables as she would eat in two meals.

Loreley pushed her plate aside with a grimace of disappointment: she didn't understand why seeing Johnny eating a lot that evening bothered her so much.

Apologizing, she headed to the bathroom to take a shower. The warmth of the water relaxed her, leaving no room for thoughts, and she put up no opposition. Her thoughts wandered far into the past, to her university days, to David, to the time she met Johnny and her future with him. A long-term future... Becoming a real family.

But what the hell was she thinking?!

Johnny had never told her he wanted to make a family with her. He had already had a wife and had run away after a few years. During the marriage he had also had a daughter, about whom he spoke very little, unlike many fathers who...

She interrupted that sequence of thoughts with a shiver, opened her mouth and let the water run into her throat. Spluttering she turned off the faucet. Many seconds passed before she could breathe properly again.

Leaning against the tiled wall, she moved her wet hair off her face. She should start the pill again today and she hadn't had anything. How come?

She had read somewhere that with some types of contraceptives the flow could decrease until it disappeared altogether. Yes, that must be it.

And what if something wasn't right? she asked herself, wringing the water out of her hair, and feeling edgy.

That question worried her so much that she dried herself quickly and got dressed again. She couldn't bear to have that uncertainty hanging over her until the next day, or she wouldn't sleep that night.

When she was ready, she told Johnny that she had forgotten to buy her usual painkillers and disappeared out the door.

Within minutes she was at the pharmacy, just across the street. She went in and asked for a pregnancy test. It was absurd to be so worried, but she knew there could be a margin for error.

Johnny was lying on the couch when she returned, intent on watching a football game, so she took the opportunity to undress and lock herself in the bathroom without being disturbed. No one could get Johnny away from there, not even the prospect of hours of unbridled sex.

She followed the instructions on the packaging and waited for the result. The test should be done in the morning, and by doing it in the evening the most she risked was getting a negative outcome, never a false positive. In that case, she would repeat the test the next morning.

Sitting on the stool, she tried to imagine how Johnny would react if the result turned out to be positive. They had never talked about marriage, let alone having children. It would be a real blow to both of them.

She looked at the clock, then at the test indicator...

5

The test was positive. Just as she feared.

How the hell did that happen? Where had she gone wrong? she wondered as she wrapped the stick in a tissue to throw it in the bin.

After a few minutes she left the bathroom, feeling as if she had been given a strong dose of sedatives. But she didn't join Johnny in the living room. She didn't want him to notice the state she was in, and needed to think about things before talking to him.

She went to the bedroom and finished undressing, took her pyjamas from under the pillow and slipped them on like an automaton. Then she noticed that she had put the pants on back to front, but couldn't be bothered to fix them.

Hearing footsteps, she turned, her back to the door. "Are you going to bed already?" asked Johnny.

"I'm very tired. Do you mind?" She pretended to be looking for something in the drawer of the bedside table so he wouldn't notice she was upset.

"No, not at all... I'll join you as soon as the game ends, it's half-time now." He walked towards her.

A mask of impassibility, the same one she wore in court, dropped over her face.

"All right." She closed the drawer again after taking out a packet of tissues she didn't need.

John hugged her from behind, his hands around her waist. "Go to bed," he told her. I'll turn off all the lights and close the shutters."

She turned her head to look at him sideways.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" he asked her.

"You hate doing those things, I always have to do it."

He smiled. «Since you're going to sleep and I have to go out, I'll make the effort to do it."

"Are you going out with Ethan?"

"As usual. But don't worry, we won't be too late tonight."

John broke the embrace, gave her a light kiss on the temple and left the room.

Loreley slid under the covers, but struggled to get to sleep. For the first time, she felt happy that Johnny was going out without her in the evening. She hadn't recovered from what had happened at Hans's wedding yet, and now she had a bigger problem. Neither of them had considered bringing a child into the world, not now.

Two days went by, and Loreley had not yet decided to let John know that he was about to become a father for the second time. She wanted to keep that secret to herself, although in a glimmer of rationality she vowed she would tell him as soon as possible, in the hope that he would not react negatively.

It was unbelievable that she could get pregnant despite taking the necessary precautions. When she was at home it was all she could think about; and it was only when she was in the office that she could get her mind off it. Work kept her busy and gave her a little respite.

That Wednesday morning she was in a courtroom with her client, Peter Wallace.

Loreley had seen defendants nervous, repentant, worried, frightened, or even pleased with themselves, but she had never seen such a detached expression on the face of any of them. For this client it was as if what was happening around him did not concern him at all. He sat there next to her, his eyes staring into space, with his hands clasped in a pose which would have been more suitable inside a church than a courtroom.

Loreley had met Judge Henry Palmer during her internship and had appreciated him for his humanity, which was not discernible now, however. His eyes were half-hidden by the drooping upper

eyelids and the thin lips were tightly closed, as usual. She rarely saw him smile during a hearing. At a rough guess, he must have put on at least ten pounds since the last time she had seen him, and his belly was now pressing against the edge of the bench. Even the toga couldn't disguise it.

The judge adjusted his spectacles on his nose before asking her the question she expected. "How does your client plead?" His voice rang out loudly, but a little hoarse, as if he had just recovered from a sore throat.

She turned to Peter Wallace, who did not blink an eye. The only thing that let her know that he was alive was a barely perceptible twitch of his well-shaped jaw. "Innocent, Your Honour. My client has no previous record, he has always led a quiet life, and the crime of which he is accused is yet to be proven. The evidence against him is based solely on an unreliable statement. I ask for him to be released on bail."

"Prosecutor..." said the judge, inviting him to speak.

"The defendant has no priors, that's true, but as has already been pointed out, he has an aggressive nature, and there is always a first time for any act. Furthermore, he could leave the State, his family has the means to help him. I ask that the defence's request be rejected."

After careful consideration, the judge decided: "Bail is denied."

The sharp blow of the gavel ended the hearing

Her client turned to her then, his green eyes devoid of light.

"I'm sorry."

"It wasn't me. I know that no one believes me; not even you, counselor."

There was no humility in his tone nor self-pity, but no arrogance either. She saw him push a small lock of curly, Titian red hair from his eyes.

"Goodbye, Counselor Lehmann," he dismissed her, a moment before the guards arrived to escort him out of the courtroom.

She walked away quickly as another defendant and his defence attorney entered and were about to take their positions.

When she arrived home, Loreley threw herself on the sofa without even taking off her shoes. She had worked like she did every other day, but she felt more tired than usual. Even the scent of pot-pourri that permeated the air seemed stronger than usual. She turned up her nose.

When John returned shortly after, she raised a hand to greet him from the sofa, too comfortable to stand up and go to meet him.

"Are you all right?" he asked, approaching her. "You haven't even changed."

"I'm tired lately, you know that."

He took off his jacket, threw it on the armrest of the sofa, and after taking off her shoes sat down next to her. "Why don't you take a break, then?"

"I can't."

Johnny frowned. "Because of the case you're dealing with?"

"Yes, of course."

"Taking a weekend off won't change anything for your client, but it can only do you good."

"I don't know if it's the right moment..."

"Not even if I asked you to come to Paris with me this weekend?"

Loreley stared. "You never ask me to come with you when you go away for work."

"I know you love Paris and it's quite a while since you were there. I can see you're really worn out and I don't like it."

"Oh, well, I could give it some thought," she said as she pushed his hair back from his forehead with a small caress.

John smiled at her. "Just some thought?"

Loreley quickly reflected. She would have to talk to him, sooner or later, and couldn't let any more time go by or it would make the situation worse. Maybe Paris was the right occasion and the right place for that kind of revelation.

"Okay, that's fine. The answer is yes, I'll come with you."

"We leave on Friday morning, at dawn. And not in a manner of speaking. So have a word with your boss and ask him give you some time off until Monday. Paris is not just around the corner."

It would be a real struggle to get Kilmer to agree to her taking time off.

Well, she didn't give a damn, she had every right to it!

Paris! The quintessential city of love and age-old haven for artists of all kinds, Loreley was reading in the hotel brochure.

She put it back on the ivory-colored bedside table, wondering whether that city would help her and John to bolster their feelings for each other. She hoped so with all her might.

Going to the French doors, she opened them wide and went out onto the small balcony with the wrought-iron balustrade. Their room was on the fourth floor of a pretty Art Nouveau hotel in the centre of town, along the boulevard that led to Rue de Rivoli, the street bordering the Louvre museum.

The sun had set hours ago, but the air was not as cold and humid as she imagined it might be at that time of year. She looked at the tree-lined square below, with several benches and a marble fountain. There was a line of rental bicycles stretching along the pavement, and a little further away she could see the street, quiet at that hour, with its many shops.

As soon as they had stepped into the room, Johnny had thrown himself on the bed to recover from the fatigue of the flight. She had managed to sleep on the plane and, apart from a little nausea, she felt well and eager to do some sightseeing around the city.

"Come back inside, you're letting cold air in," Johnny grumbled, pulling the blanket up to his chin.

Loreley sighed. There was just no hope that he could see that place through the same eyes she did, she thought, closing the shutters. In the time it took her to pull their clothes out of the suitcase and arrange them in the small closet, Johnny had already fallen asleep. So she picked up the book she had brought along, lay down on the bed, and began to read.

After fifteen minutes she closed it snorting. Okay! He could go on sleeping, but she didn't want to be closed inside the hotel listening to him snoring. She fixed her shirt, picked up her handbag and opened the door.

"Where are you going?"

Loreley stopped. "To take a walk along the boulevard. I wanted to let you rest and not disturb you..."

Johnny pulled himself up and leaned on his elbow. "Come over here to me. I want to celebrate the first day in Paris in my own way."

"Then you're not so tired after all!" Unbuttoning her shirt slowly in a way that clearly showed her intentions, she threw the garment onto the ottoman, unzipped her skirt and it slip down along her legs.

"The rest is up to you," she said, moving towards him until she was so close she could feel his breath on her face.

Johnny put out his hand and within seconds she stood naked in front of him. His desire was clear to see.

That evening, he surprised her by indulging in foreplay much longer, knowing how much she liked it. It was one of the few times Loreley felt filled with attention.

If he loved her, maybe he wouldn't react badly at the news of the baby. Maybe she was just creating problems for herself and exaggerating them. Difficult as it might be, she found herself thinking about a life with him and their child. But why had it happened at that very moment, so soon?

The next morning, John left her alone and went to discuss the project with a construction company, Loreley decided to visit the Louvre Museum. She had been there already, some years before, but hadn't been able to see all of it.

She spent hours exploring the rooms, going up and down the stairs looking for the pavilions where the works that interested her were displayed, and stopping every now and then to rest.

Late in the afternoon she went shopping along Boulevard de Sébastopol and bought just a few things, because not much would fit in the suitcase.

When they met up again at sunset, Johnny suggested they go to the Eiffel Tower. They had the taxi drop them off close by and strolled along the banks of the Seine watching the sun disappear in an explosion of red and orange behind the buildings, as the first lights of the evening appeared.

The top of the tower could be seen in the distance, soaring above the trees. When they arrived at the foot of the imposing metal structure it was fully illuminated.

Loreley looked at people lined up in front of the ticket office and heard John muttering. "Look how many people are going up to the top! Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Not if you don't feel like it," she replied, trying in vain not to let her disappointment show.

"All right, I'll do it to please you this time too."

He was doing his best to make her happy, she thought.

"Maybe I should make you smile more often, your eyes are shining."

She really wanted to show him how much she appreciated those words, but gave him a fleeting kiss instead: there were too many people around.

They arrived on the rooftop panoramic terrace an hour later. Seen from above, Paris was indescribably beautiful, the lights multiplying as the minutes passed, creating brilliant patterns interspersed with splashes of tiny shimmering dots.

The crisp evening air made Loreley shiver a little, which may not have been due to the cold breeze, but the knowledge that it was time to reveal her secret to him.

She looked around and noticed a red sign above their heads: "Bar and Champagne", she read.

"What if we get a drink?" she proposed.

He followed the direction of her gaze and smiled. "It's a great idea."

It might be a mistake to talk to him about such a sensitive subject in a public place, but this was a special occasion and she didn't want to waste it. She had to try. It was all so perfect.

With the second glass of champagne, she decided to make the dreaded announcement. She took a breath, feeling the rapid pulsating of the artery in her neck. Be brave... trust yourself!

"Johnny, I have to tell you something important."

He placed the glass on the table. "I'm listening."

"I've been very focused on work in recent months; you know that, don't you?"

"What are you wanting to say?"

"Well, you know..." How hard it is!

"Loreley, what is it?" he began to get agitated. He changed his position.

"I'm pregnant," she told him.

A countless number of times she had tried to guess what his reaction would be. She had imagined everything, but not that he would burst out laughing.

"This is really funny. You're not going to scare me. I'm not falling for it."

Scare him? She was speechless. Her thoughts were muddled and she couldn't utter another word, but the expression on her face must have said it all, because he stopped laughing.

"You take the pill, you can't be pregnant! Don't joke about it."

"I'm not joking in the least."

"Have you stopped using it without informing me? Without asking my opinion?" he asked her, raising his voice.

"It's not like that. Don't get upset, keep your voice down..." she begged him, almost whispering.

"Now I understand your behaviour these last few days!"

"Try to stay calm, please!"

"How can you expect me to remain calm after you've put me against the wall?" His gaze seemed to express contempt. "How could you play such a rotten trick on me?"

He made to leave, but she stopped him, grabbing him by the arm. In turn he blocked her hand, clutching her wrist: "Don't touch me..." he ordered. Then he let go and without adding anything else, walked out on her.

In disbelief, she watched him go through the door, his step stiff and fast. She felt as if she were suffocating.

Maybe he was feeling just like that too, she thought. She felt betrayed. From his point of view she couldn't blame him, but she had not done it to him on purpose; this had to count for something.

Feeling let down, she paid the bill and walked to the elevator.

As it descended, she looked down at the city below for the last time, her heart pounding in her chest.

She laid her forehead on the glass wall and closed her eyes. Feeling the tears start, she blinked trying to stop them. Fortunately, people were too busy enjoying the view to pay attention to her.

She hoped Johnny was down there waiting for her, but didn't see him.

Sudden flashes of light made her to look up before she even set foot on the ground: the Eiffel Tower, already illuminated, had just lit up with more bright flashing lights, like the ones you'd see on a grand and sparkling Christmas tree. It seemed to want to encourage her not to lose heart. It was an invitation to smile; and it was successful, even if just for an instant.

On the way back, she called John and sent more than one message to his cell phone, with no reply. When she arrived at the hotel, the room was empty, as she had already imagined.

She kept her phone close to her. But, in the end, realizing he would not return that night, she felt the need to hear a friendly voice and called David. And, for the second time, shared the news of the baby on the way.

Her friend was speechless. On the other end of the phone, all she could hear was a cat meowing.

"Hey, David, say something!"

"My God, Loreley! And that's how you tell me, over the phone?"

"I have no other way to do it right now. Wouldn't you agree?" At that moment she needed his comforting virtual hugs, not reproach.

"I am happy about the good news, but not for the situation you're in now... Holy cow, you should have told him before you left. You would have spared yourself from being alone to face all this!"

"It seemed like a good idea, but it's done now."

"Don't jump to any hasty conclusions," he advised her. "Sometimes the first reactions are disproportionate compared to how it feels when you've had time to reflect. Of course, it will be a big change!"

"I would have expected anything, but not to get pregnant. I wasn't ready for it, and I still don't think I am," she retorted, tired of the bitterness she was feeling. "It took me a while to..."

She stopped. If she herself had needed days to accept the news, why did she expect it to be different for John? "All right, I understand. I'll wait a little while before I take his no as final."

"Now go to sleep and keep me posted, please."

"Of course, I will. Good night." She was about to hang up, but heard her friend's voice call her again.

"Wait, Loreley. Best wishes for the baby!"

6

Loreley was still half-asleep when she heard the door of the room open. She lay still, opened her eyes a little, and through her eyelashes watched John open the closet, pull out the few things he had brought with him, and then put them in the duffel bag.

He moved as stealthily as a thief. He was leaving.

Her heart was beating erratically and it was if it didn't want to start beating regularly again. She took a deep breath and, as soon as that unpleasant sensation ceased, she pulled back the blankets and got out of bed, ready to face him. She could not allow him to leave like this, with the conviction that she had deceived him.

He turned to look at her.

"I'm going to the appointment with the architect, Morel, then I'll go back to New York... alone. You go ahead and finish your weekend," he told her, stabbing her with his eyes.

"Stop acting like this! You didn't even let me talk when we were on the Eiffel Tower."

"And I don't want to hear what you have to say now either. You're a lawyer: if you can hoodwink an entire jury to save a client, who knows what you'd say to save yourself."

"That's a low blow!"

"And how would you define yours?" He pointed to her belly.

It wasn't easy to argue in those conditions, but she had to try, at least. "I didn't do it on purpose. I never stopped taking the pill, you have to believe me!"

"I'm sorry, but I can't." John grabbed his bag, went to the door, and walked out of the room, with not another glance at her.

Loreley stood motionless for a few seconds. She should have told him to go to hell and that she'd take care of the child herself, but she had to try to convince him of the truth before going that far; because as things stood now, if that man didn't deserve to have a child, his child instead deserved to have a father. Perhaps one day he would change his mind. Other men had changed their mind after they saw their child. The court had taught her that in some cases it was necessary to put pride aside.

No, if there was even just a slight hope, she felt it was her duty to make at least one attempt to straighten things out.

She got into her jeans, sweater and ankle boots, took her jacket and rushed out.

The elevator near the room was busy and the call button on the one opposite was red too.

She had to take the stairs. If she was fast enough, she would be able to reach him before he had time to find a taxi.

Fourth floor.

Steps, landing, steps.

Third floor.

Steps, landing, steps.

Faster, faster...

Second floor.

Steps, landing, nothing...

She missed her footing and the next steps came up to meet her. She screamed in terror.

A searing pain, then a whirlwind of dark shadows swallowed her into nothingness.

The slight burning on her arm and the pain in her loins made her gradually emerge from the dark fog of her senses. She couldn't open her eyes.

"Miss Lehmann... Can you hear me?"

The words had been spoken in hesitant English, with a strong foreign accent, and the female voice seemed to come from very far away.

Just a few meaningless syllables came out of her mouth. Her tongue was stuck to the palate and her lips were dry. She could only nod.

"She's coming around. You can take her to the ward." Now it was a man speaking, but this time in perfect French. Loreley thanked her father for forcing her to learn that language when they were still living in Zurich.

Loreley stiffened: where was she? The question hung in the air and a brief silence that followed. Then some confused memories assailed her with the force of a sledgehammer. The ambulance, the emergency room, the visit... and then nothing.

She was in hospital!

Her whole body began to tremble violently.

Someone tried to hold her still, but she couldn't control the intense tremors that were shaking her body.

"I think it's a reaction to the stress of trauma," she heard someone say.

What had they done to her? she wondered, in the grip of a terrible suspicion. She wanted to know, but couldn't ask. Her teeth were chattering like a jackhammer and her heart seemed to want to beat even faster; it was as if she had a hive of angry wasps in her head. She breathed deeply several times and forced herself to calm down.

"That's right, good... like that. Don't be afraid."

That male voice again, so reassuring.

"Doctor, Professor Leyrac is looking for you in room two." A woman had intervened.

"Yes, I'll be there right away. Take Miss Lehmann to her room," the man repeated.

Loreley became aware of footsteps moving away. The tenuous numbness that still enveloped her mind was wearing off. A few moments later, she managed to open her eyes.

The first thing she saw were the doors of a large elevator that were closing, then the silhouette of a woman in a white coat who was about to press a button.

Not long after, they moved her from the stretcher onto a bed.

"You'll feel better tomorrow," a nurse reassured her as she fixed the IV drip onto the support rod.

"My baby..." she managed to say touching her belly.

Loreley awoke with some difficulty. Even though it was late morning, she still felt drowsy. It had been almost impossible to sleep peacefully that night, what with bells ringing in continuation, hurried footsteps in the corridors, whispered voices and bright lights.

A hand rested on her arm. It was a nurse.

"Miss Lehmann, you must come with me. The doctor would like to talk to you. You know, about being discharged."

"Oh! I'll be getting out, then!"

"The doctor will explain everything to you." She bent over to help her get out of bed.

Although her head was aching and one knee was swollen, Loreley refused her help and limped after her.

As they went along, she heard what sounded like an argument coming from a room down the hall.

"I don't understand, there must have been a mix-up..."

"Doctor Duval, I had asked you to keep an eye on the results of the tests, and the hCG in particular; I notice it's the one that's missing."

It was a voice she had already heard.

"Here... come in here, ma'am," the nurse said to her, pointing to the half-open door of the room from which the voices were coming, then opened it wide to let her pass.

A smell of chlorine disinfectant hovered in the room. The person sitting behind the desk did not even raise his eyes from the papers he was examining. Loreley noticed only the short, brown hair, broad shoulders under the white coat and lightly tanned hands. The image of that doctor gave her a sense of disquiet, unlike the voice, which instead was able to make her feel good.

The young blonde female doctor who was standing next to him gave her a fleeting glance, then invited her to sit down.

"Miss Lehmann, it seems that you are in good health and..." he said to her in a barely comprehensible English.

"Unfortunately, there is one analysis that is still missing," the other interrupted. "You can go home, Miss Lehmann. As soon as we get the results, we'll put them in the file," the man continued, lifting his face and looking at Loreley.

Only then was she able to see his features, the dark blue eyes, like the sky at dusk.

"If there is any news, we will let you know. Please leave us your email and... Miss Lehmann, is something wrong?"

"Jack?! Jack Leroy?" shouted Loreley.

"What, excuse me?"

She stared at him, dumbfounded. God, it looks just like him! He was identical to Esther's brother, with a beard...

The doctor got up with a worried expression and went closer to her, then turned to his colleague. "Call Dr. Julies."

"Right away, Dr. Legrand," said the other, lifting the phone.

Dr. Legrand? What a fool she was! thought Loreley, disappointed. Jack spoke perfect English; that unknown man managed quite well, of course, but the way he pronounced vowels was closed, the rs were rolled, and it had a sweeter sound.

Sensing his concern, she stopped him: "I'm fine, I assure you. I just felt like I'd seen you before... that I knew you, actually; but I was wrong."

"Then we can go ahead with discharging you." He sat down, took the pen that the female doctor gave him, and scribbled something on a couple of sheets of paper. "Can you call someone to come and pick you up?"

Loreley stiffened, clasped her hands, and looked down on the group of pastel-colored folders on one side of the desk.

"Miss Lehmann..." he urged her.

She raised her eyes again and met his, which were looking at her attentively; she tried to assume a more relaxed attitude.

"Did you come to Paris alone? Do you have anyone here who can help you?"

She thought of Johnny, but immediately banished that idea. Maybe he was already in New York. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "You said a little while ago that I can leave. I don't need anything or anyone," she said in a firm voice.

An expression that was a mixture of surprise and skepticism appeared on his face. Lying to a person who had such an intense and shrewd gaze was not at all easy. The defensive position she had taken was already betraying her. But when it's all said and done, wasn't it up to her to decide for herself?

"I can assure you that I am telling you the truth. I don't have anyone to contact and I can manage by myself."

There were a few moments of silence.

"All right, we'll discharge you as planned," the doctor said. "In the meantime, I'm prescribing a treatment you can do at home." He handed her a couple of pieces of paper.

She took them and folded them without even glancing at them. All she wanted was to escape as quickly as she could from that situation which was making her feel uncomfortable.

"Luckily there were no consequences and the child is fine; but you should rest for at least a couple of days," he went. "You can have the stitches in your head removed in a week's time, in any hospital. And keep the knee brace on for at least fourteen or at the most twenty days."

"Of course, I will."

"It would be better if you came back here for a check-up, before you leave. It's a precaution that I feel I should advise you."

"I'll think about it. I'm also going to have to contact the health insurance people. Thank you, Dr. Legrand." She took her leave, holding onto the arm of the chair as she got up, then looked at the other doctor: "Doctor..."

She forced herself to smile at her, and said goodbye with a nod of her head, then turned to leave the infirmary. Her mind seemed emptied of all thought, but filled with an anger she never believed she could feel towards John and towards herself.

Being in that emotional state lowered her attention span and she placed her weight on the wrong leg. She put out her arms in search of some support, but they hit a kidney-shaped metal container that crashed to the ground with a great clang, sending the contents flying.

With her healthy knee and palms on the floor, Loreley looked at the damage, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

She felt two strong hands on her shoulders helping her get to her feet, as a nurse rushed to put syringes, tubes of ointment, gauze and scissors back in the container.

"Are you all right, Miss Lehmann?" asked Legrand.

"Yes, there's nothing wrong. Thank you, doctor, I just forgot I had hurt my leg. I've always been a little careless. Now you can laugh, if you want," she joked.

The doctor looked relieved and his lips opened in a smile.

7

Loreley put on a pair of heavy jeans, a turtle-neck sweater, a semi-waterproof coat and a pair of low-heeled ankle boots. She covered her head with a wool beret to hide the dressing, and wound a scarf around her neck.

After checking that she hadn't forgotten anything in the room or bathroom, she went down to the hotel lobby and paid the bill, leaving her luggage in storage so she could go to the hospital unencumbered. She had five hours to undergo the check-up, pick up her suitcase again and go to the airport.

The reception called a taxi for her and she sat down in an armchair to wait for it.

To make sure she was well enough to make the return trip, she had stayed in the hotel longer than planned and had tried to beat the boredom reading and watching television. She left the room only to go down to the restaurant. The staff had been very kind to her: from time to time the housemaid would knock on her door to ask if she needed anything.

She had received two phone calls during those days. The first had been from David, asking her if there was any news regarding the situation with her fiancé. When she had told him about Johnny's untimely departure and her accident, he was speechless at first; then he'd had a fit of rage peppered with colourful insults, followed by many words of advice.

He had also ordered her to stay in the room warm and safe, as if she might have thrown herself into the Paris nightlife with her knee still swollen! At the end of the lecture he promised that he would pick her up at the airport.

The second phone-call had come from a nurse, who told her the result of the missing test, and also advised her to undergo a check-up before returning home. Having already moved the flight to the following day, Loreley had immediately booked the visit for the same day as her departure.

The arrival of the taxi put an end to the passage of those brief memories of her last days in Paris. Annoyed by the long wait Loreley got into the car and looked askew at the driver.

"Take me to the Hôpital Saint-Louis, please." She settled into the seat. "If I had to wait this long for a taxi in Manhattan, I'd get to the office quicker on foot," she thought aloud.

"Do it now, then!" the taxi driver told her piqued, in not so good English, the vehicle still standing beside the pavement. He turned to look at her with a sarcastic half-smile: "You know, it's only a couple of miles away."

She didn't turn a hair. "I would have walked, but I'm going to the hospital. Don't you think that implies something?" she responded, convinced of what she was saying.

If it wasn't for her knee which was still sore, she really would have walked there, taking advantage of it for a good stroll in the fresh air, after four days in bed.

The driver shook his head and departed. Loreley leaned back in the seat and tried to calm down. She was aware that every time she got into a taxi in a bad mood, she took it out on the driver, but having to wait for over half an hour was really too much.

I go to Paris and have to endure all this!

Kilmer was sure to be having a good laugh about it, she told herself, thinking back to the phone call she had made to him the day after being discharged from the hospital.

When she arrived at reception, she asked to be visited by Dr. Legrand, but he was busy in the ward that morning; according to the nurse she would have to settle for the doctor on duty, but she had no intention of letting another man's hands touch her.

Faced with Loreley's obstinate insistence, the copper-haired clerk with little glasses on a chain made an attempt to please her, or maybe just get rid of her. She said she would ask the doctor if he was available for a private visit if she was willing to pay for it. Loreley didn't think about it for an instant, and just waved her credit card.

She was forced to wait for over an hour, but eventually Dr. Legrand found time to receive her.

After medicating her head wound, he took her into his office, a more welcoming place than the cold clinic where he had visited her and more appropriate for a private conversation.

"You're departing today, then, Miss Lehmann."

"Paris is a beautiful city, but I can't wait to get back to New York, after this..." She pointed to the patch on the right side of her head, above the ear.

"I can imagine. I've been promising myself for a while to take another trip back to your city, but in the end I go somewhere else, to places that are much closer. I can't take enough days off to make such a long journey." He crossed his legs and leaned back in his chair. "I should organize my work better, so I have at least one week to really enjoy the vacation."

"Well, if you do come, let me know. I will be happy to see you again and show you some interesting little-known corners, to return your kindness."

He smiled and Loreley found himself thinking yet again that he really looked like Jack Leroy.

She opened her handbag and pulled out a small printed rectangular card from her wallet.

"This is my business card with the email and mobile phone number I use for work. You already have my personal one; but just so you don't have to go looking for it..." She took a black pen from the desk, turned the card over and wrote the number. "Here it is. Call me whenever you want. If I don't pick up right away, leave a message and I'll call you back."

He reached out, took the card and read the heading, raising an eyebrow.

"You're a lawyer, then."

"Yes, a criminal lawyer."

Legrand put the card in the pocket of his coat.

"If I should come to New York, I'll keep your offer in mind." He picked up the white envelope that was beside the emergency room file and pulled out a sheet of paper.

"Miss Lehmann, let's get to the point: the hCG are within normal values, even if they are a bit high. Since your pregnancy is just at the beginning, you don't need to rush to the doctor immediately, especially now that we have done the tests and they are all normal; in about one month, when the routine checks begin, take this with you too." He gave her the sheet of paper.

"To tell the truth I've already made an appointment for next week. A little early, I know, but I'd like to have some answers to a few questions."

"If I can be of help, I..."

"Of course you could, but I'm afraid I'm stealing you away from your patients too long."

"Let's do this," he replied, looking at the clock on the wall, "I have about an hour's lunch break." He sat up straight and leaned toward her. "If you like, we can talk about it while we have a bite to eat: what do you say?"

Loreley made her calculations. Her flight was due to leave in about three hours, so she would get there in time if they didn't take too long.

"It's a great idea. If it's okay with you, it's good for me. I promise you I'll be brief."

In her seat on the plane with a glass of tea, Loreley reflected on what Dr. Legrand had told her. The fact that she became pregnant despite taking the pill regularly could be due to several reasons. The previous month she had been ill for a few days and had vomited several times. Following that episode the doctor had then prescribed her some intestinal disinfectants; and of course there were the painkillers she often took for the pain in her head. As a result, the hormones contained in the pill may have been malabsorbed with a consequent impairment of the contraceptive activity.

Now it made sense, though getting Johnny to understand it was not going to be easy. But did he deserve an explanation after his behaviour in Paris? Rightly or wrongly, he should not have reacted in such a bad way and left her alone.

What faith could she have in a man who runs away instead of dealing with the situation?

She took the glass of tea to her lips, but jumped as the plane shook slightly and a rivulet of tea splashed onto her sweater.

Damn, she was more inattentive than usual! She dried it with the paper napkin that the flight attendant had given her with the drink and her thoughts quickly returned to where they had left off.

Of late, she too had behaved in a similar way. Hadn't she run away, and on at least two occasions, from Sonny? And had she had the guts to confess to Johnny what happened between her and that man?

Slumping back in her seat, she sighed. There were some important decisions to be made: about her pregnancy, about her relationship with John, and about the outstanding issue with Sonny. She could not hope to continue down that path and point the finger at others. There was a saying that lies attract more lies, until you no longer knew how to handle them. And you finally end up with your bum on the ground!

She turned her face towards the window and looked down, but couldn't see the earth below them.

There was still quite a lot of time before they arrived at JFK airport, where David would be waiting for her: he always kept his promises. With that thought and a smile on her lips she sank into a long, heavy sleep.

She was awakened by the voice of the flight attendant advising them of the imminent landing, inviting passengers to fasten their seat belts. She had slept a long time! At that moment she felt strangely serene despite everything that had happened.

To her great relief, her feet were once again on American soil. She found it difficult being closed in a metal box all that time: in that she was almost like John.

Outside the airport, the drop in temperature forced her to stop and fasten the collar of her coat a little tighter over the scarf and put on her hat. At the roar of a plane overhead, she looked up. The sky was a deep blue with some light streaks of orange, testifying that the sun had just set. The lights of the aircraft disappeared inside a dark cloud.

People were walking quickly to grab the cabs lined up along the sidewalk, and others were looking around for something or someone. A little like her, as she searched for her friend David.

He was standing on the opposite sidewalk. As soon as their eyes met, he smiled and crossed the road to meet her, with his long bowed legs that made her smile every time she stopped to observe them.

She raised her hand to greet him, happy to have him as a friend. To be honest, in their university days, when they'd had wild time together, she would have chosen him as a future husband, if it hadn't been for one small detail: he had eventually realized that he was more attracted to men.

It's never pleasant to return to an empty house, but for Loreley it was like being on the end of a punch in the stomach. Not only was John not there, as she already imagined, but he had taken away most of his belongings.

Half of the walk-in closet had been emptied, and he had left only summer clothes. There was nothing of his in the bathroom cabinet, apart from a disposable razor now unusable.

She checked the whole apartment from top to bottom, and opened the windows to change the air despite it being freezing outside. She searched for other signs that might give her a clue as to what John had done in her absence, but there was little to understand: he would be back only to get the rest of his things.

After unpacking her suitcase, she put her dirty laundry to wash and took a shower, being careful not to touch her hair and wet the dressing. There were still three days to go before she went to the doctor to have the stitches removed. She looked at her knee and noticed that the swelling had gone down and the asymmetry between right and left was barely visible. There was some pain if she pressed her finger against the kneecap, otherwise all she felt was a sensation of heat and numbness of the skin.

Instead of getting dressed, she put on a heavy dark red satin robe and threw herself onto the sofa to rest.

Everything in the room seemed unchanged. There was the round table of white timber with a tray holding scented candles on top of it; the cabinet full of crystal glasses and vintage dishes from the Victorian era; the shelves with books and ornaments purchased in various antique markets; a mirror with a decoupage wooden frame; the tiled fireplace with glass walls and the bar with its high stools.

Everything was perfect and in its usual place.

She, instead, began to feel a vague uneasiness, a sense of non-belonging. They had taken that rented loft together and now, without John to fill it with his presence, she didn't even feel it was hers anymore. They had always split the expenses, but now she would have to pay everything and she wasn't so sure she could afford it without chipping into the trust fund her father had given her when she had left home a few years earlier.

She had promised herself not to take a single dollar from that account. She wanted to manage by herself. To be on the safe side, though, she should leave that apartment and get a smaller one in a less expensive area. But before going to an agency, she had to be sure about which direction her relationship with John would go. She wanted to give him time to reflect and change his mind, so she wouldn't regret one day that she hadn't tried, and give her child what it was entitled to: a family and the love of both parents.

A rumbling in her stomach suggested she had to eat something, but in the emotional state she was in, she didn't feel like cooking. Mira could have prepared something good for her if she had been there. She had given her another day off so she could have time to think about what to do, because she didn't know what she would find when she got home.

It would be very sad if one day she was forced to tell her that she had to look for another job. She had become attached to that hard-working woman, with a thousand resources; she had a lot of confidence in her and sending her away would be a great loss. Mira seemed to be attached to her too, and often said that she had never been treated so well as in that house and that she never wanted to leave her. Poor Mira!

She touched her belly and laughed in a high-pitched, wavering, nervous way, until that laughter turned to tears, which released the tension and plummeted her into mental stagnation.

The sharp beep of her mobile phone reminded her that it needed charging. Very slowly she got up and connected it to the charger; then tried to sleep, with no success.

She decided to call Hans; she needed to hear a familiar voice. This happened to her every time she felt down in the dumps, unlike John, who clammed up.

John... he was always in her head!

With scatty gestures she typed the number.

"Loreley, how are you? Did you have fun in Paris?" her brother asked her.

"Of course I had a great time..." She slipped on the last syllable and cleared her throat.

"Are you sure everything's okay?"

"I just woke up and I still feel a bit groggy. How are you and Esther doing?"

"We're well. I'm still in the office and she's at her Mom's."

"Speaking of Esther, I met someone in Paris," she hesitated... was it important to tell him? Maybe not, but why not? "You see, the first time I saw this person I mistook him for Jack, Esther's brother."

There was silence at the other end of the phone.

"Hans, are you there?"

"I heard you."

"Sorry, you're acting as if I didn't tell you anything."

"Don't apologize, just tell me who this guy is?"

"I met him when I ended up in hospital and..." she froze. Damn it! She didn't want to tell him about the fall.

"What are you talking about? What happened?"

"Nothing serious. I'm fine, really!" She slicked a lock of hair behind her ears to hear better.

"Tell me the truth!" insisted Hans in a sharp voice.

When he used that tone, it meant he wouldn't give up until he got convincing answers.

"I stumbled on the stairs of the hotel in Paris. Thankfully I didn't hurt myself much, just a swollen knee and a few stitches in my head."

"I'll pop over and see you."

"Not now. I'm still recovering from the flight back." She didn't want him to come here and notice Johnny's absence.

"I'll come later, so you'll have plenty of time to rest."

"I need to have some peace for a while. Don't insist! And I'm warning you: if you come anyway, I won't open for you."

Moments of silence went by. "All right, but we'll catch up during the week, okay?"

"Let me come to you, I'm often around your way. That way I'll see Esther too."

"She'll certainly be happy to see you. Now tell me about that man, You said you met him in the hospital. Was he a doctor?"

"The one who stitched me up. And this guy is the spitting image of Jack with a beard. When I heard him speak, I told myself that it couldn't be him. His English is not as perfect as that other's was, and it has a French cadence. Furthermore, the staff referred to him as Dr. Jacques Legrand. So it's clear he can't be your brother-in-law. He looked at me like he'd never seen me before."

"It's strange the things that happen in life..."

Loreley had the impression she could hear a note of concern in her brother's voice, as well as perplexity. "That's what I thought."

"Please don't tell Esther what you just told me. It took her a long time to accept the disappearance of the only remaining member of her family."

"Of course not! Don't worry."

"What about John?"

"He's fine, much better than me. He's at work right now." Of that she was sure.

"Say hello from me. I have to go now, I'm sorry, I have a meeting in a few minutes. Let mom know you're home, and try to rest."

A little more rest and getting back to walking well would mean she'd need physiotherapy! she thought snorting.

"I have to go back to the office tomorrow, though, or Kilmer will fire me."

"Try to stand up to him, don't let him intimidate you. See you during the week."

8

Sonny closed the piano and threw paper and pencil onto the top of it; the new composition required a lot of concentration, which had been lacking recently.

He got off the stool, walked out of the study and opened the window of the living room to go into the garden. What he needed was some cold air to snap out of it.

Ever since he had seen Loreley at the ice rink, he thought of her often and, despite trying to immerse himself in his work, he couldn't drive her from his mind, the images of her face and its Nordic beauty, and that one time together. On other occasions he had been with a woman for just one night and then had slept peacefully afterwards; why should it be any different with Loreley, he thought, as he heard some quick footsteps.

The housekeeper, a middle-aged woman with a gaunt face, was coming towards him waving a dark grey garment.

"Mr. Marshall, it's cold out here! Put this jacket on," she said as soon as she was close enough to give it to him.

"Thank you, but I'm fine like this."

"You'll catch something with only a shirt on... and it's half unbuttoned at that!" She hung the jacket over her arm and did up the top buttons of his shirt.

"Louise, I'm not a child. I know what I'm doing." He stopped her.

A gust of wind lifted a patch of dry leaves from the ground, some of them ending up in the woman's hair. Annoyed, she tried to get them off. "Do you see what the weather's like? There'll be a downpour soon! Let me do it." She looked at him determined, with her dark little eyes sunk in their sockets.

Sonny took the jacket off her arm and put it around his shoulders. He knew she wouldn't leave until he was covered. The housekeeper's diligence was sometimes as irritating as a mosquito bite, but she had become fond of him and seemed to have no other way of showing her affection, other than always keeping an eye on him.

When Louise had returned to her chores, Sonny continued his walk along the path which would lead him to the fountain.

"Esther. Waterfalls and fountains fascinate her..." he murmured, his voice betraying the pain he was still feeling.

He shook his head. Why keep thinking of that woman? She had made her choice and now she was happy with Hans. That alleviated the heartache of losing her. A bitter smile crossed his lips. He couldn't lose something he had never had.

"If it weren't for him, though, Esther would be here now, with me, in this house and..."

He chased away those harrowing words with a gesture of his hand. That's enough! He had to divert his attention to something else, or to someone else. For example, to a girl with long blond hair and blue eyes.

Loreley returned to occupy his thoughts, which tumbled around in his mind looking for their logical order. Those images became clear at times, at other times blurry, as they followed the memories of that one night spent with her. He felt the desire to have her there, even just to have a chat, perhaps with a glass of champagne in front of them. But that girl always eluded him, she didn't seem willing to see him again. Maybe she had repented having given herself to him... and he did not feel at peace with himself.

To hell with it! The only two women he had loved had caused him only trouble and pain, and he had no intention of adding a third.

"Hello, Sonny!" A female voice greeted him from behind.

A small sigh escaped him before he turned around.

"Hello, Lucy. How come you're around these parts?" Nassau County was a long way from Manhattan.

"What a warm welcome! Don't be in too much of a hurry to hug me, I don't want you to rumple your clothes. But it doesn't worry me, and I'll prove it right away..." Without taking her eyes off his face, she waved her hand in the air, as if calling someone's attention.

Sonny looked beyond her shoulders and saw the housekeeper heading towards them with a bottle and two goblets on a tray. He frowned. "I see Louise has been busy down in the cellar."

"Don't be upset. You know I have a certain influence on her." Lucy was the only one who could soften the woman's stiff and edgy character.

"I still don't understand the reason..."

When Louise reached them, Lucy took the champagne. "You can open it," she said, handing it to him.

"Apparently my walk is already over," he said, taking the bottle.

"You're in a bad mood! Louise warned me. And I even got dressed up for you," she said sulkily.

Sonny looked at her. She was wearing a short, elegant blue dress, which followed the generous curves of her breast and sinuous shape of her hips. Her hair was pulled back at the nape of her neck in a soft bun. Lucy was beautiful, yes, but he had known her since she was a small girl, and continued to regard her as his friend Paul's little sister.

"Sorry, I'm feeling out of sorts. If you came all the way here and wanted champagne, you must have a reason. What are we toasting this time?"

"Actually, you're right." She picked up the goblets and, when Louise had gone, she went on. "Do you remember the audition I had to do in the theatre?"

"Of course I remember. And so?"

"I did it and... they took me!"

He opened his eyes wide, astonished. "I can't believe it!"

"Oh, thank you very much! You really know how to make me feel proud of myself."

"Why don't we stop all this and give ourselves a break?" he snorted.

"I came here to celebrate my new unique work, and I'd like you to be happy for me."

"You told me you'd been studying hard, this time, but I didn't believe you. And instead you've shown me that when you want, you know how to be clever. I'm happy for you."

She smiled. "Thank you!"

Sonny poured the champagne into the two goblets that she was holding, then took one himself. "Best wishes for your career in the theatre, then."

The crystal clinked and they drank in silence.

It was Lucy who spoke again. "You know, I was tired of seeing myself with my face paralysed in a smile for hours and hours in front of a camera. Much better to act and have direct contact with people."

"I can't blame you."

She asked him to fill her glass again, drank it in one gulp and handed it back to him.

Sonny watched her drink with gusto and wrinkled his brow.

"I hope you're pacing yourself with alcohol. I've noticed you've been getting stuck into it quite a lot lately."

"Don't worry, I don't drink that much. And anyway, I'll never become like your ex-wife Leen, if that's what you're afraid of. I'm not that desperate."

"Well, I really hope so!"

"As you can see I'm getting on with life, and doing well too; you're the one who's still tied to the past. When are you going to break free from everything that happened to you? Compared to last year you've changed, I must admit, but I hope you're not diverting your life the wrong way and that it could do you harm."

"What the heck are you saying?" he asked her annoyed.

"There, see? Now I'd like to bite back, but today I feel too happy to want to fight. I'm serious."

"I prefer you as you were a while back, then."

She puffed up her cheeks and blew out the air.

"Listen, do you remember what you told me the night Esther had to leave New York and I accused you of not being in love with her enough, because you resigned yourself to letting her go without putting up a fight?"

Sonny narrowed his eyes and searched his mind for those nefarious hours. It was just before Leen tried to kill him. Lucy had come from behind, bringing him a drink, just as she had done a short time ago.

"No. It doesn't come back to me right now."

"You said to me, 'It's like I have like a pin stuck in my heart. A subtle, persistent pain that won't give me peace, but that I'll have to live with until I don't know when. I'm just more prepared than you are to put up with it.'"

"Congratulations, what a memory!"

"I couldn't hope to do theatre if I didn't. And that reply had remained impressed on my soul. But let's get back to the point I was making 'I'm just more prepared than you are to put up with it.' Would you say that again now? It seems to me that I'm reacting better than you to the pain."

"Really?! And what makes you think that?"

"The fact that I'm trying to improve myself while you're just getting worse."

"Well it's easy to improve when you start from the bottom..." He stopped. For crying out loud!

The phrase had escaped him. This time he had struck her weak point: self-esteem.

He heard his friend inhale.

"Forgive me Lucy, I didn't want to be so offensive, really..." he hurried to say, putting his hand on her arm.

She looked down at the goblet she was holding between her fingers, as if she were contemplating the bubbles rising from the bottom to the surface, then looked at him again in the face, her eyes shining. "Until recently, you would never have said such a nasty thing to me. I would maybe, but not you. Doesn't that tell you anything?"

Sonny sighed. "It tells me that perhaps it's better to finish this conversation and see each other again at a more appropriate time. Today it's obvious I'm not in the mood and I come out with unfortunate remarks, that's why I would have preferred if you'd phoned me instead of just dropping in unexpected. Much as I'm happy to see you, there are times when it's better to be alone. That doesn't mean I'm not fond of you." He smiled at her.

She took the glass and bottle out of his hands.

"Good! The next time we meet I'll make sure that you bring the champagne to me. Right now I can't imagine which happy occasion you'll be celebrating, but whatever it is, I'll be happy to share it with you." She turned on her heels and left him there in the garden, by the fountain.

Lucy placed the bottle and the glasses on the bar in the living room, then with a forced smile said goodbye to Louise, who went to open the front door for her. When she got into the car the smile disappeared, leaving her eyes free to express her emotions with tears.

She didn't know what else to do. Her attempts to shake Sonny out of that form of apathy hidden behind an inadequate and inconsistent behaviour compared to the person he'd always been, had proved useless each time. He hadn't been himself for a long time.

It all started when he had discovered that his fiancée Leen, who then became his wife, had cheated on him with Hans. Later, witnessing her degradation towards alcoholism and gambling, his downward spiral had continued, culminating in the day that his little girl lost her life in a car accident, precisely because of that woman who, instead of protecting her as a mother should have done, had pulled her with her on the road to ruin.

Esther's arrival in Sonny's life had made the situation worse.

Lucy was unable to do any more than she was doing for that man. She had become close to him because, sharing the same pain, they had often found themselves dating to help each other overcome their own crisis. But Sonny did not want or could not forget. It's not that she had forgotten that she had fallen in love with Esther's brother, far from it; but she tried to think about it as little as possible and move on, without letting the past trap her like a fish in a net.

Jack hadn't even said goodbye to her before he disappeared from her life. Obviously she didn't matter enough to him. Nothing at all, actually!

Instead, for the first time in her young life, she had fallen seriously in love.

"Jack, wherever you are..." she said aloud. "Fuck you!" she shouted then, pressing her foot on the accelerator.

9

Sitting at her desk, pen in hand, Loreley phoned the doctor and set up an appointment for the last week of the month. As Legrand had told her, it was pointless to hurry, but at least it was done. She drew a big "x" on the calendar, so the day of the visit was always visible, and also entered the date in the calendar on her mobile phone. Then she opened her e-mail. There was a lot of commercial mail, advertising, a couple of jobs, two from the bank And the last... from Dr. Jacques Legrand!

She clicked on it.

Hello Miss Lehmann,

I am writing to ask how the convalescence is going. The head wound? What about the knee? Keep the brace on it until goes down completely and you have no more pain when you put weight on your leg.

I'm thinking about taking a few days off, for a holiday abroad. Who knows! I hope your offer is still open. Jacques Legrand.

She smiled. Anything could happen.

"Good news?" asked Sarah as she came into the room.

Loreley looked up from the computer. The secretary was looking at her standing still on the threshold, holding a binder tight to her chest that looked bigger than her, petite and frail.

"What have you got for me?"

Sarah looked down at the papers in her hand. "Oh, no. These are for the boss. I saw that you were smiling and I was intrigued; smiles have been rather rare lately."

"It's not a good time," she confessed.

"I realized that, Ethan is worried about you."

Loreley sensed she was being scrutinized by those eyes which were so dark it was difficult to distinguish the pupil from the iris. There were a few moments of silence.

"If you need me, I'm here..." her friend said, adjusting the large reading glasses better on her nose.

"Thank you, I'll keep it in mind."

When Sarah had gone, Loreley leaned back in her chair. From what the secretary had said, she suspected that Ethan was aware of the situation between herself and John. Maybe he knew where he was, too. She would extort that information from him at any cost; but she had to get him alone.

The occasion presented itself the next day. He had just come in to show her the article in the New York Times, where the Wallace case was mentioned. Public opinion seemed to have already condemned him, inflicting as much punishment as possible on him, before the trial even began.

As she read the news, she shook her head. If she, deep in her heart also condemned him, how could she hope the jury would believe that man? She had to defend him and she was not doing it the correct way and in the right spirit.

She decided she would go and speak to the Wallace family to get as much information as possible about Peter's experience and personality. Yes, she had to dig into their lives.

"Loreley, are you with us?" asked Ethan, standing in front of her desk.

She closed the newspaper and handed it back to him.

"Sorry, I got distracted reading the article."

"I was saying that if you want me to help you with this case, I will."

"That's kind of you, but you already have your own work to do, and I want to get through this on my own."

The man gazed at her with an insistent message of indulgence, mixed with compassion which made her uncomfortable. She got up from her chair and faced him, leaning against the edge of her desk, arms folded.

"Instead of looking at me like that, why don't you tell me what you're really thinking?"

"I don't understand."

"Come on, you know damn well that John has left home... and maybe you know why." She was forcing his hand, but she had no choice if she wanted to get something out of him.

He scratched his head, a gesture he repeated whenever he felt ill at ease.

"Come on, Ethan! Please."

The man sighed. "What do you want me to say? I don't know what to think and it's not for me to judge. I'm just as messed up as you are with my love life, and that's enough for me."

"Are you talking about your wife? How much longer are you going to allow her to use your son as leverage? You must not let her do it any longer."

"If only it were so simple! If I'm not careful about how I behave with Stephany and what I say to her, I risk making things difficult for Lukas. And for myself. I'm afraid she's going to take him away from New York and go back to her own town."

"Don't give in. Don't give her any more money, she's already bleeding you dry. Try telling her to do what she wants. I really want to see if she'd leave. And to do what, then?"

He shook his head and remained silent. She felt sorry for him and dropped the matter.

"Do you know that Johnny dumped me in Paris, leaving me there alone?" She pointed to the wound on her head. "I did this running after him. I fell down the stairs."

"In fact I wondered how you had hurt yourself."

"Kilmer knew. But now let's go back to the topic that interests me most right now. Johnny left home without even a phone call letting me know his intentions, or to give me a chance to defend myself." She put her hands on her hips. "You know what? I don't know if he deserves an explanation, or even if it's right to give him a second chance to rectify his behaviour!"

"There's nothing right in all this and I don't want to take sides with either of you." He tightened his lips and took a deep breath. "Look, I'm fond of you both and it hurts me to see you like this. He's not doing well either, I can assure you. I'm sorry but I can't tell you anything else; talk to John."

"And how do I talk to him if I don't even know where to find him?"

Ethan did not respond immediately, he seemed to be measuring the floor tiles with small nervous steps, back and forth, his hands in his pockets; until he stopped again in front of her to look her straight in the eye. "John is in Los Angeles."

"Thank you, Ethan."

"Good luck!"

The Wallace's' home was a three-story red-brick building on 71st Street, near the intersection with West End Avenue. Loreley didn't even have to take the car to get there, because it was just over two hundred yards from her home. Before going to see her client's parents, she had gone home from the office to freshen up and change the shirt she was wearing with her suit.

The woman who opened the door looked at her annoyed, and Loreley realized that her son had not let her know she was coming. It was only after she introduced herself and explained the reason for the visit that she saw her smile and was led inside.

The living room where she was welcomed was decorated in a sober style, which was a little old-fashioned. There was no sign of extravagance, not even in the colours of the upholstery. Everything seemed to be in place, so tidy it seemed almost manic.

Loreley sat down on a cream velvet sofa, with a row of matching cushions resting against the back of it.

"Can I offer you some tea, Miss Lehmann?" the woman asked, standing stiffly in front of her. She was wearing a black dress, just below the knee, mid-heeled shoes and here straight brown hair was gathered at the nape of her neck. She had no make-up, but seemed ready to go out. And in a hurry, at that! The rather rushed mannerisms confirmed this.

"No, thank you, Mrs. Wallace; I'm fine."

She heard the front door unlock and then some footsteps. Shortly after, a tall thin boy appeared at the door. He looked to be in his thirties and resembled Mrs Wallace, so Loreley deduced that it was Michael, Peter's brother. He didn't look like Peter's brother, who must have taken after his father.

. "Hello, Counselor Lehmann. I hope you haven't had to wait too long." He turned to Loreley and shook her hand.

"Michael, why didn't you tell me anything about this? Did you do it on purpose?" the mother intervened. "What are you hiding from me?"

The boy rolled his eyes. "I've been busy and I forgot to let you know. Now don't start seeing intrigues in everything again."

His mother glared at him.

"I didn't know you had to go out right now," he apologized.

Mrs. Wallace did not seem totally convinced, but her son was unapologetic. "Oh, alright!" She turned to Loreley. "I'm happy to have met my son's lawyer. I'm sorry I didn't come to court, but I won't miss the next hearing. Now I must go out. As you just heard, I have a commitment," and saying this she left the room.

Loreley sat back on the couch, and Michael picked up a padded chair and sat opposite her.

"I'm sorry. My mother has her paranoia."

"I would have preferred to speak with your mother too, I think I told you."

The young man folded his arms and crossed his ankles. "It's better to leave my mother out of this conversation."

Loreley frowned. "Why?"

"You see, she's a woman with very firm convictions and a strong sense of morality, or what it is she means by that word. Let's just say she's a bit of a goody two-shoes. In her opinion, Peter is a layabout, only capable of creating problems."

"Really?"

"Of course, it all depends on what a mother expects of her child, though mine has always demanded too much. But I must admit that this time the problem that Peter has created is really enormous, greater than him... and us."

"And what is your relationship with your brother?"

"Well, when I was little, Peter behaved as if I was the one who took Mom's attention away from him, and for spite he would pinch me so I would annoy her with my crying; or he secretly drank the milk in my bottle, which Mom would leave in my hands once I was old enough to hold it myself. Every now and then, as a boy, he would break something and blame me for the damage, to make her scold me."

"They're all behaviours that occur in any ordinary family: the older brother very jealous of the younger one and frightened that the parents may love the little one more than him."

"Yes, that's true, but Peter exaggerated those behaviours. Despite the way he picked on me, though, he was my idol. I tried to imitate him in everything: in the way he dressed, combed his hair, interacted with girls..."

He paused as if to reflect, then shook his head smiling.

"He had a lot of savoir-faire and a way of behaving that went beyond his good looks, which already made him a winner! But trying to be like my brother didn't work for me. I envied him, and over time I even started to hold grudges against him because of that. In retaliation, I tried to be the first in my class at school. I was able to overcome my laziness when it came to studying and discovered that it was easy for me to get good grades, which until then had been rather poor. I had achieved my goal: my parents praised me and humiliated him for his mediocre grades. It's horrible, I know, and I'm not proud of those years. I haven't thought about it in a long time."

So much for the younger brother in adoration! During his teenage years, Michael seemed to have been not only jealous, but begrudging as well, Loreley thought, settling back better on the cushions. But she didn't know, though, where that young man wanted to go with this.

"And how did your brother react?"

"Peter preferred not to say anything in those situations, it was the only form of respect he had for our parents. He would take the lectures in silence, but when we were alone, he would get angry: 'Mom and Dad just can't understand that I, unlike you, I don't want to go mouldy inside the walls of a college,' he said. 'If you like to study, go right ahead, good for you. I want to create and live in the open air.' That was the concept he would often repeat after the usual discussion about school."

"So he didn't realize that you were striving to earn high grades just to get back at him."

"No, I don't think so, he never said anything about it."

"Peter didn't want to go to college, so what was he doing?"

"My brother had a flair for art and he painted. And not just on canvas, but on street pavements too, and on the walls of buildings. It's rare, though, for anyone to make a living as an artist right away. Mom and Dad kept telling him that, but he didn't give a damn and never tried to change things. He said that on the one hand he found it convenient because I was there to channel all their expectations, so he could be free to go his own way."

If it was true that Peter had an unhealthy jealousy towards his younger brother as a child, it didn't mean that he continued to be that way when he was an adult. She must maintain pressure on that point. For the moment all she had understood about him was that he possessed a character which was at odds with the kind of malice and instinct for violence needed to beat a woman to death.

"From what you've told me, Peter was very jealous of you as a child. Was it like that in later years too? Did he ever hit you? And, when it came to girls, did he ever shown excesses of anger?"

Loreley watched Michael get up and head to the next room. He disappeared behind a door and reappeared with a bottle of whiskey and a couple of glasses. "Do you want some?" he asked her. "Maybe it would be better to offer a glass of champagne to a lady like you..."

Loreley hesitated, she was not used to drinking hard alcohol on an empty stomach and in her state she couldn't even afford to. "Yes, thanks."

He didn't ask twice and poured two fingers of whiskey into the glass, then took a sip and sat down again in front of her.

"I knew we were going to get to these questions." He emptied his glass in one gulp and filled it again. "I want to be honest with you, Counselor. You see, Peter was jealous and possessive in his relationships with girls, I must acknowledge that, but the only time he was involved in anything violent because of one of them was to defend her, not to assault her. As for me, I was on the receiving end of only a couple of punches from him; well deserved, by the way. I needed a good lesson, but my father wasn't there, so he took care of it."

"And what had you done wrong?"

Michael looked away. "Peter had found a sachet of cocaine in my drawer. I know what you're thinking, but I wasn't a cocaine addict. It had been given to me by a college classmate of mine; I had put it aside because I was scared to try it, and was waiting until I found the courage to do it. I took a big risk. That guy hoped that I would like it so much I'd become hooked on it and buy it from him, as Peter explained to me later. My brother had saved my ass by getting rid of it and keeping quiet about it with our parents. But that time he couldn't keep his hands to himself... just for my own good, so I'd learn my lesson."

"Did it end there?"

"Yes, of course. That's why I didn't want Mom to take part in this conversation, I couldn't have been so honest. You don't know her."

"I already have a vague idea."

"Multiply that vague idea by at least three."

Loreley nodded. "Let's go back to Peter."

"I have nothing more to tell you about him. Soon after that, he met Lindsay and left home."

"How was the relationship between them?"

"As far as I know, good. Some arguments, yes... who doesn't have them? Certainly, he seemed a little tense lately, but I think it was for financial reasons."

"Was there someone else buzzing around Lindsay?"

Michael moved around in his chair. "I don't think so, but she was very reserved and didn't talk about herself much. She never seemed to me like the kind who lets herself be carried away with passion."

Loreley saw him look at the pendulum clock on the wall, an antique piece, and realized it was time to take her leave.

She got up off the sofa. "Well, at this point I'll get out of your hair. Thank you for your time." She took her handbag and jacket and left.

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