

PROLOGUE

Tammy woke in the middle of her nightmare. A sharp, metallic screech tormented her with an intense headache, and she shuffled her feet to the kitchen. She didn't even turn on the light. It would only intensify her pain. There was plenty of light for her from the electric clock-radio with an illuminated 3:37 a.m.

It never ends, she thought, struggling with the pain. I'm so tired.

With a sigh, Tammy reached for the small box with a red cross in the middle. For nearly two years, she had been battling cancer and the posttreatment side effects that often tortured her with severe headaches and insomnia. There was always something in her body that gave her a feeling of deep unhappiness.

"Forty years old... I'm still young. I want to enjoy my life." She cried softly so she would not wake her husband.

She protested her illness every day. Every single day. She imagined herself with a flag of various colors in her hands to represent the vividness and perfection of life, and holding it tightly, she walked toward barricades to protest and to fight the struggle and the great suffering of life.

She took a pill, drank a cup of water, and looked through the window for no apparent reason—just as she usually did, because of her painful insomnia. There was nothing yet in touch with the new day. Not a single motion was outside except the light spring breeze that occasionally interfered with the tree leaves. Suddenly, it seemed to her that a shadow flashed through the shed, but it was difficult to discern what it could be in the dark. Likely some animal scavenging for food. Besides that, it was a quiet early morning. Perhaps too quiet...

Then she saw another shadow, much larger. It crept along the ground, trembling under the light of a lonely lantern. Tammy squinted her eyes again, peering into the darkness. Then only one word involuntarily burst out her mouth. "Why?" She glanced at the clock. It was 3:45 a.m.

A God-forgotten place, she thought. Shabby houses are divided into two halves, for the sake of people supporting each other. Life here is not the same as in the city. You can come over to your neighbor late in the evening to simply ask for salt if you're out of your own. You can exchange fresh venison for a bottle of moonshine. However, this life is not as simple and as harmless as it may seem at first glance.

The fact that last Saturday night had been so peaceful seemed uncommon to her. Usually, she could hear every word behind the wall of her duplex when Marta's husband was drunk. Both families

could be imaginarily united as one due to the number of secrets they kept about one another, involuntarily and faithfully but certainly not with a sincere desire of it. Sometimes Tammy wished Marta, the woman next door, better luck with her terrifying spouse. She prayed for her safety while sending her daughter into the farther room to avoid having her hear the X-rated language that, luckily for her family, was often transformed into a drunk man's incoherent mumbles. She didn't know if she could handle it any longer. Ever since Marta married that man, everybody's life in their neighborhood had become shaded with hidden fear and the awareness of a potential murder.

COPS FOR BREAKFAST

“Get up! Get up!” Dustin shook his wife lightly by the shoulders.

Tammy opened her eyes halfway. Showing disappointment, she shamed her husband. “Are you serious? You know I didn’t sleep all night.”

The daylight was already breaking through the ginger curtains, creating an effect of fire in the bedroom. Tammy chose this fabric on purpose because she hated the cold. She hated her habitat with an importunate abundance of gray and green. So depressing. She pulled her blanket over her head.

“Please, Tammy, get up. There is something going on,” Dustin insisted with worry in his voice. His words summoned her curiosity, so she could not close her eyes again. She wrapped her tense body in a soft polyester robe and followed her husband to the kitchen.

“What do you need?”

Without words, he nodded toward the window. Cops were swarming around Marta’s shed.

“Do you have any clue what happened?” she asked drowsily as she was not quite awake yet.

“I don’t. But maybe *you* do,” Dustin said, and she caught a hint of suspicion in his voice. He agitated her. She shot him a challenging look, to which he immediately responded, “*You* were the one not sleeping all night, *not me*.”

“And what is your point?”

“Well...” he hesitated.

“That’s right! You have nothing to say, Dustin!” she snapped.

She never had patience when he tried to build conclusions. Some things became hard for him to comprehend with his beaten head. Over the years, Tammy still loved her husband tenderly, and if not for her illness, which unfortunately had developed into a chronic one, she would open her heart to him again. But now she was a grumpy, impatient woman, and she snarled at him each time she heard his naïve talk or absurd ideas. On his part, he would not be able to forgive her for convincing him to be a gym teacher, instead of supporting him in his boxing career, which she never believed in. His last spar was as dramatically painful for him as it was for her. He lay in a coma for four days, and that was enough for her to understand one truth: there is no reason to endanger your whole life in an instant for the possibility of some silly fame. She tried her best to prove to Dustin her point. But either she didn’t choose the right words, or he was not made of the right material to absorb them. Either way, his mind had stubbornly followed the path to a hostile denial of all that his wife wisely created for him: his new life and his new

career. He just wasn't willing to accept the fact that without her, he would be nothing more than a full-bodied man with one dream annoying him constantly—how to split somebody's head and protect his own.

"You're still here?" Tammy said with irritation.

"Where am I supposed to be?" He looked at her confusedly and paused for a moment. "Can I have my coffee? Promise not to bother you with my stupid ideas."

"Oh, thank you! You deserve a good breakfast then!" She allowed some irony. "What do you want? Eggs or biscuits?"

"Well... can I have both?" he asked somewhat humbly, and added, "By the way, Happy Mother's Day!"

Tammy burst out laughing. "Oh my God, Dustin! You are the most attentive husband in the world!"

After her sleepless night and a handful of pills, she lost control over her emotions. Nothing unusual for any human being. Of course, she didn't mean to talk to her husband the way she did, but somehow it happened all the time. She would provide both—biscuits and eggs, plus sausages. She teased him because it simply fell in her manner. And another thing: she experienced too many disappointments during her almost twenty years with Dustin. Doubtfully, her harshness reflected her rancor. No. Rather, it was the easiest way to defend her rights in her marriage.

A heavy knock on the door suddenly interrupted the silence in their kitchen.

"Open the door," she ordered, cracking eggs in the bowl. "Cops."

"Why do you think so?" Even now Dustin tried to argue with her.

She sighed, sending him another dramatic look, the look of a doctor to a hopeless patient.

"Who else can it be? Just open the door, Dustin." She didn't even try to hide her irritation.

Of course, she was right. Two police officers—one tall and thin and the second shorter and heavier—were standing behind their door like a mismatched set.

"May we come in?" the tall one inquired with the type of confidence only a cop could have, acknowledging that nobody would attempt to refuse the law enforcer's request.

"Sure." Dustin stepped aside to let them in.

Tammy was busy with her breakfast preparation. The last thing she wanted to see in her tight kitchen were cops early in the morning. At least for her, it was too early. She didn't even bother with the traditional *hello* or *good morning*.

"May I help you?" she bristled.

"Excuse my wife, please. She..." Dustin held his tongue for a moment. "She has been sick for days."

Tammy remained calm, but inside, she thanked God for leading Dustin's thoughts. Sure, the cops were fishing for details. Of course, she had nothing to hide, but she didn't want an extra headache.

"Alexander and Marta Gray are your neighbors? Have you noticed anything strange with them lately?" the tall officer asked.

Everything about her neighbors seemed strange to her. *They are married! And this is already strange!*

"Yes, they are my neighbors," she replied. "Is it not obvious for you, idiot?" she murmured under her nose.

"What?" the officer sought for elaboration.

"I don't understand your question, sir."

"Have you noticed anything strange in your neighbors' behavior lately? Maybe loud talking, unusual visitors?" the officer clarified.

"Like the President of the United States?" Tammy blew out a sarcastic huff. Then she caught Dustin's pleading look and settled herself back. "Sorry, Officer. I don't see how the neighbors' voices cannot be loud to us with the wall we share that is only four inches thick. I can diagnose them with the flu through the wall if they sneeze or cough."

"Exactly," the cop said. "If you can hear your neighbor's cough, surely you can hear much more than that. Probably every word, huh?"

"Not really. Only the talking I hear from their bedroom. It seems like the architect of this crap"—her index finger drew a circle in the air—"had some sort of sexual disorder."

The shorter officer smirked at her remark, and the other continued to question.

"Okay. Maybe some unusual activity? Perhaps some strange noises late at night? Shrills for help maybe?"

"I absolutely hate coyotes, Officer!" Tammy replied dramatically. "They sounded terrible last night. I had to stuff my ears with a bunch of cotton. And by the way, would you mind explaining what the hell is going on?"

The stick-looking cop ignored her request and showed an intention to leave, but the puffy one suddenly intervened.

"A murder took place last night at your neighbors' barn," he said, and received an immediate look from the other one, which didn't confuse him a bit. Tammy noticed that he no longer had a stupid smile on his face. *Maybe he is not stupid after all.* Holding onto the kitchen table, Tammy plumped into the chair. "Who?" she barely vocalized and felt a cold sweat all over her. Her lips became dry, and she experienced a sudden thirst.

"Did you know the guy named Ivan Kortnev?" the puffy one asked.

“Yes,” she pressed through her dry lips and took a deep breath. Her own breath became incomprehensible to her—a disappointment, or vice versa, some strange relief? She couldn’t interpret it yet. Then, under the pressure of the officer’s insisting look, she said, “He was a good man.”

“Was?” the other shot her a look.

“You just asked me if I knew him,” she sounded irritated. Then she got up, reached to the sink, and poured a glass of water. She greedily drank half a glass while leaning over the sink.

“What about you?” The officer shifted to Dustin.

“What?” Dustin seemed confused.

Tammy turned her head and gazed at her husband curiously. *What’s his answer going to be like?*

The officer helped Dustin out. “Did you see or hear anything last night?”

“Sorry.” Dustin shrugged his shoulders. “Can’t complain. I slept good all night.”

“Okay,” the officer gave up and, redirecting to Tammy, said, “Have a nice day, ma’am!” Both turned and walked out of her kitchen.

“Good luck!” Tammy sent her modest wish after them, and then she reached for the plates to serve their interrupted breakfast.

Dustin swallowed his saliva at the sight of the plate with scrambled eggs and hissing sausages. *Marta’s homemade sausages! Yummy!* Their neighbor always shared with them anything she grew in her garden or her little barn.

After several bites, Dustin expressed his disagreement with Tammy regarding their recent conversation with the cops.

“You shouldn’t talk with them like that,” he said, chewing on sausages.

“Please! That officer wasn’t worth a crap to have a decent conversation with, let alone saying anything about an interrogation. He has no skills whatsoever to take down testimony,” Tammy argued, watching Dustin eat.

“You just can’t stay away from trouble, Tammy! Can you? You’re always up for a fight. Always. Even now, with your medical condition...”

He knew that his last words would piss her off, and he did regret them as soon as they slipped off of his tongue. She shot him a disapproving look.

“And what about my condition?” She paused for a moment, waiting for his answer, and then emphasized her point. “I’m fine, Dustin! I’m fine! And I do *not* appreciate your clumsy condolence!”

THE GOSSIP

Soon after breakfast, Dustin left his hypercritical wife. He knew she was upset. Their daughter didn't make it home for the holidays, and then that stupid murder next door. She offered Marta help, but Marta refused to open her door, explaining through her tears that she needed some time alone. Dustin knew it was just too much for Tammy, and he generously excused her grumpiness. At quarter after two in the afternoon, he left the grocery store. A beautiful bouquet of red roses stuck out of the paper bag, betraying Dustin's brisk conspiracy. He had never been good at expressions of love. Moreover, it seemed like he had been embarrassed by showing his best feelings, so he masked them with less attractive ones.

Dustin remembered the time when he bought a furry bundle of parsley for Tammy's birthday, taking consideration of an old lady who had been selling greens on the street. The woman looked desperate. Her eyes expressed emptiness and great disappointment with life. Her poor clothes cloaked her wispy figure, providing her warmth as much as it was possible for her frazzled duds. Despite it, she looked clean. Her dark hair was brushed neatly and tucked in a sort of teacher's bun. She might have had an intellectual profession in the past, and now it seemed like she was very uncomfortable with what she was doing to sustain her subsistence. What became significantly touching for Dustin was that the woman wasn't a beggar, and that fact alarmed his indignation to the point that he incriminated himself for his moderate well-being. There was no need for a scrutinized observation to find her whole appearance appealed to the humanity and integrity of the world. Dustin chose the *right* bundle of greens, gave her a twenty-dollar bill, and hurried away with the words "Keep the change." She had asked only for a dollar a bundle.

Then, with the traditional "Happy birthday!" he honored his wife with quite a nontraditional bouquet, hoping to be excused. Tammy paid good credit to Dustin's sense of humor. She took the parsley without any resentment, not even thinking of any misconceptions.

"Thank you, Dustin. I'm glad you remembered my birthday," she said.

"Sorry," he responded guiltily. "Next time I'll do better."

As Dustin walked back to his truck, he bumped into someone he would rather avoid.

"Hey, Dustin! What's in your bag? The roses for Tammy?" Like a thorn in his rib, a familiar voice took him by surprise.

He saw Rick nearby, a big guy with a round and always pleased face, like a cat who just ate a canary. Dustin never liked him. A man of his type could not be trusted. Rick would tell nasty jokes about things that were not even funny. Dustin wanted to ignore the guy, but Rick made it difficult.

“Hi. How’re you doing?” Dustin replied without a hint of interest.

“Good! Thank you.” A loud voice with a note of a female’s shrill jarred Dustin’s ears.

How the hell did this big pile manage to have a lady’s high-pitched voice? I wouldn’t be surprised if he can handle a soprano. Dustin tossed sarcastic thoughts, while Rick continued chattering.

“So? How’s Tammy doing?”

“She’s perfectly fine,” Dustin blurted out and spat to the side.

“I see you got roses. Are they for Tammy?” Rick grinned somewhat slyly.

“What the hell is it your business, man? Of course, they are for Tammy! Who else would they be for?”

“Hold your horses, man! I didn’t mean to be offensive. Have any news about last night’s incident?”

“What incident?” Dustin played dumb as he was chewing on straw in his mouth. The presence of such an idiot irritated him.

“Your neighbor. Ax. He slaughtered his friend as if the other was a hog, right in the barn. They were drinking all night. Christ, how stupid of the man was it, being around him.”

It seemed to Dustin that Rick was happy to share this news, and if instead of Dustin he had met someone else, he would have informed them as well.

“I don’t care about this,” Dustin said.

“Wow! The man killed another one next door to you, and you don’t care?”

“You’re spreading rumors, Rick. You will get yourself in trouble. Myself, I don’t see any benefit from this type of conversation. Have a good day.”

“It’s a close community, man! Take it easy!” Rick hollered as Dustin turned his engine on.

THE BLIND LOVE

Tammy was sitting at her dining table, entertaining herself by turning pages of the old photo album. Her eyes occasionally rested on the photo with two children in it. She closed her eyes for a moment, departing from her present, as a sudden tentative knock on her door interrupted her thoughts. She glanced at the clock. 8:55 p.m.

“Tammy, it’s me, Marta...” Her neighbor’s trembling voice sounded behind the door. Tammy let her night guest in. It was hard for her not to notice Marta’s red face. *No doubt she was crying all day long.* She didn’t have to explain why she was there without an invitation. She didn’t need to have one. Over the years, they had become more than neighbors and more than acquaintances. The most private details of Marta’s life remained with her, scrupulously hidden somewhere in the bottom of her heart, but despite Marta’s mysterious silence, Tammy could always figure out her problems. She read Marta’s dull, hopeless eyes with ease, because neither the healing spring sunlight with its evoking power nor Tammy’s hospitality could light them up. She looked as if she was drained and wasted, and the only thing she wanted was peace.

“I brought some milk for you. It’s fresh.” She handed a glass jar to Tammy.

Tammy knew the milk was just an excuse for Marta to come over, but she wasn’t going to reveal that and make the poor woman feel uncomfortable. She thanked Marta for her care and invited her to the kitchen.

“Would you like some tea?”

Marta hesitated for a moment, glanced at the clock underneath the kitchen cabinet.

“It’s okay. I can’t sleep this early anyway,” Tammy reassured her guest. “You know, ever since I got my medical problem, I turned into an owl.” She smiled. “Awake at night. Asleep during the day.”

She poured the tea in Marta’s mug slowly. As Marta stared at this loquacious trickle of golden brew, affectionate tears smoothed down her face. Tammy hadn’t seen her up close for a while, and now she could see that her guest had gained at least ten more years in appearance over her real age.

She didn’t shower Marta with a bunch of questions. As she sipped her tea, she noticed how Marta was shivering. The poor thing clenched her hands around the ceramic mug just to get the warmth from it. Sighing, Tammy got up, fetched a shawl, and wrapped it around Marta’s shoulders. Right away, Marta buried her nose in the warm wool. Tammy knew Marta needed to release her emotions. As she expected,

after the sedative effect of her quiet environment with the soft light, the smell of wool, and the soothing crackle of the fire in her kitchen wood burner, Marta became talkative, though not without hysterical notes in her voice. She spurred her words out, gulping for air as if she had trouble breathing freely because of her stress.

“I don’t know how I will live without him... They took him away. They’re sure he’s the murderer.” Her eyes were full of tears. “Ivan was his best friend. That man meant a lot to him. I found him this morning with a screwdriver in his chest. It could be an accident but—God sees!—not a murder! Why don’t they believe him, Tammy? Why?” Marta cried, grieving for her husband.

The image of a horrific event that occurred in the barn wildly took over Tammy’s imagination. She felt a little nauseated by her guest’s a-bit-too-detailed description, but she managed to reply.

“I don’t know, Marta. I don’t know.” Then she shocked her guest with the following: “Why are you mourning him anyway? At least now you can get some rest, and he will have time to reconsider the way he treats you.”

Marta’s eyes rounded in surprise. Getting herself together, she exclaimed, “Tammy! How could you? Yes, we argue sometimes, but he’s not a bad man.” She paused and added, “When he doesn’t drink.”

“Ugh...” Tammy ruminated aloud. Pointing her index finger to her chin, she tried to recognize something. “And *when* is he *not* drinking?” She knew for sure that Alexander had a habit of drinking every weekend, but if earlier it was generally a large amount of beer, and a shot of vodka on significant holidays, now he swayed straight to hard liquors, having become a heavy drinker for the past couple of months. Whether his business was slow recently or some of his family matters were bothering him, it seemed as if he had lost interest in everything besides the bottle of hard alcohol.

Marta dropped her eyes and, hardly fighting her tears, whispered, “I still love him.”

RAIN, RAIN, WASH AWAY!

Tammy was in her master bathroom getting ready for bed. She didn't have much hope that she finally would be able to get some sleep. That day brought her nothing but anxiety she hoped she would never experience again. The stressful Sunday was finally over and washed away by the pouring rain. There was something mysterious about it. They hadn't had rain for weeks, and now it was pouring as if by order of an invisible Providence. It was washing away the blood of an innocent man, washing away all hard feelings, washing away...

Suddenly, she realized that she could go to sleep without taking her pills. An odd comparison came to her. She shook her head as if she was trying to get rid of this awkward idea, then softly said to herself, "Don't think like that. Don't think like that."

"Tammy, who are you talking to over there?" Dustin's voice interrupted her thoughts.

"Just thinking aloud!" she shouted out of the bathroom, hoping he would leave her alone.

Contrary to her husband, Tammy didn't see any problem with her verbalized thinking. She held a strong philosophy behind it: no interlocutor – no argument.

Why did Alexander kill Ivan—if he did it, of course? That question annoyed her to the point that she couldn't think of anything else. *The idea of an accidental death sounded very unconvincing. I doubt if that idea will get into the loop of the investigation. Marta is blind with her love, but—give me a break!—there must be some common sense and boundaries to fantasy.* She sighed. *Poor Marta ... Does Alexander still love her? She's a good woman and doesn't deserve to be mistreated, especially after all she has done for him.* Naturally, reflecting on Marta's generosity, Tammy recalled her days after the hospital. *It was terrible! Throwing up every day, not being able to eat normally. If Marta hadn't brought me the goat milk, I might not have survived.* Her heart was touched with sympathy under the emotion of her appreciated memory toward her caring neighbor.

She turned a blue handle, letting the cold-water jet take care of her pessimistic thoughts. She splashed her face, but it didn't help her get rid of them. On the contrary, she shifted them to Alexander, but she didn't even think of the murder, just a touching memory. *He always showed his care for me and always asked if I needed any help. He never forgot my birthday or, of course, Mother's Day.*

Tammy already had a collection of spoons and bowls carved by him; a very talented man. Sometimes he signed a purpose for the use, like "soup," "flour," "sugar." The last one with the "honey"

brought lots of problems for her. Tammy tried to settle Marta's jealousy, but she was adamant and for some time avoided opening the door to her neighbor.

Stunned by Marta's revelation, Tammy tried to oppose decent features to the less attractive ones in Alexander's personality. She realized why this man had become the way he was now. She felt sincere compassion toward his unfortunate fate, but on the other hand, she could not excuse him entirely for being such a jerk to his wife, who seemed to be a loving and caring person to him for the past several years that he had been out of prison.

He should appreciate her courage for getting him under her roof at all! Tammy thought angrily. Well, somehow, she found a reason to love him. Shall I doubt somebody's marriage? Simply, it's not my business.

She went to bed and kissed her husband on the cheek. "Sorry and thank you."

"For what?" Dustin asked with languorous laziness as he threw his hands behind his head.

Tammy rested her palm on his chest and looked in his eyes. "Thank you for the roses, and sorry for being impatient today."

Dustin wrapped his hand around his wife and kissed her on the head. "You know how to make me happy: 'Thank you for not bringing me parsley, and sorry, Dustin, you were so stupid that I lost my patience.'" He laughed in a kind but a bit sarcastic way. "Love you too, Tammy." Then he recognized the late visit and asked, "What did Marta need? Can't sleep happily ever after without her husband?"

"Not funny," Tammy said. "She doesn't believe Alexander killed Ivan."

"Oh, really? So, what is her version?"

"I don't think she has any." Tammy sighed and caressed Dustin's chest gently. "She's trying to play her imagination around the chance of a mishap, but this is unlikely to be true."

"How come? Do you eliminate this possibility?"

"Well... I don't want to be very sure about it. But if it is the case of an accident, then it's going to be more complicated to prove than just sticking with murder, especially in Alexander's case."

Dustin sent a long yawn in response to that. He was tired and had put up with this long day exclusively for his wife. He reached to the table lamp and, without a word, turned the light off. That was the end of that Mother's Day, of the difficult and bloody one, May 9, 1999.

SKOMOROKH

At nine o'clock in the morning on Monday, May 10, Steve Hogan walked into his office on Forest Street with an intense headache. All night long, he had been drinking in the bar, celebrating another weekend of being a free man. His wife had left him a month ago, not willing to cope with his crazy work schedule and life-threatening situations. Besides that, there was something else that she wasn't willing to explain to him as well. After a short adjustment period, he was okay with choosing his career over an annoying and constantly unhappy wife. He had never felt entirely attached to his Adam's rib anyway, and after she left, he quickly realized why God had preferred to sculpt the man before the woman. Using the standard scale of zero to ten, where zero means no pain at all, and ten is very strong, overwhelming pain, Hogan could be confident with the numbers being somewhere between two and three. He experienced a slight discomfort of being alone. From now on, every morning he had to prepare something for himself, even if it was a very modest breakfast or just a cup of coffee. The next issue was his injured pride, being a healthy male for three—as his wife defined—"long years," she never became pregnant. And now, Hogan was out of sorts due to the obsessive idea that some other man would successfully mate with his, not even yet officially, ex-wife.

The door of his office creaked open and the redhead asked, "Mister Hogan, may I?"

"Dude! How many times do I need to tell you? Captain Hogan! Captain! Not mister! Follow me, dude?" Hogan corrected, refusing to hear "mister" again.

"Sorry, Captain!" The sergeant waited at the door to be approved.

"Are you stuck in that damn door? Do you need a written invitation to take a few steps forward and finally close the fucking door?" Captain yelled.

The sergeant, no longer hesitating, jumped in the office and slammed the door shut. Hogan sent him a haughty look and, turning his back on the employee, opened his safe. A pint of whiskey appeared in his hand. He poured himself a shot and chugged it down carelessly.

"So? What do you have?" he asked with his inherent cheekiness.

The sergeant sighed, opened his notepad, and read aloud: "Sunday, May 9, 10:15 a.m. Alexander Gray in the criminal world is better known as Ax..."

"Son of a bitch!" Captain cursed.

Then the sergeant saw his eyes, brown as coffee beans. They sparked with a sort of excitement now. They seemed to get brighter in the shade of bloody bourbon. The sergeant, feeling discretion toward Hogan, who had been nervously playing with a cigar in his mouth, chose not to poke his nose in the other's perhaps not very pleasant memory.

"Alexander Gray, the thirty-eight-year-old man accused of the murder of Ivan Kortnev, a forty-five-year-old man. The event took place in the storage owned by the offender, where both the victim and the offender were drinking alcohol all night long. The death occurred approximately between four and five o'clock in the morning following a stabbing with a screwdriver in the left side of Kortnev's chest. The fingerprints on the murder weapon were identified as belonging to Alexander Gray."

"Bring this rural killer into the basement!" Hogan ordered.

"Do you mean the investigation room?" suppressing doubt, the sergeant ventured to ask and regretted it immediately.

"You're a fancy-ass, not a sergeant! I don't need an aquarium!" He was not a fan of the room with a large window inside the hallway. "I told you the basement, Dumbass!"

The environment in the basement was far from cheerful for any man who was not the judge there. Sitting on a rusty fold-out chair, Ax could see stains of blood of different sizes: from the little nasal drops to large ones. He tried to recall every moment of the last time he had seen his friend alive. He remembered Ivan's drunk but honest words. He wrapped an arm around Ax's neck, letting it hang freely down the shoulder, and then having full control over his words, he said, "Alexander! Friend! I want you to always remember..." He had to stop between the words to gasp for some air to stay awake before he finished his revelation. He swayed back and forth with Alexander in his arm like he was lullabying him to sleep, "If nobody believes you, then I will!" Ivan's modest life with his careless ways, not bothering with what others said, had always impressed Alexander. He could trust him with his life. Ivan's face was close to his when he said his last words. "Don't let anybody crush you. If you must fight with your legs and arms tied, then use your head! Use your teeth. If you're not able to use them either, use your thoughts!" Then Ivan summed up his ideas pompously, "Whoever has the truth is the stronger one!" His bravado was short, but it became a critical piece of Alexander's memory.

A savage impact jolted him from his memory. Then another one, a stronger one, threw him right to the concrete floor. No condolences, no sympathy. He was a murderer.

"What's up, Ax?" Hogan sneered. "After fifteen years of a break, you got back to business?" He spat on the concrete, just next to the disarmed prisoner. The blood oozed from the other's busted lip, but it

didn't bother him a bit. Ivan's words were pulsating in his head, freeing him from pain. "*Alexander! Friend! Don't let anybody crush you.*"

Hogan was ready for his private talk with the *rural killer*.

"For many years, Ax, I haven't been able to figure you out," he said. He put his Nat Sherman behind his ear, pulled a chair close to the inmate, who was still lying on the dusty floor, and sat down, demonstrating his raw superiority. "What the fuck is wrong with you? You did away with your other friend. Well, with less brutality now." He grabbed Ax's hair, pulled it back, and jeered into his face, "What? Have you drained all your creativity, you son of a bitch?"

"Good thing, Captain, my hands are handcuffed," Ax scoffed.

"What's that? Threatening an officer?"

"No, Captain. It's just a friendly tip-off," Ax bared his teeth in mockery. "Make sure you bring my advocate here next time. Otherwise, it may happen that you will take my place. Never know, Captain. Never know."

Hogan let go of Ax's hair and settled himself down on the old wooden desk that was supposed to be in the dumpster already. For a moment, he found himself speechless. A man of his type could hardly survive the collapse of his superiority. He needed to regain control.

"You know, Ax, if I were you, I wouldn't be too cocky! Your fingerprints are all over the weapon, and of course, you were creative again. Last time it was an ax, and now a screwdriver. Follow me?" Hogan took his cigar out, put it in his mouth, and clicked a lighter. Then he puffed out a cloud of smoke straight into the inmate's face. "See you later, Axigator!" he said boldly.

Ax was lying on the concrete floor, listening to Hogan's garbage talk. Then, suddenly he recalled a funny word from his deceased friend, and that word echoed in his head: *Skomorokh*. *Yes, just the right word for him. He thinks he's cool, but instead he's funny. Sort of a joker.*

"Skomorokh," the word popped out of his mouth rather involuntarily.

"What?" already at the door, Hogan turned his head.

Ax could tell that Hogan found himself dumb with his lexicon. So many years around criminals, and—sure—that word had never crossed his ears. Perhaps the prisoner was also not deprived of the ability to improvise. Bummer!

6

ZOE

Finally, Zoe was back after three months of being in Canada, studying art history and French. Tammy knew that it was going to be a short visit with her daughter since Zoe took a placement test and had been approved for UAA College of Art and Sciences, with a full-ride scholarship.

There was still plenty of time before Zoe's arrival—a whole hour or so. But Tammy couldn't wait any longer; she missed her daughter badly. In addition to that, the weather was perfect. She walked slowly to the whistle-stop, reflecting on the things that she wished were better, but over the years had remained the same, no matter what. She could smell a strong scent of dirt nearby. She glanced to the side of the road and saw Marta in her potato field. *Of course, she would kill herself before she gave up on her field. The rubber boots and a spade in her hands. Such a workaholic.* Tammy waved as Marta took a short break to stretch her back. The other waved back to her; only, her gesture was dull, as if after what happened to her husband, she had neither the strength nor the desire to live on, and everything that she was doing every single day of her life was nothing more than a habit. The houses turned gray and black after long exposure to the rain and snow. Such an irritating image involuntarily caused Tammy a comparison with something that somehow survived the fire but wasn't ash yet. Only Marta's barn along with her husband's woodshop that summoned the better feelings. Alexander always took good care of this place. He polished the wood with love, carved the figurines, and painted doors and window frames. Besides this piece of her neighbors' property, there was nothing to rest an eye on. *Thank God Zoe is going be all right, far away from this hellhole,* she thought. Tammy was happy that she had encouraged her daughter to travel thousands of miles away to improve her chance for a better life. She took any opportunity that benefitted her daughter's future.

Lost in thought, she didn't even notice that she'd already reached the whistle-stop. It didn't surprise her that she was alone at that place. There was no commute station and accordingly not a simple platform for the passengers to get out of the cars. She waited for five minutes, then five more minutes of lonesome reflection. She never liked trains. They had always summoned in her a feeling of anxious expectation and melancholy. Long and heavy. Rolling, knocking, creaking. Disquieting anticipation of someone or even something. And now, it was there—a terrifying hammering, a daunting rattling. Getting closer and closer. She stuck her index fingers in her ears and closed her eyes. Her face clenched in pain, and two vertical wrinkles formed right above her nose. *A little bit more... Almost, almost... Here we go.*

She opened her eyes. Zoe stood on the grass with the medium-sized luggage in her hand. If it were not for the fact that only one person got out of the car, Tammy would never have recognized her daughter in this well-dressed girl. She eyed her with pleasure: scarlet-red, hooded coat to the knees, a leather lady's backpack over her shoulder. And she had cut her hair. *At least only to the shoulders.* Tammy sighed, silently accepting her daughter's choice.

"Hi, Mom! So good to see you again!" Zoe exclaimed.

"Nice to see you too, dear," Tammy replied with a smile. *No hugs, no kisses, of course. She's still Alaskan.* Tammy smirked. *Maybe it's a good thing though. I would probably not know how to act if my daughter threw herself on me. Not used to it.*

"Where is Dad? Is something wrong?" Zoe asked.

Of course, she worries about Dustin. Daddy's girl.

"He expected you to be here two days ago. He is at work now. You know, he can't miss a day. He needs his job."

Zoe looked at Tammy somewhat sharply, and the other corrected herself. "*We* need him to have this job."

Although they took a short path to the village, there was still about half a mile ahead of them. Tammy listened to Zoe attentively. She talked about Toronto and Niagara and how surprisingly friendly Canadians appeared to be to her. As she was busy talking, she didn't pay attention to the boring environment, mainly represented by the woods until they finally got to the oldest and abandoned part of the village. Then something ill-favored came into her view, and she wasn't able to defeat her abhorrence.

"Disgusting!" she commented as they passed an abandoned outhouse that was falling apart. "Why would people leave something like that and not burn it to the ground? Just a stinky hole in the middle of another one."

Tammy didn't respond to that. There was nothing that she wanted to disprove in Zoe's words.

At home, after Tammy fed her daughter a full meal, she had a nice chat with her. She was proud of Zoe's achievements.

"Look at you, girl! Made it all the way to college! Have new friends. A new life! Gosh, I'm jealous of you!" Tammy rejoiced.

"Thanks, Mom," Zoe said and yawned. "Honestly, I'm a bit tired."

"Oh, go lie down. Rest a bit before your dad gets back. Your room is still the same," Tammy replied. It didn't take Zoe long to follow mother's advice. She kissed her mother on the cheek and walked down to her room.

While Zoe took a nap, Tammy washed dishes, occasionally glancing out the window. She saw Marta again. She had already returned from her field, and now, instead of a spade, she had a bucket full of feed for her animals. *Poor thing.* Tammy was captured in her philanthropic thoughts. Shuffling through passages from her past, she chose one to think about again. Why she chose that particular one she had no clue:

“Do you want me to call the police next time?”

“For what?” Marta showed her genuine surprise and laughed at the question. “You have nothing to worry about. Besides...” Marta hesitated to finish.

“Fire ahead, Marta! *Besides* what?” Tammy lost her patience—there was not only Marta’s wide-awake night but hers as well.

“I don’t mind...” the battered wife said, not daring to encounter her interlocutor’s eyes.

Tammy was shocked. A desperate disgust caused her a feeling of nausea. She put her hand to her throat as if this would help to prevent her from vomiting. She felt like the kitchen floor moved away under her feet, and she smelled ammonia in the air. She plopped in the chair near the table, and gaining her control back, asked, “You don’t mind *what*, Marta?”

“Just forget what I said. I don’t expect you to understand me anyway. Just want you to know I will do anything to keep him happy. Anything!” She attempted to close that ticklish topic.

Straight after her tirade, Marta left without an apology, leaving Tammy in the state of stunned rumination. *I have no right to judge anybody. I have no right. Shit! I do have a right! I have a right to be upset, to be angry, and to be unhappy, while Marta has a right to be happy in her own damn way!*

Soon Tammy heard a creak in the floor behind her. There was Zoe, to her surprise.

“You’re up already? That was quick.”

“Can’t sleep,” Zoe complained. “Thank you, Mom, for not upgrading my room,” she added cheerfully and grabbed an apple off the table.

Yeah. She knows we don’t have money to upgrade her room, and obviously that’s no longer necessary.

“What’s going on outside?” Zoe asked, then bit the apple. Tammy didn’t answer. Then, out of curiosity, Zoe stuck her head over her mom’s shoulder, while the other was still working on the dishes.

“Oh, how’d I know it was Marta,” Zoe commented. “Has everything remained the same? Her husband beats her up every weekend? Or is it more often than that now? I guess I missed a lot of the story in the past three months.”

Tammy didn’t want to discuss the matter, not when her only child was back for a couple of days. But Zoe insisted on the subject.

“I don’t understand why Marta can’t just poison him. I would do anything to protect myself or you,” she said, astonishing her mother.

“Zoe!” Tammy slammed the dishes back into the sink, wiped her hands on her apron, and with a grim look faced her daughter. Leaning back on the kitchen counter, she crossed her hands and judgmentally shook her head.

“What?” Zoe parried with a strong desire to prove her point. “Isn’t that the purpose of our life—to be happy? Isn’t that what it’s all about—Just. Being. Happy?” As any teenager, Zoe was fresh minded, ready to stand up for her own truth, and there was nothing that could persuade her from doing things any other way.

Then Tammy confronted her with the words that would irritate any adolescent.

“You know, Zoe, life is not as easy as you may think. Some people feel happy when they make others happy, even if they must sacrifice themselves.”

She sent her daughter into wild indignation, while she herself zoned out of the present moment. She remembered Zoe’s little girl questions she hadn’t been able to answer. *Mommy, why is our wall breathing so hard? And it seems like it’s crying.* When Zoe became a teenager, questions of this kind took her to a radically different level of perception. There were no fairy-tale explanations anymore. She realized that there were no ghosts either, sadly for her. But there was a very realistic and very ugly side of life.

Occasionally, Tammy heard Zoe’s abrupt phrases, from which she easily grasped her ideas: *Stupid women! They prefer to be abused by their husbands for the sake of their husbands’ happiness. So absurd!*

“Mom! Mom!” Zoe yelled. “You don’t listen to me!”

“What?” Tammy asked as she was pulled out of her irritating memory. “Oh, I’m sorry. I went to hell for a moment. But I agree with you. It doesn’t make any sense to be a human and sustain a very unhuman lifestyle,” Tammy confirmed, regarding Zoe’s sharp, eager eyes. *God, how good she is!* Tammy thought. *Ebony, straight hair, and green, almond-shaped eyes, framed in between thick eyelashes—no need for mascara. Her whole appearance is slim and nimble like an Egyptian cat. Definitely, her place is not here. Not among the ice and virgin forest that creates an image of absolute wilderness, bounding with a hermit’s life.*

“Did I get you right, dear?” Tammy asked Zoe.

Zoe blinked. It seemed as if she had drained all her energy in this battle for her point of view. She snorted, dissatisfied, and got ready to leave.

“Alexander’s under arrest.” Tammy stopped her with the galvanic news. “He’s been accused of murder. Once again. I guess you still remember Ivan?”

“Yeah.” Zoe nodded her head while her eyes asked Tammy to finish her story.

“He was a very nice man... but... he’s dead now.” And after a pause, she added, “Perhaps you’ll be able to have some quiet time here before you leave again.”

In a few days, Zoe had to leave for college, as her mom said, to carve a better life. She had some summer classes she had signed up for and was about to start her part-time job in the city.

“Yoo-hoo! Lucky me!” exulted Zoe. “And for how long will he join the place he belongs to?”

Tammy sighed. “You surprise me with your cynicism, Zoe, but okay. Nobody knows yet. They might classify him as a serial murderer now.”

Zoe heartily accepted this news, not even trying to hide her uplifted mood. She murmured a song underneath her nose—most likely something from earlier Patricia Kaas. Sticking the earbuds inside her ears, she danced her way out of the kitchen.

Life! She’s a real life! My dad was right when he named her Zoe. After this thought crossed Tammy’s mind, she returned to the dishes.

FOREVER LONELY

The next day, Marta stopped by Tammy's house to say *hi* to Zoe. She knew that Zoe loved her raspberry jam, so she brought her two jars full.

"Why so many, Marta?" Zoe laughed, giving a hug to her caring neighbor.

Marta brushed away her sudden tear. It was emotional to her, since she didn't have her own kids and she always treated Zoe as if she were her own child. Yes, they were not just neighbors. They were a close community folk—almost family.

"You will use it all. I know you always catch a cold," Marta claimed. Then she rummaged in her plastic bag and took out a white scarf. "This is for you too, girl. From me and my nanny. It will keep your tonsils warm." Noticing a smile on Tammy's face, she turned to her. "Yes, I know. You wanted to remove her tonsils. She doesn't need that. If you remove them, where do you think the infection goes? To the lungs and bronchi." Marta laid out her argument. Then, she shook her plastic bag once but with a force as if showing her protest. Folding it accurately, she continued, "That surgery really does nothing to you. You just don't have a fever, but all other symptoms can be even worse. Just keep your neck warm and take vitamin C, especially during the fall and winter."

"Okay, I will. Thanks, Marta." Zoe smelled the scarf and touched her face with it. "So soft. I like it." Then she stashed her presents in her bag that already stood in one of the corners of their tight living space.

"When're you leaving?" Marta became curious.

"Tomorrow," Zoe replied.

"So soon?"

"Yep. Must go," Zoe said as she zipped her travel bag.

Tammy was helping her pack things up. There was not much for Zoe to take, but at least some organic products would help her save money in the city.

"Mom, I don't need that!" Zoe argued as her mother urged her to take a bag of potatoes.

"Here is not much," Tammy persisted. "Five pounds only. Why won't you take it with you? So, you don't have to buy it as soon as you get there?"

"Because I'm not going to cook."

“What are you going to eat then?”

“Stop it, Mom!” Zoe felt unnerved. “People don’t live on potatoes only. We have restaurants over there. Fast food is not expensive.”

Tammy shook her head and was going to say something, but Marta interfered.

“She’s right, Tammy.” At some point, it was pleasant to Marta to hear that Zoe identified herself as a city girl. “She doesn’t need this crap. She knows what she’s doing.” Then she addressed Zoe directly. “You go, girl! You are smart, beautiful, and intelligent. And don’t you dare come back here!” Then she pointed her finger at Tammy. “And I wish you the same!” Then, she left, leaving both mother and daughter speechless.

In a few steps, Marta was already home. She leaned on the door and looked in the dark corridor as if she didn’t know whether or not to proceed down to the living area. *This is not home. I have nobody here who will care for me, and I have nobody who needs my care. This is not home.* Tears rolled down her cheeks. She smoothed them with both hands and then, halfheartedly, walked down to the living room. She opened her vanity drawer that her husband had once fashioned for her. Her chin trembled again. She withdrew a notebook and glanced in the round mirror. *Wrinkles...* She touched her face. *I’m aging. It is becoming more noticeable.* When she was done lamenting, she took a pen and wrote in her notebook with her fastidious cursive: “I deeply regret that I don’t have a child. I have been chasing after happiness all my life, and I didn’t catch it anyway. I would like to have a daughter like Zoe, but it’s too late now. Lonely forever.”

