



THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

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The theory of chaos establishes the “butterfly effect” based on the following Chinese proverb:

The simple flutter of a butterfly can change the world.

One day in the summer of 2006, when little Oli dared to snoop on the medical results of his parents, a butterfly appeared out of nowhere, and for no apparent reason, it fluttered its wings.

Foreword

He woke up, opening his eyes in a thin slit, and immediately after that the phone rang. Or maybe it was the irritating timbre that made him wake up. In any case, he found himself laying on the leather sofa in his living room. He was wearing a black suit and matching shoes, the same outfit he wore the day before. It was hot.

He could not remember clearly what had happened in the last few hours, but he was glad to be home. The last thing his memory recorded was that it was dark when he left the apartment, and he was at a bar with a glass of Jack Daniel's on the bar and that was the only clue that could help him rebuild the evening. That solitary memory made him turn his attention to an empty glass bottle that, in front of his dizzy eyes, was laying on the table in front of the sofa.

He sighed.

His eyelids were almost closed, for he was convinced that if he opened them completely, he would suffer an excruciating headache. He tried to move, but his left arm was asleep and it didn't respond; he had fallen asleep on it. He felt an uncomfortable tingle in his fingertips when he finally released it with a sharp movement. Then he slowly lifted his left ear from the black leather, revealing the imprint his own stubble had left on the cushion. He had a metallic taste in his mouth, and an uncomfortable, doughy mass prevented him from swallowing. He decided that the first thing he would do after answering the phone call would be to brush his teeth. He got up with difficulty, and after muttering *fuck* and a couple of *oh shit*, picked up the phone with a simple *hello*.

"I'm Carroll." Then a pause, "I hope I didn't wake you up".

The man looked around, disoriented and with a heavy hangover. It was still dark. The dim light coming from the outside lamps was sneaking through the window glass, showing part of the furniture shelves. A strong anger, followed by a strange feeling of frustration and helplessness, came to him as he followed with his glance the beam of clarity. Disorder was not the right word to define what he saw. The dozens of books and compact discs, the tennis trophies he had accumulated throughout his teen years, and a couple of modern vases that, while not worth a fortune, had a high sentimental value, were scattered on the floor. They were heaped up, dented and torn to pieces. Had he continued analyzing the room, he would have also found a blow to the center of his latest model television set that cracked the forty-six inches practically in its entirety. In an

instinctive movement, he moved his hand to the back of his waist, where he usually carried his pistol. He was startled to feel the emptiness in his gun case, and sighed with relief when he found it on the table, inches from the bottle of whiskey. It was a Hekler Koch Compact, a weapon of almost 700 grams with the magazine prepared for 9 mm Parabellum bullets. Light, cold and manageable. He did not remember putting it there, and that was strange, because he had become accustomed to being aware of it at all times.

He frowned.

"Agent?" The voice persisted.

"What the fuck do you want at this hour, Tom?"

"I'm sorry for waking you up on your day off, but something has happened tonight."

Your day off! These words were supposed to mean something good. People used to take advantage of them to take camping trips with their families, to dine downtown with their partners, to play football with their children or, in good weather, perhaps to enjoy a greasy and high calorie barbecue with the neighbors. He, however, had other kinds of plans. He would sleep late, maybe until 2 or 3pm. Afterwards he would have for *breakfast* an *ice-cold whiskey* while enjoying Andy Murray's match on television. The day would end with Ania's visit, which, at any time that he requested it, she would make up for his lousy day off with a torrid, wild sex exercise on the bedroom carpet, both drinking up champagne.

But Carroll had called, something had happened that night. Something serious, the detective thought, keeping an eye on the shelf, which was bound to ruin his day off.

"Are you listening to me?" Insisted the voice behind the receiver.

"Tom, what do you say happened?"

"I think you should see it with your own eyes." Thomas Carroll's voice was trembling on the other end of the phone. "Cowley Road, number 219. My God..."

"Okay, don't lose your temper. I'll change in a second and run out there. Just tell me what to expect, give me some info..."

He couldn't finish the sentence. During the conversation, he had begun to feel a stinging in the area of his right forearm. He had actually noticed it ever since he woke up. In an instinctive act, he moved the other hand to the area of the itch to rub and scratch it. It was then that something sticky covered his skin. He was astonished at what he saw, and he understood that his discomfort was not only due to the hangover: three deep scratches ran down his arm from elbow to wrist. And judging by the bruised color that was making the skin bloody, they were starting to become infected.

What the fuck...

"A terrible murder has been committed tonight," Carroll said.

The detective swallowed.

After saying goodbye with the promise that he would be there as soon as possible, he hung up the phone and got up from the sofa. Stunned, he stared at the lock on the front door: it seemed to be intact. Then he staggered through the hallway of his house, helping himself by holding onto the walls. He reached the bathroom, and as he examined his appearance in front of the mirror, he began to sweat. He had to sit on the toilet to control the dizziness that was beginning to overwhelm him. His lip was slightly cracked (hence his mouth was so pasty), and some stains of dried blood littered his chin, his neck, and a good part of his shirt.

Someone, most likely a professional, had come into the house at night destroying the furniture, drugging him and giving him a good beating. And worst of all, what plagued him most was that he didn't remember anything at all. For an insignificant instant, the agent panicked.

Chapter 1

"Do you think they'll ever let me out of this place, Morgan?"

"I hope so, Doctor. If it were me I couldn't stand the thought of dying between these four walls. I have too many wonderful things in the outside world."

"Really? What do you have in your *outside world* that is so valuable?"

"Well, my wife, whom I adore, and my two children, Benjamin and Africa, who are my reason for getting up every day."

"I get it."

"What's with the face, Salas? Don't you have anything on the outside?"

"Not much, to be honest."

"Don't you have children?"

"Come on, let's go for a walk. It's a splendid day."

"Why don't you want to answer me? You're leaving without responding and I can't stand that, and you know it! Do you have children or not?"

"I insist, let's go outside and walk. I have the feeling that this is going to be a great day."

Monday, November 6, 2006

Judge José Miguel Callejo took his glasses off, and held them a few inches from his mouth and let out a breath of hot air. As he carefully wiped the glass, he looked at the man in the trench coat, sitting diagonally to his right. His gaze focused on the forms he had on the desk and, with a permanently twisted frown, it made him seem like a person with a boorish personality and no sense of humor. Dr. Grau had presented himself to him a little over half an hour ago with a brief "hello, what's up" just before he took a seat in his corresponding place in the room, and had not looked at him again. Callejo cast him to be about fifty years old, although he might have been a young man of forty, who was embittered by his own ego or an old man whose thick, brown hair took fifteen years off. Beneath his trench coat was a stylish navy blue suit complemented by a tie of the same color.

The Judge was concentrating on his visual examination when the doctor caught him off guard and gave him such a look that it made him instinctively turn his head.

Then he put his glasses on the tip of his nose and pretended to read the papers before him. But the thoughts that actually occupied his mind were all related to the same date: last October the 12th. Until that damn day he had enjoyed a few quiet months in the region, with no more work than a small drug-trafficking between minors, a couple of cases of domestic violence, and some attempted robbery happily resolved by the Civil Guard. Everything changed, however, when that guy Charley, the maniac who was a proprietor in Ámber, with dubious ownership, was caught with his dick out of his pants and his hands on the tits of that poor girl. The case was closed in less than twenty-four hours. The girl denounced the attempted rape and the lout was forced to leave town until the trial was held that would lead directly to jail. A successful day and another medal for Judge Callejo, but on the 12th, a series of unforeseen events occurred. The man who had helped prevent her from being raped was found dead on the beach because, according to what had come to the judge heard, it was a stroke. And to his surprise when two days later, after the funeral, his own daughter denounced the father-in-law of the deceased!

Callejo took a sip of the coffee he had just taken from the machine and fixed his gaze on the horizon.

Apparently, the father-in-law, a prestigious retired physician, had allegedly falsified the diagnosis to hide his son-in-law's illness, God knew for what purpose. A case as surreal as this one did not happen every day, the judge

thought then, and he continued thinking now. It would all have been an amusing challenge if the widow's accusation had not been supported by a testimony from the doctor who had been a victim of the old man's lies and his false diagnosis. The girl was called Sara Mora, and it turned out to be the same one that had denounced the attempted rape of the wretched Charley less than a week before. Too many coincidences! He had learned to distrust this after so many years in law service.

And the best was still missing. The icing on the cake! Judge Callejo remembered that he was right at the door about to leave his house, on the way to his office, when he received an urgent call from the Civil Guard's office: Charley had been found dead at the foot of the cliff. They found remnants of his brain scattered among the rocks.

The door of the room opened, and a pleasant lady with a calm gesture entered, accompanied by an usher, who kindly invited her to take a seat in the chair that occupied the center of the room.

José Miguel Callejo had a hunch that something was off. Charley had committed suicide and the strange case of the crazy doctor was going to be resolved that same afternoon. Nevertheless, everything was so well connected, so simple, that it troubled him. He decided that as soon as the summons ended, it had just begun, he would pull some strings.

"Violeta, please get comfortable." He spoke to the woman in a powerful tone of voice. "The sooner we start, the sooner we'll finish. We won't take up too much time of your time."

Sara Mora dedicated the whole trip to look nostalgically out the window, first from the train, later the plane, and now, on the bus. She felt that she had been traveling all day, and in reality it had been so, between journeys, transfers and tedious waiting. She found it hard to get used to the convoluted way the English drove on the left, and at every roundabout, when the vehicle turned clockwise and not the other way around, she thought she'd have a heart attack. The landscape had been the same since she left London: green prairies, green hills... green, green, and greener. The young doctor watched in fascination the beauty of Great Britain, and for the first time on her trip, she was convinced that it might be a journey of no return. She liked the idea, which surprised her. She glanced at her watch to see that it wasn't too far before she arrived.

She had the laptop open and lit on her knees. A copy in "pdf" format of the cover of *El Diario Montañés*, local news of the Cantabrian province, occupied the screen. Sara had been hearing the same news for much of the trip:

SUCCESSION OF TRAGEDIES IN ÁMBER

Under the headline appeared four photographs in the foreground of Charley, Alfonso, Dr. Salas, and herself, in that order. *Where in the world did this crowd get this image of me?* The news was extensive, and it summed up in detail (and some other invented sensationalism) what happened during the fateful week in the northern town. Sara hated that she had been labeled as *a poor young woman whose savage rape attempt would undoubtedly be very hard to overcome* though she acknowledged that at least they had the decency to point to her *brilliant career in the world of neurosurgery*. In addition, according to her, the publication was too kind to Salas and the criminal, who was called *ingenious calculator* and *mentally unfit*, respectively.

She closed the notebook angrily and blew into the air.

Sitting to her left, an obese, red-faced man slept leaning towards her. Sara decided to baptize him *Porky* for obvious reasons, he snored so loudly that at times it seemed as if he was going to drown. The girl wanted to reach the station to lose sight of him, but until then she had to be distracted. Careful not to wake the huge snorer, she bent down to put away the computer and pulled out a notebook and pen from the bag at her feet. She paused for a moment, staring at the blank sheet, clicked on it with the pen and gave a nervous sigh. Then she began to write:

Diana,

I'm writing from the bus. It is eight-thirty in the afternoon, and I think I must be about to arrive. I'm exhausted, but the long journey has been worth it, how beautiful this is! It is always said that the weather in England is based on rain, cold and fog (you should see my suitcase, it looks like an Eskimo's), but today makes a splendid day. It was very, very early when I left Ámber, and the train that took me to Madrid took more than five hours. I took advantage of the breakfast being served in the cafeteria they had installed in one of the cars, although the coffee was difficult to digest and they had hardly any pastries; I was content with a donut that was... hard as a stone! I have slept most of my trip, and when I arrived in Madrid it was raining without stopping. Then I almost got lost on the subway. I thought I'd be late to catch the plane, but finally it left late, so...

She stopped, reread her own text, and crossed out the last few sentences, deciding that Diana would not be interested in the details of her boring day at all.

Focus, Sara! She scolded herself.

She was obviously nervous. The calligraphy was energetic and imperfect. Between phrase and sentence she took a deep breath, excited, then continued.

I've been bad, Diana. During this last month certain things have happened of which I've been recovering little by little, you know. I haven't told anyone about the attempted rape except you, of course.

The young woman's hand shook.

As I told you in the last letter, my rapist threw himself off the cliff. However my nightmares haven't stopped, rather the opposite. Sometimes I wake up at dawn, my body soaked with perspiration, convinced that the strange-eyed maniac is under the bed. He has survived and has returned to finish his work with me. I know it's stupid. I don't want to end up in a psychiatric hospital; I have faith that this trip will help me find peace again. Sometimes I am afraid of myself, of committing some madness.

And speaking of doctors, there is another issue. nosy Doctor Salas. The very pillar of the community betrayed me, betrayed us all. He deserves to pay for what he did. He forced me to fail in my diagnosis and to lie to a whole family, to a friend. I feel so responsible! Verónica requested my help the other day, as a direct witness and principal victim, to denounce her father. It is very hard with everything that is happening in that family, but the old man deserves to pay. I am not a spiteful person, but I helped Verónica and testified against him. It was what my heart requested I did the right thing. I think he's going to be tried.

A tear slid down the young woman's cheekbone and she was forced to stop writing. After half a minute, she blew her nose and calmed down.

Finally the day has come. In a few minutes I will step on the ground in this city and start a new life. I will do what I should have done many years ago.

Thanks for everything, Diana. Soon you will hear from me. I promise.

She put the notebook and ballpoint pen back in place and, excitedly, turned her gaze back to the green landscape, now dark by night. Green hope.

Porky was awakened by one of his most powerful snores, disoriented and satisfied, just as the bus was entering the platforms of the Gloucester Green Coach Station, Oxford City Bus Station.

“The tractor should not be going too fast, more in fact bearing in mind that it circulated close to the number 5th on Granite Street, a road at that time without asphalt and at the edge of a fairly quiet residential area. The vehicle was so wide that it occupied part of the opposite direction, forcing the other cars, motorcycles and bicycles to move out of its way until it stumbled through. The mastodon driver assumed that the rest of the occupants on the road would be careful with him.”

Judge Callejo reached into the back pocket of his pants and took out a cigarette pack, but he remembered that smoking was no longer allowed in public places, so he threw it on the desk. He kept paying attention to the tired words of the woman. Nor did he overlook that Doctor Grau was writing it all in his perfectly aligned file.

"But that afternoon, my six-year-old daughter, who was playing by throwing the ball against a wall and jumping on it when it came back, had other things on her mind. It's possible that the ball slipped from her at the time of the rebound and shot out. Or maybe the driver was lighting a match at that very moment. Or maybe that October afternoon, in a typically autumnal wind, she was just one more distracted girl. In any case, Amelia did not see the approaching bus when she ran to pick up her ball. She may have heard or not heard the horn, but it's clear that she didn't have time to react.”

Violeta stared into Callejo's eyes as she narrated the death of her daughter, which seemed almost heroic to the judge, given the circumstances.

"According to the witnesses, the man turned the wheel, pressed hard on the brake, and stopped the vehicle generating a violent cloud of dust on the road. But it was useless. A strong impact was heard and felt on the front of the chassis. Rafael and I were surprised by the cries of the neighbors, so we rushed out of the house, where we found Amelia lying on the floor in a pool of blood. She was unconscious, but she still had a pulse. Rafael put her in the car and we rushed her to the sanatorium of the Virgen del Carmen in Torrelavega, inland more than thirty minutes from Ámber. That's where she finally died.”

"Well, I'm sorry for the tragedy.”

Violeta nodded in response to the judge's sincere condolences, but her gaze locked on him implying that the idea of the summons was not entirely to her liking.

"The mourning lasted too long. Relatives and friends from all corners of Spain came to visit us during the following months to help us with the house and the care of the girls, who were still two babies at the time. My husband, who already had a good post as doctor in the clinic, couldn't contain the pain that tortured him inside. At home, if anyone approached to lend a hand with washing

dishes, for example, he would sit in the first chair he could find and begin to sob like a child. He grew a horrible beard, lost more than ten kilos, and the bags under his eyes swelled from crying.”

"The worst of it was when Amelia's little sister, Verónica, approached him, begging for attention. Rafael could hardly look into the eyes of his own daughter, for when he did, it was as if he saw in her pupils the emptiness left by the person he'd ever loved the most and lost by a stupid carelessness.”

"I understand," said the judge.

"Lorena, the youngest of the three, who still lived among little dolls and fairy tales, didn't help either. It was as if for Rafael she didn't even exist. It could be said that the care and attention of Verónica and Lorena during their first years of life was exclusively my work. He was too busy fighting against his own demons. The years went by and things did not improve. His daily behavior depended on his state of mind: if he wanted to stay in bed all morning, he did; if he didn't feel like going to the clinic, he would not go and that was that. The deep depression in which he had fallen was about to cost him his job. One thing was for sure: whatever time it was, whatever he did, you always found Rafael looking out the window at 5th Granite Street.”

Violeta paused, staring into space.

“Continue, please. What happened next?”

"My ex-husband turned one hundred and eighty degrees for his problem," said the old woman. "He took refuge in his profession.”

Callejo raised his eyebrows and leaned forward, showing maximum attention.

“He spent most of the marriage locked within himself. He was a handsome and serious man, in my opinion with a certain resemblance to Robert De Niro, but he was too anchored in the tragedy of Amelia and lost his connection with the world. He was only able to focus on his work in the hospital, almost obsessively, a fact that served him to be considered one of the best. I think he thought that the better he did in his job, the fewer girls like Amelia would die in a hospital. During these particularly unhappy years, he alternated operating rooms with bars and more bars, and became something like the last ice of one of his Bourbon glasses: the coldest of all, which keeps cold when the others have already melted and ends up damaging your teeth if you bite it in the end. The few moments he spent at home he spent smoking and drinking. Many nights I would wake up and Rafael was not on his side of the bed. Then I would tiptoe to the kitchen, where I found him sitting at the table with the lights off. I tried by all means to help him, but I couldn't reach him. I could not, and that's it. I begged him and begged. I even dressed up with the most sensual nightie and suggested a

good night of sex, and... you know what happens when you have the feeling that nothing is going to happen? Well that was exactly what happened. The kitchen was his temple and the night his guardian. With a glass of whiskey, a packet of cigarettes, a cigarette lighter, and an ashtray, he spent hours alone in the dark.”

"Was that the cause of your divorce?" Inquired the judge.

"I honestly think he came to hate me," the woman said with a slight shrug. "Unconsciously he blamed me for not paying more attention to Amelia that day, those things are noticeable."

Callejo thought it was easy for Violeta to shrug her shoulders at the moment, but at that time it must have been a nightmare for all the family members.

"We were finally divorced in 1979. It wasn't an easy decision, and not just for me, but also for the girls. Verónica, in particular, was a teenager and didn't understand. She was a very particular girl, you know. For some reason I would always be grateful, she showed a special affection for her father, despite the incessant scorn she received from him."

"If I am not mistaken, you married shortly afterwards with the one who was the mayor of Ámber in those years." The judge cleared his throat, aware that he was touching a delicate subject. "How did that affect Dr. Salas and the relationship with his daughter?"

"I'd rather not talk about my second marriage, if you don't mind," the woman said in annoyance.

"I get it."

"Yet, I will answer your question: they became strangely inseparable. I mean, they no longer lived in the same house, but that might be the reason they got along so well. Verónica was already an adult and Lorena had gone to study in London. I think Verónica was lonely, and she needed her father figure somehow. That miracle was wonderful. Rafael smiled again and stopped drinking. With me, he was still grouchy and the disgusting person from whom I had separated, but I didn't care. Somehow, everything seemed fine, and even more so when, a few years later, Verónica had an offspring with her new husband, Alfonso." The old woman drew the gesture of the cross with her right hand, a sign of respect for her late deceased son-in-law, and then continued as if nothing. "On leaving the hospital after childbirth, Alfonso and Verónica went directly to Rafael's house, where they gave him little Óliver. Rafael held him in his arms and tenderly cradled the baby who had just entered his home, I suppose he was remembering our missing Amelia. When their eyes met, Rafael's wrinkled face lit up, as if he felt the glow that once radiated from his own daughter. He gripped the boy and never let him go again."

"I understand he has spoiled him," Callejo said.

"He loves him madly." The woman smiled proudly. "Madly," she repeated. "That's exactly the word."

The judge turned the page and, considering that they were getting too long in time, decided to get to the point of matter by questioning the woman for her opinion on the matter.

"About what?"

"Last week, his son-in-law passed away, leaving a second baby on the way. Until that day, both the family and the doctor who was taking the case had been deceived by her ex-husband, making them believe that the one who was going to die was their daughter."

She paused.

"Well, I'd like your opinion," he added firmly.

"With all due respect, Your Honor, I am here to speak of Rafael, not to give my opinion."

"But you didn't take part in your daughter's complaint against him."

"Exactly, I did not," replied the woman with some aplomb.

The judge took a few seconds to think upon his next question.

"At least answer this: what do you think was the reason he illegally changed the diagnoses?"

Violeta didn't answer, however, for a new voice broke into the conversation for the first time. Dr. Grau had looked up from his papers to interrupt the interrogation in a hollowed-out voice, as if he were speaking to an empty chair:

"Were you surprised by the misdeed of your ex-husband?"

The woman, stunned, stammered.

"Do you think Rafael Salas is a person who acts impulsively, without taking into account the possible consequences, and putting at risk both his reputation and his family life? After all, you are the person who has lived with him the longest, and therefore the one who knows him best."

"Em... no. Well, I couldn't tell!"

The doctor had managed to corner the woman, who was now nervous and insecure.

"Understand, Madame, that we need to be sure before we make a decision. Any minute detail will be of use," he insisted relentlessly.

Dr. Grau struck the desk with the tip of his pen as he spoke, an action that irritated the judge greatly. Violeta, for her part, had come to breathe faster.

"Rafael is a difficult and unpredictable person, there is no doubt about it. It's impossible to know what's going on in his head," she said.

"Do you think he would do what he did again?" Was the doctor's next question.

The woman was not going to doubt this time.

"Very well, yes."

Grau looked at Callejo with his gaze for the first time all afternoon, and they both knew immediately what was going to happen next.

"For my part, I think we can terminate the summons," said the first, and rose to his feet. "The decision is clear."

José Miguel Callejo nodded and added, "the die is cast" in a curt whisper that was lost in the sound of the chairs that were moving away from the desk.

Tuesday, November 7, 2006

The morning of November 7th had begun with strong bursts of wind, and Violeta had to grip the steering wheel firmly to keep the car inside the lane. Twenty minutes into the journey, the old Volvo drove into a narrow dirt road up the hill. When it ran up to the iron door, she stopped the car and turned off the engine. She descended and walked to the gate. Dr. Salas had done the same and was already there, watching closely the countless latches and locks.

"Here it is," she said. "We have already arrived."

In front of them stood a single construction of stonewall, and as large as a castle or a palace. Seen from close up, the wall was very tall. And the gate, old and rusty, was devoid of doorbells and bell pulls.

"You're not saying anything?" Violeta insisted.

"Go to hell," he said grimly.

The old man peered through the bars. She, struggling to swallow her tears, turned and looked at the landscape. They were facing south, which meant that Ámber, as well as the sea, were on the other side of the hill. From that height, the Cantabrian range was planted forming a wall that separated the coast from the plateau, and extended from east to west like an impregnable stone curtain. The woman felt like it was the end of the world.

Inside the enclosure, beyond the gates, an individual approached from the end of a road that ended at the entrance of a huge building. When he reached the gate, he inserted an iron key as large as one of the locks, and although the old man clung to the bars like a child who did not want to go to school, the door opened. A raucous screech gave Violeta's skin goose bumps. She approached her ex-husband and kissed him on the cheek, accompanying the gesture with a "you'll be fine." He averted his face with inappropriate abruptness and allowed the man with the keys to grab his arm and drag him inward. He just turned his head to take a last look inside the Volvo. In the back seat, a ten-year-old boy watched him with his open eyes the size of saucers. They looked at each other for a moment. No gesture of farewell was needed. The gate closed again, and the

two men disappeared behind the door of the main building. Then Violeta started the engine again and let it slip, without haste, downhill.

Chapter 2

"Now that we're out in the open, enjoying this great day, let's talk about serious things."

"Propose a topic, then."

"For example: the family you have out there, Morgan, is it musical?"

"What do you mean, doctor?"

"You know, one of those families that make you dance without meaning to, even in your pajamas. Of the ones that are standing on the table and singing, *You Can't Leave Your Hat On*, while you unbuckle your belt. You let your dog off its leash and open a bottle of wine to celebrate, because, what the fuck, you only live once! You convert the shampoo into a microphone and the shower tray into your recording studio. You watch that fucking sad movie while you smile, because until that moment you always let yourself only see it halfway thinking my life is *depressing enough as it is without seeing that drama*. Those kinds of families. Musical families. Like the one I threw away."

"Well! You're nuts, you know."

"If we consider where we are, that may be an advantage."

Tuesday, 5 March 2002

"Look mate, the park!" She exclaimed, addressing Tallent with very Castilian English. "Mate" was one of the few colloquial words in the Anglo-Saxon language that she had managed to internalize all these months. "How weird! With the good day that it was, so sunny, it should be crowded with people sunbathing or playing soccer."

"It's not so strange. It's a workday and it's still early. In a few hours this will look very different," the native said absently.

"Let's go there! I still have some time left until the bus leaves, and I don't want to go home having wasted a last game. Come on, get the Frisbee and we'll play some!"

Without waiting for a reply Tallent who affectionately called her partner *Brunet*, went on the grass. The British shrugged and followed in her footsteps. It was nice to be outdoors on a day like that, maybe a sign of the prelude to spring.

Brunet had left the suitcase where she could watch it, and she already had the Frisbee in her hands. Over the next few minutes, Oxford University Park witnessed the beautiful dance of two lovers who refused to say goodbye, playing a sport whose enjoyment they had discovered over the past few months. Tallent's dream would soon be over, and all the magical evenings since Brunet's arrival in the city in mid-September were going to become bittersweet memories. The adventure had come to its end; there was only an hour and a half to take a bus headed for Gatwick, London, where a huge plane was waiting for her to go to Spain.

"Let's go back to the road, come on. It's been half an hour and I don't want you to miss the bus because of me."

After her ill-timed words, Tallent watched as the plastic disc fell into the hands of her Brunet, who then projected it with rage against the dry grass. The sadness in her eyes, she realized, had become extreme. Up to that moment, she had maintained her composure, as if she had promised not to cry or make a farewell drama. But wasn't the meaning of *drama* implicit in farewells? She could feel how those dark Spanish eyes that had seduced her in her day were wet. Tallent knew the strength of her lover, much greater than hers. What had happened was that they had feared that dreadful day since they met, and it could not be otherwise, for their romance had been truly beautiful.

"No, mate," replied Brunet, and repeated it more firmly, "No! Let's play some more, please."

She retrieved the disc from the grass and threw it back hard, as if it might stop the time.

"Come on, now throw it to me!" She cried, her eyes moist, and she ran.

The British female obeyed and ran behind. They played as if they had agreed to savor every second. And so they went into a wooded area. At that point where it was difficult for the native British to maintain her steady breathing, she begged a truce. Her *opponent*, however, did not grant it. They laughed out loud at their mischievous last moments at Oxford, they had begun to sweat. Then, trapped in an ecstasy of desperate love that went back and forth with each Frisbee pitch, Tallent stepped on unstable ground and lost her balance. She sank to the ground. A stabbing pain invaded her right ankle, and the pain multiplied when she rested her sole on the surface as she tried to stand on her foot again. Upon analyzing the terrain, she discovered that she had stumbled on an old root that hovered between two mounds.

The ankle gave way and she fell again. It hurt even more.

The next few minutes were strange, and from that day on there would be an imperfect mist among the memories of Tallent.

Brunet telephoned an ambulance. Despite her poor level of English, she managed to have the ambulance attendants come to the park in a few minutes that seemed eternal for the sufferer.

It all happened slowly. As three men lifted her from her arms and legs to place her on a stretcher, Tallent tried to reach out to embrace her love, but she couldn't move. The reaching out to her was unbearable. She understood it immediately, and looking into her eyes, she knew Brunet was aware too. There was no solution: the bus would leave in less than an hour and she would not have time to accompany her to the hospital. Irremediably these were their last seconds together. Pain, pain...

Then she was transported inside an ambulance and her tears burst out of control. The doors of the vehicle closed at her feet and everything was invaded by the gloom. She knew that, as life was, they would never see each other again. The engine started, and Tallent felt a throbbing pain in her chest, far more intense than her ankle.

Tuesday, November 7, 2006

Dr. Rodolfo Grau took a quick look at the papers the nurse had just laid on his desk. Everything seemed to be in order, Rafael Salas' official form was correct. He decided that he would later read the reports carefully, so he put them in the upper drawer of the desk and shouted in the air, "come in!"

He watched Doctor Salas as he entered his office. He did not appear to be more than sixty-five, and he was surprised to find that this person was far from that of any dimwit he had imagined, an image Grau had formed in his head after the testimony of his ex-wife, Violeta. While it was true that his hair was white and disheveled, two deep black eyes stood out inquisitively, as if stating who

was in command. He looked more like a movie actor than a doctor: strong, sturdy trunk, thick hands, a gold Rolex on his left wrist, and straight steps that denoted a superiority complex. Grau suppressed a smile to remember the comparison that Violeta had made between her ex-spouse and Robert De Niro: she had hit it right on the nail, just missing the characteristic mole that the actor has on his right cheek. What surprised him the most, however, was the elegant suit he had chosen to show up in his office: a gray Italian suit, a blue tie immensely combined with taste, and shiny black shoes. Too much for this place, Grau thought. Where do you think you're going?

"Please, Salas, come in and sit down," he invited him cordially.

The ex-doctor, showing a sour gesture that he did not seem to pretend to disguise, he approached the desk with determination, smoothed his jacket lapels with his hands, and sat down in front of the director of the center with his chest erect. Grau had thought that he might notice some sign of sadness or anxiety in his face, but it was not so. His gaze was indifferent and distant.

"Are you Rodolfo Grau?" The newcomer asked.

"Doctor Grau," the other corrected him roughly. "That's the way it is."

The director stared at the old man's expression, as if waiting for some tentative reaction from him. He didn't get it

"Tell me Rafael, do you know why you're here?"

"Doctor Salas," he said wickedly.

Grau grunted, as he didn't expect to be forced to maintain a power struggle with his new patient.

"You're no longer a doctor," he replied with unquestionable certainty. "In any case, Salas, do you know what you're doing in this center?"

"Social works."

"But why? What reason?"

"I think you know perfectly well."

"I want to hear it in your own words," Grau insisted, tired from the lack of answers.

"All right, *Rodolfo*, I'll cooperate with you," Salas said, accenting the name. The man, whose name had just been mentioned, clenched his teeth, but he sat patiently and waited. "I'm here because my daughter denounced me," Rafael said with a chill.

"Why? What did you do?" Grau asked, though he knew the answer well.

"I lied to her."

"About what?"

The old doctor snorted and waved his arms in reproach.

"Is this necessary?" He protested. "Tell me what my work will be here, and, above all, for God's sake, give me a decent room. I want to take a shower."

"Soon," the director promised, with the weary smile of a respectable man who is forced to deal with idiots. "But first, let's keep talking, why did you decide to lie about your son-in-law's illness? The probability of success was immensely remote."

"And yet it worked."

"Well, you're here, I wouldn't say it worked," Grau said, and then let out a mocking laugh.

"It doesn't matter, does it? It worked, period." Dr. Salas leaned against the back of the chair and smiled proudly.

"You're a genius," the director said suddenly.

"What do you mean?" He leaned forward again, always with exaggerated vitality. "No, no, the merit was not mine."

The interviewer typed on his computer, as if improvising, a few words on a notepad: "arrogance, sarcasm, humility." He paused as he realized the incongruity of his analysis, and returned to the conversation.

"Who would be the merit of your evil idea, if not you?" He asked, making the question sound like a trap.

"I don't want to answer that question."

"Where were you born?" The one with more authority changed the subject suddenly.

"Marseille, France. Although by accident, my parents were from Ámber, just as I would be if my dear mother, who may rest in peace, had she not been in labor in the middle of a pleasure trip. I have lived in Ámber all my life."

"Tell me about your ex-wife, Violeta."

"Fuck you."

Grau raised his eyebrows in amazement and continued as if nothing.

"Tell me about Sara Mora, your old student."

"Fuck you again!" He repeated, this time pointing at Grau with his finger.

The director clasped his hands together and leaned against the desk.

"I beg you to calm down, Salas," he said slowly. "I am your companion here, not your enemy."

The old man looked silently sideways.

"Let's change the subject." The director decided to try his luck on the other side. "I understand you were a wizard at neurology surgery. An eminence!"

"Indeed, Rodolfo, you have said it. I was the best," he said, this time puffing out his chest.

"Doctor Salas, I can't help noticing that you're trying to denigrate me," Grau said, changing his tone with the intention of regaining control of the conversation.

"That's right."

"I'd like to know why? I am the director of this center, and as such, here everyone absolutely treats me with respect."

"You may be the one in charge of this place, but at the level of medical knowledge, Rodolfo, you don't even reach the soles of my shoes," he said evilly. "I am the eminence, you said it yourself," he added, and gave him a playful wink. Then he laughed to the extreme, throwing his head back, and the director was forced to imitate him, with something more than prudence, for the truth is that he had left him speechless. The old man was not a fool.

Once they both regained their composure, Rodolfo Grau stood up and went to the door of the office.

"There is something, Salas, that I would like to make very clear to you. This is a psychiatric center, or, as we like to call it now, a mental sanatorium. As soon as you cross this door again you will enter a mean and unpleasant world," he warned.

"I already know it. I have to do my sentence and pay for my sins, whatever they may be," the old man protested, rather than asserted. "I will do what is required from me with the sick and I will wait patiently until the day of my release. If I had been able to choose," he added ironically, "I would have booked a room at the Ritz Hotel in Madrid, and not here."

Ignoring his sarcasm, Grau opened the door and put his right arm on Raphael's shoulder, urging him to walk.

"Watch out for the boys. Here the rules are very strict, you will see, because certain patients are dangerous. If any of them are agoraphobic and cannot go outside the enclosure, for example, we do not tolerate anyone, for ridiculing them, or to drag them out to the street. In these cases we impose very severe punishments."

"You'll do very well, Rodolfo. We seem to begin to understand each other."

"There are inmates," insisted the director of the mental sanatorium, "who suffer different degrees of schizophrenia. For example, there are those who believe they are people who they are not, and we even have some who only interact with beings created in their own brain."

"I'll keep that in mind, director," Salas agreed.

"What, then, can I count with your approval?"

"So it is."

Grau accompanied the new addition to his room through the sad corridors of the center. There, he said goodbye to him.

"Inside you'll find toiletries, pajamas, sheets and a pillow. I'll see you tomorrow, when I introduce you to the boys," he said, and invited him in with a wave of his arm. Then he slammed the door behind him and went down the corridor.

Rafael Salas stared for a long moment at the door that had just closed. He was alone in what would be his room for the next few weeks.

He untied his tie and laid it on the mattress of the bed, still unmade. He understood that he had many reasons to worry. He was there to minister to the sick. Not in their treatments, because this was not his specialty, but in first aid, healing wounds, putting plasters on or, in the most undesirable case, he may have to clean the excrements and urine of the most disabled. What most distressed him was the sinister scenario in which he had to survive from now on. All his life he had been trained to open human brains and fix them, but he was incapable of dealing with mentally disabled people. He was not a brave man in the presence of madmen, much less to clean toilets. With all this, from now on he would have to live among a multitude of individuals whose tumors were not on the surface of the brain, but in their very depths: beings crippled of soul and instinct, in whose word could not be trusted, for they themselves lived in an unreal world. In all its cases, this was going to be so terrible, because one would have to enter (and try to understand) in a kind of parallel world that summarized the subsoil of humanity, the manure of society and the failure of evolution. And yet, he told himself, he had to feel grateful for being an old man, a factor that kept him from entering prison.

After some incalculable minutes of rambling, Dr. Salas heard someone insistently knocking on the door. He was surprised, as he did not expect visitors on his first day. It will be Dr. Grau again, who wants to introduce me to someone, he tried to guess.

Behind the door, the ex-doctor met a black man with small stature and a lively gaze. His hair was an afro, but not very long, and an unblemished white robe betrayed his occupation in the center: he was one of the doctors. The little man of color shook his hand with a radiant smile that occupied half his face.

"Are you the new one?" He wanted to know with catchy good humor.

"The same. And you are..." Rafael said, and leaned over to the newcomer's chest to read the label on his robe, "Saul, curious name."

"Saul Morgan," the visitor confirmed. "A real pleasure, it is Dr. Salas, is it not?"

The man snapped his mouth shut and put his hand on Saul's arm.

"Yes, but you can call me Yayo."

Only one night had passed since she'd stepped into Oxford, and Sara Mora had already regretted her decision to stay with a foster family.

The first impression had been good. She soon found the road that led from the bus station to the house that had been assigned to her by the agency. After a leisurely stroll along the long Banbury Road, (an avenue that traveled through the city from north to south), it had reached Victoria Road 48th, home of the Connors. The street was not long, and it was purely residential: no shops, no banks, no offices; only beautiful duplex apartments with roof tops finished in a sharp peak, which Sara felt was a very British style. The young girl's enthusiasm was growing until she rang the bell and was greeted by her new family. The most Kafkaesque experience would begin as she passed through the doorway.

A twelve-year-old boy who introduced himself as Nick was in charge of welcoming her and showing the house to her. His parents (or as Sara later learned, his mother and stepfather) had gone out. The young woman, whose level of English had been rusting over time by disuse, barely understood a word of what the child was explaining. More than uttering words, he spat them out!

The bedroom that had been assigned to her upstairs wasn't all that bad; it was spacious and reasonably clean. But the bathroom... "Mother of god!" cried Sara when she came in for a shower that night. Neither was she expecting a twenty-square-foot polished bathroom, but of course it was a surprise to discover that three spiders with thin, elongated legs, which seemed to come out of nowhere, hung from the ceiling above the shower. Sara almost fainted when she had to shower under such repulsive company.

After the spider problem, meeting the rest of the family was less traumatic. Nick's mother (and mistress of the house) was a strange forty-year-old named Claire. She had disheveled hair, she was used to shouting at the rest of the family and every time she became nervous, the veins on her neck swelled. Her more humane side, on the other hand, came to the surface when she talked, grunted or played with *Rolly*. The main entertainment of the Connor's little pooch was to lick the cutlery and dirty dishes from the dishwasher.

If the company of spiders and the dog-scrubber were unexpected obstacles in her goal to stay clean and healthy, true surrealism would arrive later that night. The young woman was about to go up the stairs to her new bedroom, when she heard strange, sharp sounds, as if they came from a cave, on the other side of the living room door. Nick, who was passing by, tried to explain to her through cautious whispers that on the other side of the door Kurt was in the middle of one of his prayers. Apparently, her mother's new husband followed the guidelines of Buddhism to the letter. He went to meetings weekly and claimed to

be less violent if he recited certain private songs every day. "He is a good man, now that he has Buddha," the boy explained to Sara's stunned gaze.

"What does he do?" She tried to vocalize in the best English she could.

"*Forensic*." It was Nick's brief answer, and then he turned and left.

It was the first time Sara heard that word, but it wasn't necessary to search the dictionary for its obvious meaning. The man had already given her goose bumps, someone she had not yet seen in person.

Sara thought of how to solve the serious spider problem as she went out Tuesday morning with the intention of taking a walk in the center. Cowboy jeans, leather boots and a thin brown jacket of the same material were enough for that sunny day. Despite the good weather, she felt let down. Now that she was here, she didn't know where to start. Or, rather, she didn't dare to do what she had to do. And her new host family didn't invite optimism for the next few days.

She zipped the jacket halfway through and redid the previous day's route down Banbury Road. On the way she fell headlong into the Museum of Natural History, so she used it to entertain herself by looking at dinosaur bones and stuffed animals. She then went downtown, where the Radcliffe Camera fascinated her, a colossal circular building built in the 18th century as a scientific library. Nothing else surrounded her; she found St. Mary's Church, from whose tower she observed the city as a whole.

Sara had read that at the foot of St. Mary's Church they had opened a coffee shop, and her stomach was starting to growl. She ordered a delicious chocolate muffin and a cappuccino. She sat on the grassy lawn in front of the church and turned her face toward the sun to feel the comforting heat on her skin.

Two college students were chatting, also sitting in the grass, stared at her. They made her uncomfortable. The smaller of the two, a blond full of freckles and with the face of a bad boy, broke the ice with a petulant, "heeeey sweetie..."

The foreigner, blushing, looked away, and as she never ceased to feel the mischievous eyes of the cute guys penetrating the back of her head, she turned her body and gave them her back.

But Sara was going to discover the stubbornness of the new English generations. The other man, who had just witnessed his friend's courtship with amusement, approached and asked permission to sit down, proving to be several levels of gallantry above his colleague.

"May I invite you to another coffee, my dear? You have the impression of being short of company," he said; with such perfect English that even Sara understood every word without problem.

That the boy was handsome was evidence. And he hit the nail right on: she was unaccompanied! She hated feeling like this. If her mother were there, she would move heaven and earth as long as she accepted the offer of the English man, and thus be able to see her only daughter clinging to a man's arm. But Sara had no intention of pleasing her mother. She didn't want men in her life; not even with a perfect English accent nor any other.

She mumbled something in pathetic English trying to indicate that she was declining the offer. Then she took a last sip of coffee and vanished from there, ashamed until, she lost sight of the two boys. She took Catte Street, a university transit, and the presentiment suddenly invaded her that someone was following her. As a product of a reflex att, she turned her head casually in disguise to examine the environment, and found that the two Englishmen were still in their position, sitting on the grass at St. Mary and involved in their own affairs. But Sara, convinced that she was the victim of one of her last paranoia, still felt someone's eyes on the back of her neck. Passing beneath the particular Bridge of Sighs (named for its indisputable resemblance to its Venetian namesake), she entered the alley in the hope of misleading her observer, if indeed he existed.

The historic St. Helen's Passage was no ordinary alley. A little more than a meter wide, the rays of the sun didn't reach it. Its brick-red walls meandered in an orange light from a pair of lanterns, which would have made it a nightmare-like walk except for one of the walls at the entrance, a poster seduced most drinkers with the following text: THE FAMOUS TURF TAVERN, AN EDUCATION IN INTOXICATION

What Sara found when she reached the end of the passage put a smile on her face and erased her pursuer from her mind. A quaint little house with a low roof, dating back to the 13th century and encased in between old buildings, was a pub. At the front there was a small patio with a wonderful charm, in which customers enjoyed brewed beers and appetizer dishes on some tables and wooden benches. Sara noticed that the outer wall was decorated with slate posters where the most illustrious visitors to the Turf had been drawn with chalk. Chuck Berry, Elizabeth Taylor and Bill Clinton were three of the celebrities who most called the doctor's attention.

There were no free tables left, so she entered the premises and allowed herself to be invaded by its British atmosphere of past ages. Comforted by the smell of varnish and the dim lighting, she approached a corner of the bar that was vacant and asked for a beer and a combined meat dish garnished with broccoli and mashed potatoes. It was not particularly tasty, but she didn't leave a crumb on the plate.

What Sara Mora didn't expect was that the pleasant lunch was to be interrupted.

It had been less than half an hour since she had reached the pub, and the number of diners had doubled. It was about twelve-thirty at noon, and both locals and tourists were starting to leave their homes to enjoy the sunny Tuesday. Sara looked around to make a mental picture of the magnificent appearance of the interior of the room when she was forced to stop the inspection, at a point that caught her eye. She had to stare to make sure her eyes didn't betray her.

It can't be... she thought in horror, rather than whispered, for she couldn't generate a single sound.

In the crowd by the front door a middle-aged man, thin and tall, who almost hit his head on the doorway, watched her over the other guests with unusual attention. Their gazes crossed, and then she could detect a slight smile on his face. She rose from the stool as he approached, but soon saw she had nowhere to escape. On one side the bar surrounded her, and there were too many people around her to vanish in a few seconds. What the hell could she do? When the pursuer came closer and she looked him up and down, Sara began to gasp for air. It had to be a hallucination.

Charley... she repeated mentally to herself as she struggled to overcome her panic.

The beer mug was dismissed due to an involuntary gesture that the girl gave as she tried to escape, and it crashed into the wooden floor of the Turf Tavern.

Chapter 3

"What do you know about love, Morgan?"

"It's that uncomfortable butterfly feeling that forms in your stomach and steals your appetite, it's all a nuisance."

"The problem is not about having butterflies in your stomach, but not knowing how to put them into combat training."

"Did you manage your army of butterflies, Doctor?"

"Not by a long shot."

Tuesday, November 7, 2006

A lanky blond boy who worked at the Turf as a waiter to finance his university came out of the bar with a broom and a mop. After giving Sara a look of reproach, he began to clean the spilled beer. The clientele that concentrated around the small incident shrugged, and then each followed his own. Except for Sara, who was immersed in her own nightmare. Charley had already reached her position and cornered her against the wood. *What do I do?* She repeated to herself. *What...?* Panic-stricken, she wanted to shriek and scream like a lunatic. Literally, run out. She did not do it, for the man's right hand grasped her arm firmly. *The right hand...*

Sara was so stunned, her sight so uncertain and fuzzy, that it took several seconds to notice that her stalker held both arms. She focused her attention on her extremity and nearly lost her balance. Her legs were failing her as she lacked strength. Nothing seemed to make sense! So blocked, she didn't think of the knife she'd always had in her purse ever since she'd been attacked by Charley. Then the man bent to hold her and looked at her in a way that slowed her heart rate by the minute.

"Charley..." she moaned.

The man replied with a friendly gesture, as if he expected that reaction and knew that the next step would be to comfort her.

Sara studied his features. The eyes were perfectly normal (no trace of unequal pupils), and blinked to a natural rhythm. He gave off a pleasant fragrance, like fresh cologne, and wore a white shirt inside blue linen trousers. This guy didn't seem to attract any bad attention, except for one important detail: he was identical to her aggressor.

If this man wasn't Charley, who the hell was he?

That same day, in Torrelavega, the investigation on the double Rubial-Morales case was resumed, when Judge Callejo summoned the police to a meeting in his office. He looked at the two members of the police who were seated in front of him. It did not please him to see the composition of the pair.

The youngest of them didn't seem at all to be an officer. Either he had just been transferred to the police station, or he was a rookie. He decided on the second option by observing his soft features and seeing that he was the youngest agent he had seen in a long time. Marcos Tena had a subtle and intelligent sense of humor that Callejo would soon discover *and appreciate* during the course of the meeting. It still remained to check his competence in resolving a case.

His superior was Commissary Julian Barreneche, a forty-six-year-old veteran who had been in the Crime Scene Investigation office for eighteen years. Barreneche was the cause of Callejo's displeasure. To compensate for his long

experience and research to solve unusual investigations, Barreneche was well known in the world as an egocentric, sarcastic and with a morbid sense of humor that, especially bothered Callejo a lot. His way of being, as well as his way of resolving conflicts, were details that simply did not please the judge. But he had to recognize one thing: when the screws were tightened and he concentrated on his work, he was an excellent researcher. In addition, the rookie Tena could use an intensive training method with Barreneche. They could be an interesting couple.

The meeting had also called for an officer of the Civil Guard and his burly companion, to report first hand what happened at Dr. Mora's house the afternoon Carlos Rubial was about to rape her. They were both exhausted and wanted to go home as soon as possible.

After twenty minutes recalling the facts, everyone had refreshed the case and again became clear how events unfolded. Callejo made a summary:

"This is what we know so far: the renowned Dr. Rafael Salas, using his falsified influence..." he paused to rectify, "sorry, he exchanged the medical diagnoses of the two members of the marriage Morales, Alfonso and Verónica, making believe that she suffered from a deadly brain tumor, when in reality it was her husband who was dying."

"Sir, don't forget to mention the important fact that the woman was your daughter, and therefore the corpse, your son-in-law," said the senior civil guard.

"Thank you, Agent." The judge gave him a look full of irony to imply that this detail was more than dispensable. "I thought that was clear."

The civilian cursed silently at himself and lowered his head, blushing. Callejo continued:

"Alfonso Morales died on the sandy beach of Ámber on October the 12th. On the other hand, four days earlier, Carlos Rubial, from now on Charley, was intercepted and arrested for the assault and attempted rape of Sara Mora in her own house. Mora was the doctor who took the whole case of Alfonso and Verónica Morales and, of course, who was also fooled by Dr. Salas, who, by the way, had been her mentor a few years ago."

Marcos Tena raised his eyebrows, but didn't ask for more details about that curious relationship, which was what he was dying to know. The judge addressed the couple of civilians:

"You received the notice of the rape attempt on Zafiro Street. Do you know who made that call?"

They both shook their heads.

"We traced the call, but it was done from a phone booth. All we know is that, because of the tone of voice, it was a woman," said the superior. The younger, on

the other hand, didn't participate in any of the conversation.

"All right," agreed the judge, who easily led the meeting. "And finally, the same day that Alfonso Morales disappears from this world, Charley gets out of the middle by throwing himself into the sea from the cliff. Any comments?"

Tena took a step forward and spoke for the first time:

"I'd say Rubial took his own life because he knew he was going to jail, your Honor," he said hesitantly.

Barreneche and Callejo exchanged glances. The chief of police took the floor before his young companion was humiliated by his obvious conclusion. No one but he had the right to punish him.

"Did you forget a detail?" Barreneche asked the magistrate.

"What detail?"

"Carlos Rubial was disabled," the policeman said.

"Hell ya, I know he was disabled. Remember, I questioned him myself?"

Barreneche chewed the judge's sullenness like stale gum, and smiled.

"Don't take me for stupid and think back," he said intriguingly. "The disabled guy lost his arm in a car accident in which he was traveling with Alfonso Morales himself. It happened in 1983."

He smiled even more.

In his thoughts José Miguel Callejo cursed the commissar, although he didn't show the slightest change in his face. Once again, this cocky bastard was always one step ahead.

"Besides, Rubial was the stepbrother of Verónica Salas," added the chief of police, although he knew that they all knew this information, including the civil guards.

"Mmm... coincidence?" Callejo asked for an opinion.

"It may be, but I'll bet not," Barreneche said. "Without wanting to get into family crap, I suspect that this guy Charley had something to do with the old man's plan."

The oldest of the civil guards spoke again, this time to recall an important fact:

"We mustn't overlook the photos we found scattered on the doctor's floor the day we stopped Rubial. That scum himself had them in his wallet, and Verónica appeared in them in a compromising position, let's say, very intimate."

"Hell, it's true. The damn pictures," spit Callejo, annoyed.

A brief silence settled around the desk. They had reached a tricky point. Rafael Salas had been tried and Rubial was dead. There is an unacknowledged fear in the legal world regarding investigations: no police, judge or prosecutor

wants to delve into the actions of a deceased, much less if it has to do with his past. And the reason was simple: a dead man cannot be interrogated.

Callejo wanted to cover up the subject, but something told him that there was more underneath to scratch. Besides, he had to admit that the case fascinated him.

"What are the orders?" Asked Marcos Tena.

He referred to the investigation but at the same time he made clear his desire to work immediately in a real and complex case like that.

Both Barreneche and Callejo shook their heads, the first in denial, and the second nodding. The judge liked that kid.

"Agree. Tena: "You're going to work on the case. Barreneche, you, of course, will accompany him. You'll be the commanding officer. You will take care of Charley's social life. I want you to investigate where he lived, in what circles he moved and with whom he was dealing, ask any family member, friend or foe. As for the two of you," he gestured at the two civilians, "good work. You can leave."

Julian Barreneche's mouth snapped open.

"What? But this isn't even an investigation!" He growled, his voice increasing. "I'm an expert at catching scum, and you know I'm the best. But don't ask me to make a compilation of that man's life. What do you want, do you want me to write his biography?"

"No more talk," said the magistrate. "I just want you to ask a little bit about his private life, it shouldn't take you more than a few days. We will meet again this week."

Inside the Turf Tavern, cornered against the bar, Sara Mora was about to listen with amazement at the first words that the phony Charley was going to pronounce as a question.

"Sara Mora? Is it really you?"

The greeting did not seem to the young foreigner as disturbing as the serene tone with which the arrival had expressed himself. As quickly as possible, somehow, the man had made it clear that he was as far removed for him to be Carlos Rubial; the amputee would never have manifested himself in such a way.

"Do I... do I know you?" The doctor had assumed she was not going to be able to flee, so she tried to get some information.

"No, but unfortunately you did know my brother." Sara paled, and he sped to mend the misfortune with an explanation: "Don't be afraid! We look alike, but I have nothing to do with him," he explained, almost between entreaties. "No longer anything to do with him."

She thought quickly. By appearance, without a doubt opposite her was a man reasonably attractive, yes, and in comparison with that worm, he was light years away! But oblivious of Charley's stump, laziness, and extraterrestrial gaze, it was clear they shared genes. Besides, she had realized that he had no English accent; he spoke in perfect Castilian. *If he's really Charley's brother, will he know about his suicide? And more importantly, how and why did he find me?* Sara was submerged in her own thoughts when the words, "let me explain everything while having coffee," landed in her ears as an alarm that warned her that her time for a decision had expired.

She needed to act. The Sara of a few months ago would have accepted the offer without hesitation. Of course, she would have sat down with that perfect stranger, letting herself get carried away, and would have revealed every little detail of her private life. But the naive girl had suffered an attempted rape and a professional humiliation in no time. It could be said she had learned from her mistakes or not? The truth was that she had no intention of sitting down and talking to the man who claimed to have a first-class family relationship with the person who had taken her innocence. But what other choice was there? She had no escape, and, after all, she couldn't be raped or attacked inside the bar, there were too many witnesses.

On the other hand, her conscience insisted more and more forcefully that she needed to know the history of the man.

She agreed.

They both walked to one of the few free tables left in the room, though she resisted sitting down.

"I won't take another step until you tell me your first and last name," she sharply stated.

"Miguel Lennard," said the newly presented, as if waiting for an ultimatum. "Although almost everyone here knows me as Mike, of course. Except my colleagues in the ballroom club, who call me Mickey, and my mother, may she rest in peace, that used to call me Miguelito."

"Lennard?" Curiosity for his surname change to an Anglo-Saxon one caused in Sara the same surprise as discovering that this man danced the tango in his free time.

"I changed my surname once I reached England," he mused. "Let me explain everything."

Then he gestured with his hand for her to sit at the table. Sara blinked a couple of times and nodded unconvinced. He placed his jacket on the back of a chair and settled down, so they faced each other. He ordered an espresso macchiato for him and a café latte for her. The doctor's hands were trembling so

much that she couldn't help jiggling the cup when she brought it to her mouth. She supposed that Mike had noticed her nervousness, because he decided to get to the point:

"I know what my brother did to you," he said.

Sara felt something in her stomach contract, making her want to vomit. She had never heard her tragedy from the mouth of another, and the wound was not yet closed.

"You... you know that?"

"Yes, and I want you to know that I feel it in my soul. My brother was a monster, but I'm not like him. I promise you that."

Sara hesitated, and took a moment to examine the man in front of her. Surprising, as it may seem, he was moderately attractive. The brown hair, combed in bangs and with the side part to the side, made him seem unmanly at first, although she realized an idea that Sara had always maintained: the haircut in a man is fundamental to give a good (or bad) look. In this view, the good brother beat his relative by a vast difference. Modern black-eyed glasses occupied a large part of his face. A face that, and here there was another great difference of hygiene between the two, was shaved. The body posture was correct, and his skin gave off a pleasant aroma of a man's cologne at the table area. It was as if Charley had taken all the destructive genes, leaving the good ones to his placenta mate. Because, if there was something that left no room for interpretation, it was that both were twins.

"I don't want our resemblance to make you have a premeditated opinion of me," he continued, interrupting Sara's analysis.

"Okay," she said at last, almost surrendering. "Even though it's still hard for me to look you in the eye, I suppose it's not fair that I hate you. But, see, how do you know who I am?"

"I saw your picture in an article in the newspaper the other day. It has been an incredible coincidence that we met accidentally here."

She shook her head uncomprehendingly. She dismissed the second comment and focused on the first one:

"The newspaper? That's not possible. Why did you, a citizen of Oxford, read the website of a local newspaper in Cantabria?" She formulated the question, narrowing her eyes, convinced that he was taking her for a fool.

"Well, when they found my brother's body the Spanish police called me as the closest living blood relative," Mike said without hesitation. "I must admit the news shocked me. But I didn't go to the funeral, if in case there was one. The truth is that long ago I stopped considering him my brother." Ashamed, he made a grimace that he tried to pass as a smile. "However, since then I have been

reading the newspapers in case I see anything. I guess out of simple curiosity, nothing more."

"And then you saw my picture in the news."

"Exactly. Finally, they published a great article. And not only about Charley's death, but also about your... well, about what he did to you," he rectified, "and everything about his step-sister's family. When I read that I only thought: what mad absurdity have they put that poor doctor through! Ironies of life, now the poor doctor is here, having coffee with me."

Mike smiled sweetly.

"Well yes, they really deceived us."

Sara looked at the wooden table. She didn't feel comfortable talking about it with a stranger. That story was something that belonged only to her and to her past.

"What happened to the woman?" He wanted to know. "I mean the widow. How is it going? I suppose it was a huge blow to her as well. Given her pregnancy, I mean."

"Verónica's pregnancy is going well." Sara sighed in pity. "But I don't think she ever forgave her father."

A short silence took over the table. Mike excused himself to go to the bathroom, and Sara was left alone. She had not been able to get her heart beating at a normal speed throughout the conversation. Why was it so hard to relax? She didn't want to examine her own feelings for fear of an unsatisfactory answer. Then she noticed that Mike had had the carelessness of leaving his jacket on the chair, with all his belongings protruding through his pocket: the wallet, a bunch of keys and his cell phone. The doctor had the urge to reach out and take the wallet. She opened it trembling and, along with credit cards, bus passes and a couple of ten-pound notes, she found a driver's license. "Bingo!" She turned for a second to turn her gaze to the service door to check that there was still time: the coast was clear. She examined the document.

He had told the truth about his identity.

In the lower left corner of the card, the close-up of a very young Mike, smiling and with bright eyes. Most likely, he was fresh out of college. The heading occupied the center of the document.

So ingratiated was she wondering that she almost didn't realize that her companion was already returning from the bathroom, and if he had been attentive, he would have caught her red handed with his wallet where he had left it.

She barely escaped from getting caught.

"Well." Sara Mora resumed the conversation as Mike sat down, shifting the subject to another that interested her more. "You owe me a story."

They both smiled, surprised at how quickly they were beginning to get involved.

"Indeed, I owe you," he said, clapping his hand. "What do you want to know?"

"Your relationship with Charley."

"Agreed. Where to begin..." Mike hesitated thoughtfully for a few moments, as if to recompose a long story in his brain. "My brother has never been very normal, that's the truth. Since he was a small kid, he entertained himself by breaking my toys or by burning anything he was given. Then, being older, he always missed class; he was belligerent to the teachers and also to our mother. I never got along with him, even though we were identical brothers. At least in the physical, fortunately I didn't behave like him. I felt ashamed of my own brother. And fear." It seemed to her that Lennard's eyes glazed as his voice sounded more broken. "As we became teenagers, he started becoming violent. You couldn't say anything to him, and at the least reproach he threatened us or he would bruise us sometimes."

"Us?" Sara frowned. "Who else did he bully besides you?"

"My mother. She was a very good woman, she gave us everything but she never knew how to straighten Charley. Things got worse and worse."

"What about your father?"

"My father?" Mike said, as if the question was stupid. "He is the reason my brother was like that! He was an unscrupulous man, aggressive and ruthless. And that's how he became mayor, of course."

"Did he hit you?" Sara asked, more and more intrigued.

"Charley or my father?"

"Your father," she agreed.

"He never touched me, but my mother..." The twin waved and paused to swallow. "My mother, he beat her almost every day, always at night. He made sure that Charley and I were laying down, and then he untied his belt and hit her with it." Lennard made a subtle gesture with his hand, as if waving an invisible whip. "I know because I never slept until the beatings ended, although my mother did everything possible not to scream. She didn't want to scare us."

"And your brother? Was he aware?"

"Charlie and I slept in the same bunk. He could hear me crying every time the attacks took place, but I can't say the same about him." Mike Lennard's voice had turned into a murmur. "My brother never showed the minimum feeling of sadness towards our mother, nor fear towards our father."

Sara had run out of questions. Or, rather, she was too moved to formulate them.

"It turned out all right, after all," Mike said with a sorry expression. "My dear mother, aware that it was a matter of time before Rubial went overboard and ended her life, decided to escape without saying anything. She explained her intentions and I, as it could not be otherwise, accompanied her. Until the last moment, she intended to take my brother with us, against my will. Luckily, he had just entered a reform school for hitting a teacher and it was impossible to get him out of there." He took a sip of his espresso macchiato, and his voice rose. "So we left Ámber without him, and we lost sight of them forever. Thank God."

"Wow, what an incredible story," said Sara, still in shock. "So you came to live in Oxford?"

"We settled in London, in a little house on the banks of the river, just outside the city," Mike explained, a nostalgic smile on his face. "My mother remarried, this time with a decent man, the typical Englishman of extraordinary principles. I lived with them until she died, five years ago. Then I was offered work in Oxford and I didn't hesitate."

"Had you heard from Charley or your father?"

"No, except for a gift my brother sent me some years ago. A music box."

"A music box?"

"Yes, one of those simple boxes that generates an uncomfortable melody when you open them. Next to it I found a brief note of brotherly love that sounded like a goodbye. It said to consider that box as a symbol of family union, and insisted that I never throw it away." He clenched his fists as if he held back some grudge. "Now I use the box as a place for my watch. I really don't know why I keep it."

"And apart from that?"

"Apart from that, nothing. Until the other day I received the call informing me that my brother had taken his life. As for my father, it came to my ears that he had resigned from the post of mayor, disappearing from the map. I never knew if it was true or not, and I'm not interested either."

Mike Lennard leaned forward and took the girl's hands.

"Sara, I'm so terribly sorry you had to suffer a monstrosity at the hands of my brother."

She allowed herself to feel him caress her knuckles, and she realized that it had been a long time since a comforting warmth made her feel sheltered that way.

They said goodbye in the street, under the Bridge of Sighs, promising to see each other again. Mike wanted to go further and invited Sara to dinner at his

house the next day, but she was hesitant. "Tomorrow I have said I'll stay with my foster family for the day in Cambridge," she lied, for she wasn't yet convinced of his intentions, "although we should exchange telephone numbers!" By half, Mike had to accept. Once the numbers were noted by each, they kissed on the cheek and said goodbye. They both went their respective ways with a more lively expression than they had been a few hours before.

Neither of them noticed that a police officer had been watching them. Standing, leaning against the wall of the Bodleian Library, Alfred Horner had the sudden presentiment that something bad was going to happen.

Chapter 4

"Tell me, is it because of that amazing love story that you're locked in here? Did you commit some madness?"

"I'm here because of a pummeling from Oli."

"Who is this Oli?"

"My grandson, it is all his fault."

Wednesday, November 8, 2006

A wrinkled tongue licked Tallent's cheek and didn't stop until it had accomplished its purpose: to awaken her.

"Oh, Vader... Shit," the girl cursed between babbling with one eye still half closed.

The morning light of that Wednesday was already traversing the fine pistachio-colored curtains in the bedroom. Tallent leaned toward the alarm clock that sat on a wooden bedside table, very vintage. It was 9:45. It was time to wake up, as Vader had reminded her as he jumped out of bed and in a flash went into the dining area, and saw his empty food bowl.

The newly woken woman rubbed her face with both hands and stretched her arms until the muscles of her back creaked. Then she filled Vader's bowl with pellets, put a Paul Simon record in the living room's record player, and went to look out the window. Oxford had dawned quiet and beautiful. The sun invaded Walton Street and bicycles circled the asphalt, autumn was already beginning to make its appearance falling from the trees. She yawned again, and a lovely moan, like a whimper, came out of her mouth.

She had breakfast only with the company of *Hearts and Bones* of Simon. Vader, who had already quenched his hunger, had become a ball of sleeping fur on the sofa, and she prepared for a new day of work. Or whatever she did, since playing her favorite classics for outdoor tourists could not be considered a job. And much less rehearsing with the Oxford Symphony Orchestra, which was what she devoted every morning. She liked it too much to qualify herself as a work slave.

When she went to put on her leather boots, she felt the right ankle with her hand. As every morning, the old injury hurt her, and as every morning, she remembered her Brunet when she felt that pain. Four years had passed and the grief was still there, that her joint sent a reminder daily to her heart to avoid forgetting. As if it were routine, the young woman drew a smile of perfect nostalgia on her face.

She had always been clear: life was not going to give her anything. When she was only fifteen years old, her father, David Tallent's all-terrain vehicle that he was driving in the Swiss Alps, fell downhill during the vacation he enjoyed with his wife, Mary. Both died instantly, leaving an orphaned child. Tallent was able to adapt to the circumstances and wore armor around her soul that forced her to mature. Far from deterrence, she decided to fulfill her dream to become a professional violinist. She found work, as a waitress first and cocktail waitress afterwards, in the Red Lion, one of the most important pubs in Oxford. For several years she had to work seven days a week in order to finance music

lessons, and when she had any amount of free time, she would take the violin out to the street and practice her favorite songs in front of the pedestrians. No one ever remembered seeing her with a man, very occasionally she drank a drink of alcohol, and she hated the noise of the nightclubs. Instead she cultivated a taste for the small pleasures of life: scratching the sock mark on her ankles, lying between freshly washed sheets or being surprised by the smell of freshly baked bread. Despite her tragic adolescence, the young woman was one of those who left a mark: sweet, sensible and sure of herself, ultimately resplendent. She always had a kind word or advice for her friends, and especially when she played the violin, she radiated a joy of life that transferred to her melodies. No one played like her; she was a world in herself.

The young British woman met Brunet at the Red Lion bar on a night in September 2001. That evening they exchanged looks and amusing wordplay, and from then on, Brunet began to go to the Red Lion quite often until she invited her to go to the movies.

Tallent was aware that Brunet barely understood her English, having arrived in the city from Spain through an Erasmus scholarship. But that made it even more exciting: they had fun trying to understand each other, and when they didn't, they played with their imagination, which was exciting. The couple spent almost half a year sinking into what became a kind of prolonged summer romance.

Basically, she was the best, Tallent recalled from her room. They went on picnics, went out for beer, and, on a couple of occasions, escaped to Liverpool and Bath all weekend. In short, they had a great time. When they drove through the streets of Oxford, in an old green Peugeot that the natives call *Minifalcon*, they talked about everything except what they would do with their relationship in the future. Tallent's music encompassed everything surrounding the couple. If the violinist liked a genre, she would bring it up over and over again. On one occasion, remembered the British woman, she interpreted the classic of the sixties, Eleanor Rigby, for her love during a whole month. Brunet was fascinated by her music. Once, the snow began to fall hard as they drove through the Headington neighborhood. Then a local radio station punched out a ballad of Roy Orbison, and Brunet, aware of her predilection for the singer, stepped on the brakes in the middle of the storm, took her lover by the hand and dragged her tenderly toward the street. There she danced with her, singing in her ear *You Got It*, while the snow fell through the streetlights. It was as if the world belonged to them.

It was the best months of her life.

Four long years later, the violinist continued to revive her romance. Since she left without being able to say goodbye because of the untimely ankle injury suffered during the last morning, she had never heard from Brunet again. Nevertheless, she had set fire to her soul. It was as if she had the dark suspicion that she would never love anyone as purely as Brunet. Her thoughts discouraged her every morning, making her a prey to a fleeting love that was doomed from the beginning.

It was the drop of a tear from her cheek to the parquet, which made her stop daydreaming and finished with her boots. She wiped her eyes with her palms, wished her cat good morning, and went out the door of the apartment with her inseparable violin on her back.

At one-quarter past noon, in Ámber, police chief Julian Barreneche and his young companion, Marcos Tena, entered through the door of the Sensations bar. They had visited Charley's house just before, not without a certain stupor, even though it didn't seem worthy of such denomination. The dust made it almost impossible to breathe, and the mess of the place, even though it barely had furniture, was absolute. Both police officers agreed that it met all the requirements of an abandoned place. And yet it was where Charley lived. "That crazy suicidal must have been an absolute character," were the exact words of Barreneche, who showed in his tone that he still couldn't understand what the hell he was doing there.

Apart from confirming the peculiarity of the deceased, they didn't find in the house any clue that could be useful to them. They also went back to reviewing his Land Rover though it was the first thing the police found next to the cliff on the day of the incident, and again unsuccessfully: only the dry patches of some cheap whiskey scattered on the hood. The Sensations, that dump that Rubial had in his name, was their last option to discover any connecting thread. Barreneche hoped for the same success. He wished he could find nothing of interest, go home, and that Judge Callejo would file the case once and for all.

The Sensations door was open, so they entered without knocking. The drawn curtains plunged the room in gloom, even though the sun shone outside. A huge mass of flesh and blubber snored grotesquely inside the bar, lying on the wooden bench. Barreneche gestured to his deputy, untied the button of his jean jacket and accessed the inside of the bar from one end to the other end. He picked up a pitcher of beer and then poured half a bottle of vodka into it, which he found among the shelves. When he had finished, he tossed the contents of the jug over the giant's head without the least bit of regard. He awoke between spasms and clumsily shoved his back against the cash register when he stepped back. The youngest of the policemen couldn't suppress a timid laugh.

"What... what do you want?" Asked the tallow ball, confused. "Beer?"

"I'm a cop, you idiot," said Barreneche, scathingly, showing his plaque with an air of superiority.

The fat man's eyes widened. His first reaction was to look toward the exit, and then he said,

"No... no drugs here, guys," he said frightened. "You can check it out if you want!"

The commissary drew a half circle with his right hand and gave the giant such a slap that left an imprint of his knuckles on the cheekbone. Visibly pissed, but not moving a single muscle in his face, he grabbed the ponytail and dragged the bartender's huge head up under the brew tap. Then he moved the crank, releasing the alcohol. Tena was alert. Why did his boss have to behave like that?

"Maybe I'd like some beer," the superior said cruelly. "What's your name, chubby?"

"Mahh..." The man could barely breathe with the beer all over his face. Barreneche released him.

"Maximilian!" He cried out in gasps once more. "That's my name. And I'm going to report you, you fucking sons of...!"

The commissary interrupted him sardonically:

"Don't make me laugh, Maximilian. You won't report this if you don't want anyone to know that you use this rats nest to deal drugs."

Max hesitated. He certainly had him against a rock. Marcos Tena watched the scene intently.

"Then what do you want, if it's not drugs?"

"You're going to tell me everything you know about Carlos Rubial," Barreneche said.

"Charley?"

"Yes, Charley," cried Marcos Tena. It was the first time he had opened his mouth since entering.

"He hit the rocks a few days ago," said Max, who seemed about to pee his pants.

Barreneche rolled his eyes.

"Something we don't know, stupid junkie?" He insisted impatiently.

"Well... Charley didn't tell me much," said the giant. "The weeks before he committed suicide, he came and went, but he almost never stayed. He unattended the bar, as you can see. Something worried him. Charley was a very strange guy."

"Didn't you see anything in particular? Any details, maybe?" Barreneche wanted to know.

Max shrugged.

"He brought a phone one day," he said.

"A phone?" This time both cops spoke in unison.

"Yes, inside a box. But he never used it," Max said. "It's no longer here, he took it."

The agents glanced at each other, wondering if any of them had anything more to add.

"He had no family? Friends?" Asked Marcos Tena, anxious to bring something to the table. "I don't know, what did he do when he wasn't here?"

"He had no one."

Maximilian froze his repulsive expression for a few seconds, thoughtfully, then added:

"Well, there was a girl," he asserted, and continued to ponder.

The officers looked at each other again. Tena was filled with enthusiasm. His superior, on the other hand, seemed bored.

"What girl?" Marcos wanted to know, eager for clues to follow.

Max's eyes widened to look like two marbles. Apparently, he had just come up with the name.

"Alyssa!" He exclaimed. "Alyssa Grifero I think it was her full name. Find it and you'll get the answers you are looking for."

"Alyssa Grifero," Tena whispered as he scribbled it in his notebook. "What did she have to do with Charley?"

"A whore?" Barreneche added, with marked rudeness. "Was she his girl?"

"Alyssa was a child." Max's face darkened as he shook his head. "But she had something with Charley that I never understood, guys. He wouldn't allow her into the bar," he said with a stern tone of voice. "I insist, she was just a girl."

The interrogation had ended for Julian Barreneche, and therefore also for his young assistant. After the policeman dried his hands with a dry cloth, they left Max caring for the inflammation on his cheekbone with an ice cube and left the Sensations.

"How did you know they're dealing drugs there?" Tena asked in a sudden good humor.

"I've been at this for a long time, kid." The eldest sketched a vain smile as he answered.

"So shouldn't we close the premises immediately and arrest the fat guy?"

"Do it if you want," the chief said wearily. "That's the job of the incompetent Drug Unit. I won't waste my time on things that aren't for me."

As soon as he finished speaking, he turned to Tena, put his hand on his left shoulder, and said his last words of the day:

"Listen to me: Alyssa Grifero will be your first assignment as my trainee. Find her."

The next day, Barreneche met with Judge Callejo in his office to review the case. It was lunchtime. The judge had been informed of the dismaying aspect of the suicide's home. He was also informed in detail of the "quiet" conversation with Max (as described by Barreneche, who wanted to avoid the issue of backhanding his cheek and the beer shower).

Callejo, attentive, nodded his head.

He asked, "have you collected any information about that Alyssa?" and the policeman told him about the girl.

"We're on it," Barreneche said. "I have ordered Tena to investigate. I spoke to him a moment ago on the phone and he told me that he has tracked the last calls made or received with her cell phone."

"And?"

"The last calls are from a couple days ago, and they came from Ámber. I don't think she's very far," said the policeman, who wanted to finish as soon as possible to go eat.

Callejo frowned and sighed. Then he asked the question he had been wanting to ask for the last few minutes:

"Why did you send Tena to investigate her alone? For me it's a very serious matter, Julian."

"Don't you trust him?" Protested the man visibly offended.

"No, I trust you!" He lifted the tone of his voice and the reply echoed in the room.

An uncomfortable silence prevailed in the room. The ring tone of Barreneche's cell phone sounded. He picked it up and held it to his ear while still watching the judge. It was Tena.

"I know where Alyssa Grifero is, sir!" Shouted the young man, more than he spoke, from the other side of the connection.

Barreneche stood up in the chair like a spring.

"Great, Tena, good job," he said, and immediately gave some orders. "Listen, tell me the exact address and go on there. I'll join you as soon as I get there."

"Impossible, sir!" Marcos Tena continued to scream. "The girl just took a plane to London! And she has made a reservation at an Oxford hostel!"

Alyssa Grifero came down the flight of stairs with a backpack dangling from her shoulder and dragging a small blue suitcase. The blizzard that had risen that morning made her hair fly in all directions, so she decided that when it was all over and she went home, she would cut her hair. She tensed as she entered the terminal and felt the difference in temperature. Without stopping to glance in any

store or even for a quick coffee, she went outside, where a car was waiting for her. With only a breath of fresh air, she climbed into the vehicle.

"Long time, *Dorian*. I'm glad to see you," she said as she bent to give the man in the driver's seat a kiss on each cheek. The ten-day beard stubble was as usual, and his hair was longer than she remembered. The arrogant gesture wasn't lost on her either.

The vehicle started and left the airport lanes dedicated to the collection of passengers.

"You've grown up since the last time I saw you," the driver said with a sharp English accent and still looking at the road.

"You've changed too, you have more wrinkles."

Dorian let out a half smile.

"May I ask, why are you in Oxford?"

"Business."

"Hell, you're just as mysterious, that's the usual Aly."

Grifero smiled unwillingly and changed the subject:

"How's it going? Do you keep earning your life intimidating people?"

"It's more than that, but yes," Dorian said with a tense gesture. "Right now I have nothing on my hands, so if you know about anything..."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"I know about Charley," he said after a pause.

"I know."

"You're good?"

"Perfectly."

Dorian let out a snort that broke the tension that was just building inside the car.

"You really won't tell me anything, will you?"

"Maybe some other time."

A little more than half an hour later, they arrived at their destination. Dorian pulled Alyssa up to the door of her hostel, where they said goodbye with a hug. They promised to keep sending messages, where they both felt more comfortable.

That evening, Sara Mora sat down to dinner with her new British family and, as usual in that house; a slight disorder reigned from appetizers to dessert. Claire Connor, who was the one who did as she pleased at home, had prepared a spinach, corn and pea salad that Sara struggled to finish. For the main course, they had an overly fried fish, chips, broccoli and carrots. The doctor had forgotten the industrial flavor of fish & chips. The dessert was the best. Kurt, the Buddhist, forensic and second husband of Claire who was not eating with them

because of work, had bought a tray of different flavored cupcakes that morning. Sara would have been delighted to try the carrot cake, her favorite, but Nick lunged at it even before the tray touched the table. That impossible boy had gotten ahead of her.

At seven-thirty Sara's cell phone rang. She got up from the table in a rush and almost missed her call before getting the phone out of her corduroy jacket, which Mrs. Connor had most assuredly put on the hook at the entrance because *it was proper*. It was Mike Lennard.

The cell phone sounded, "ding", and Alyssa opened her eyes in a reflex act. It took her less than a second to orient herself and remember where she was. She sat up, and settled herself on the sheet with her legs crossed, and inspected her Blackberry. She had a new email, which caused a crooked smile to be drawn on her face.

From «Jasper» to «A.G.»

Hi,

Remember. Cowley Road. Number 219.

Tell me everything in detail when you're done. And be careful.

Jasper

Sigh. Then she locked her phone and went to the dresser, where she had left her wristwatch. It was 6:35 pm. She had plenty of time.

She spent the next hour and a half eating something (she had bought a vegetable sandwich and yogurt with raisins that didn't look too bad at Tesco) and she enjoyed a hot, foamy bath.

As she massaged her soap-bubbled thighs, she came to the firm conclusion that she was more nervous than she had imagined at first. She had nothing to fear, but traveling alone in a foreign country where the language that was spoken was so alien to her, added to the uncertainty of not knowing what was going to happen in the following hours, it caused annoying butterflies in her stomach. Alyssa became more nervous after Jasper's cautious e-mail he had just sent her. "Fuck! Jasper, always so brilliant and careful."

She wanted to remove the dark thoughts from her mind by playing with the foam that billowed around her knees. About ten minutes later, when the water began to cool, she decided that she was relaxed enough to come out of the tub. She dried herself off and put on black jeans, boots of the same color, and a hooded gray sweatshirt big enough to conceal most of her face. Before leaving the room, she looked out through the window. From the ground floor of the poor hostel, the stamp of the Rawlinson Road could not be more depressing: the small

parking lot of the building looked empty, wet and covered largely by dead leaves falling from the trees in the street bordering the area, an old stonewall invaded by moss. When the first drops of what would eventually be a dense storm started falling onto the glass, Alyssa threw an airborne scowl. No matter, I'll walk anyway. It didn't matter that she had to cross the city while the sky fell on her head; catching a bus was not an option. The last years of her life had forced her to adopt the irritating habit of letting herself be seen in public as little as possible, regardless of whether she was in another country, let alone in such a degree of excitement. She hung her backpack on her right shoulder and slammed the door.

Mike Lennard spoke in an uneasy tone of voice on the other side of the phone:

"Hi, Sara, did I call you at a bad time?" He said, listening to the background noise.

"Hi Mike!" She greeted him, happily surprised. "Not really, I'm having dinner with my lunatic host family. How are you?"

"Just two things. I want to invite you to have a drink tonight at my house. I promise we'll have a good time."

"Mike..." Sarah, indecisive between what she should and what she wanted to do, pondered her words well. "I told you I couldn't today."

"No, that was two days ago. You told me you couldn't because you were visiting Cambridge yesterday. What's up today?"

Sara rolled her eyes at being so stupid as to not count the days.

"Mike, I just don't think we should see each other at your home for now. We just met. It's too soon, don't you think?"

"All right, I accept," he said with resignation.

"All right."

"The second thing I want to tell you, I don't think you'll like it."

Sara frowned.

"I'm listening."

"I didn't tell you the whole truth about me," he said suddenly.

"What did you say?" She raised the tone of her voice.

"There are some things I haven't told you, though I will, don't worry," he said. "But it must be in person. That's why I wanted to see you today."

Sara didn't answer. This time she was more furious than intrigued, so she hung up without saying goodbye. Completely disgruntled, she returned to the living room, where she apologized to Claire and Nick, she refused a cup of tea with milk the woman was preparing, and escaped to her room.

"Shit!" she repeated in frustration, "Shit! Shit!"

She paced the room from side to side with no apparent sense, trying to focus her thoughts. She was having a little anxiety attack, another one in a few days.

"Let's see, Sarah, focus," she ordered sternly. "What was the meaning of the call?"

Still walking in circles, the young woman thought of different possibilities, reasonable problems that Charley's twin wanted to share with her.

Sara gritted her teeth. She couldn't believe that she was again involved in an affair with...

Nosey Charley!

She paused for a moment, took a deep breath and forced herself to see everything from a more optimistic perspective. And if what Mike had to tell her wasn't bad, she wondered. Had she noticed if his tone was cheerful or worried? Remember, Sara, remember. Her inner dilemma shifted toward a more disturbing thought: *And if... she asked again, what if this man was not really Charley's twin? Is that what happened? On the driver's license, he was identified by the name of Mike Lennard, not Rubial. He had assured her that he had changed his name, but what if he had lied about it? Impossible,* concluded Sara, whose brain was overcoming anxiety in favor of her own performance, *he was identical to Charley!* She cried aloud now. *They have to be brothers! So what now?*

She sat on the bed and hugged her teddy bear, Golden tightly. She wanted to cry. She missed Ámber and Diana. She couldn't believe that she had left her home to flee her past, and in three days she was already living with four lunatics, showering in the company of spiders, and making plans with the twin brother of her almost rapist who, to cap it off, was lying and stalking her.

Could it really be considered harassment?

Mike was a nice man, with good conversation, and he also respected her. It wasn't fair to judge him for being *his* brother. He just wanted to see her one evening and tell her something more intimate. What was wrong with that? She relaxed and opened her laptop in order to think of something else. She had not used it since the bus trip that brought her to Oxford, so the news in "PDF" of the *Diario Montañés* news remained on the monitor as it had been left on that day. Sara stared at the screen for a while, staring blankly, not thinking about anything concrete.

Wait a minute! She was just coming to a conclusion, and it was alarming. Mike said that he had read the news of this newspaper and it spoke about Alfonso, Verónica and her pregnancy. However, she moved the cursor from the top to the bottom of the news, looking for words that she knew she wouldn't find, for in the news there was no mention of the pregnancy anywhere.

She was absorbed. That man knows more things than he told me. She got up suddenly and began to dress. She didn't like the situation at all. Why would he hide something like that? On second thought, she told herself as she pulled on a white cotton sweater, it had all been very strange from the first moment. Coincidentally we're in the same country, same city and same bar. And who recognizes someone that he hasn't seen in his life except for a simple photograph published in a small space of digital news? The reality was that nothing made sense; everything seemed improbable.

Before leaving her room, she looked out the window and noticed that the dark sky threatened rain. She grabbed the umbrella and left the house without saying anything to anyone else.

The first thing that Alyssa did as soon as she headed south on Banbury Road was check the time: 8:35 pm. The storm had already fully awakened, and within fifteen minutes, the young woman was soaking wet.

With every step she took, the fluttering in her stomach grew and rose to her chest. She insulted herself for being so stupid, but in the depths of her being she knew that she was in some way facing the moment that would determine her future and would make her, perhaps, a totally different person. She urgently needed a change of course in her life, to define herself, to eliminate her inner ghosts and to cling to some sign that would make her reconcile with the planet.

She reached the historical center, and as she passed St. Giles, her teeth clenched, not only because of her nerves, but because the cold had already reached her bones and made her teeth chatter. She sped up, for she was less than a fifteen-minute walk away.

Cowley Road became eternal. As she progressed, single-family brick houses with billiard roofs were being replaced by foreign businesses of all kinds, mainly fast food. The number 219 was a dark brick townhouse a few square meters built next to a liquor store. It was an exact, if rather coquettish, replica of the houses that stood next to it along the avenue. From the other end of the street, Alyssa saw no sign of life inside. She looked at the clock again. 09:37 pm. In fact, she had arrived a few minutes in advance. She smoked a couple of cigarettes to make time. Then, with her clothes dripping, she bought a kebab in the Turk store behind her and ate it there, standing on the sidewalk. The awning of the premises sheltered her from the rain.

Suddenly a light went on in one of the rooms of the house. Alyssa shuddered as she identified the silhouette of a person behind the window. A strong feeling awakened within her.

I found you.

She dropped half of the kebab in a garbage can, and, illuminated by the warm light of street lamps, she crossed the street. She did not reach the door, however, for halfway there she discovered a dubious alley less than a meter wide separating the number 219 from the liquor store. She decided to spend a couple of minutes inspecting it. She found a small window in the sidewall of the building, possibly the bathroom, which Alyssa thought would be perfect for information on what was happening inside.

At that moment another light turned on inside the building that partially illuminated the alley. The young woman lunged to the side praying softly that she had not been discovered. Once she recovered her breathing rhythm, she crouched in the rain and found an angle of vision from where she could see through the window everything that was mirrored in the mirror of the bathroom.

Then something happened, and Alyssa felt an intense discomfort in her gut.

A few minutes later, the dry sound of a gunshot sounded like thunder at 219 Cowley Road, breaking the night's calm and alarming the entire neighborhood.

Chapter 5

"There are more fish in the sea, everyone told me when I divorced Violeta. Fucking ignorants."

"Isn't that what the phrase implies, doctor?"

"Please, Morgan! Nobody wants to eat a fillet of hake fish when they just put a couple pounds of prawns in their stomach, right? I wonder who was the first to say that horrible phrase that everyone repeats but nobody ever wants to hear."

Thursday, November 9, 2006

The complaint had already been filed, and nothing that could or had not been done was of importance. He had no doubt that he held all the cards in his hands, at least, to be the main suspect. He was between a rock and a hard place. The formal complaint had come to the police that morning; he was only waiting for the trial, and, after that, to know the sentencing.

Jaime Vergara looked at his superior, Dr. Ángel Fuenmayor, through the office glass, and paused for a moment. He did not want to discuss the case with him, but he knew the conversation was inevitable. There was still one thing that needed clarification. I'm about to take the first step towards a free fall, he thought, deeply depressed. He knocked, turned the knob, and went into the study, and with his head down he forced himself to smile. Dr. Fuenmayor returned the greeting and invited him to sit down.

"Well let's see. The last time you called me to your office was to tell me about your divorce. What have you done this time?" Jaime teased, trying to sound unconcerned.

"Jaime, don't upset me. Don't tell me you don't know why I called you." The head of neurosurgery, more sullen than usual, shifted in his chair. "I have received the complaint," said the superior solemnly. "Didn't you ever think to tell me?"

"Look, what do you want me to say? I suppose all this shit is my problem," he replied, aggravating the tone of his voice.

"No, obviously it's not!"

Jaime kept scrutinizing his boss's eyes, but he didn't add any comment. He refused to rush the moment of his crucifixion.

"Buddy, what did you do?" Asked Fuenmayor with a paternal air.

The subordinate raised his eyebrows and then made an annoying chuckle with his mouth.

"Haven't you read the report?"

Fuenmayor merely snorted with an unfriendly face, urging Jaime to take the matter seriously.

"Look, Angel, I gave poor Shapiro some kind of intravenous poison. Then I screwed his son's wife at the foot of the bed," answered the young man without blinking.

"Jaime, damn it, I'm serious!" The senior doctor raised his voice for the first time. "Do you think this is a game?"

"I'm innocent, Angel, fuck!" Exclaimed the accused, irritated, and struck the desk with his fist demonstrating an extraordinary lack of control. "Do you think I could do something like that?"

After a few seconds of scrupulous silence, the older of the two leaned forward and sought his best doctor out with his eyes.

"Don't talk to me like I'm your enemy, Jaime," he said condescendingly, and held up a hand. "Wait let me talk, I'm on your side and I plan to help you. I believe in your innocence and we will come out of this."

"Thanks Angel." The young doctor recovered his composure and apologized to his boss. "I'm sorry I acted like this, I'm pretty screwed."

"Nevertheless," said the older, and Vergara waited, with a sinking sensation, which, although clearly predictable, had been on his mind for days, "I have no choice but to suspend you from employment and pay until all this is resolved."

He couldn't deny that it was a social and professional imposition, more than a punishment. Angel and he were good friends, and Jaime seemed to detect in his eyes a shadow of sadness and disappointment. He couldn't blame him.

The conversation continued for several more minutes. The question that floated in the air but which the head of neurosurgery did not dare to ask, it was embarrassing and inconceivable, was how he could have been caught with the patient's daughter-in-law in an... affectionate embrace. For him, who thought he knew Jaime as a son, the answer to that question went beyond explainable.

As soon as he left the hospital, a journalist from Telecinco and another from Antena3 assaulted Jaime, both with their respective cameras behind him, on the stairs of the entrance to the building.

"Do you have anything to say about the accusation that places you as Shapiro's killer?" The reporter asked.

Vergara quickened his pace without answering.

"How do you feel, Doctor?" He insisted, bringing the microphone closer to the doctor's jaw.

"I'll survive."

"Come, tell us something, give us a good exclusive," added Telecinco, who acted as his best friend.

This type of trash journalist had always nauseated Jaime, as he called them, who believed in a right to everything in order to get a story. Now, that he was the one behind the microphone, he would not give them the pleasure of answering.

He began to feel unpleasant cramps in his stomach, and he was getting cold, where strong gusts of wind turned the north of the Paseo de la Castellana into a desolate place. He raised his hand and stopped the first taxi that passed, and hurriedly got in to get away from the journalistic parasites as soon as possible. He didn't want to go home and did not know where to go, so he ordered the taxi driver to take him to the roundabout of Alonso Martinez, which was the first place that came to mind. When he reached his destination and got out of the car,

he stood on the sidewalk, uncertain, not quite sure where to go. Finally, he decided to cross the street to the Grand Café Santander.

Shortly after ordering a latte and a portion of carrot cake, an informative breakthrough began on the television. After some news related to the Gaza war and Baghdad massacre, it was his turn. Fortunately, the scoop did not last more than ten seconds:

This morning, the young doctor Jaime Vergara, from the hospital in La Paz, has been identified as the main suspect in the death of the famous businessman Juan Shapiro. "It's a premeditated homicide," Shapiro's son said. We will expand the details of the story in the information on Chanel 3.

Jaime snorted in disgust.

A couple of weeks ago, just before Juan Shapiro died, an increasingly heavy sensation and unpleasantness had formed inside his stomach. However, the depression had not taken possession of him until that morning, when he left Doctor Fuenmayor's office and felt completely helpless. His own state of mind surprised him. From the first moment of this story he knew that he had fallen into a trap. As soon as his old patient died and the complaint was filed, he knew that if there was no miracle, he would be fucked. They would condemn him and he would have to say goodbye to everything he had achieved in his years as a doctor. At first, of course, he had received the charge with surprise. Then he waited for confirmation for the date of the trial, which was still in the air, in a reasonably carefree manner. But now, once he had talked the subject over with his mentor, uneasiness began to overwhelm him.

As he bit the first piece of cake, he felt as if the cake had become a knot inside his mouth. He had a hard time swallowing it and set the plate aside.

This was all new to Jaime. He had never been accused by anyone, and he had never done anything illegal, except when, at the age of twelve, the Muslim man who sold candy in the neighborhood shop caught him taking a pack of chewing gum without paying for it. He considered himself an impulsive and vehement man, but he was not a delinquent, much less a criminal. The complaint was important, nothing more and nothing less than a serious charge of homicide. In his favor he had his innocence, which he had to prove by all means, and the support of a whole army of doctors who would support him in sworn statements.

Taking an optimistic position, he hoped to be cleared and avoid imprisonment. However, since the economic point of view, the issue was catastrophic. Having not yet reached his thirties, Jaime's savings were limited, despite having a respected neurosurgeon salary. He did some quick calculations

while drinking coffee and concluded that he lacked the strength to assess how much the expenses would be. By prudently managing his money, he would be able to pay both the legal costs and the remuneration of a lawyer. The problem was that his boss had stopped paying him until; at least, until the case was concluded.

He weighed the possibility of selling the house and the car, which would evaporate into nothing. At the turn of the millennium, as soon as he left the faculty and encouraged by his large monthly salary in his first job as a doctor, he decided to look for a fixed address. He discarded several houses until he found a fifty-square-meter flat in Cuzco, right next to La Castellana. The previous owner had bought and renovated the house with a taste that dazzled Jaime, but when the previous owner married and his wife became pregnant, they decided to move to a larger apartment, so the newly qualified doctor was able to buy the house he was looking for at a very good price. The house only needed a few touches, such as pulling a couple of partitions and covering the terrace with huge windows, perfect for watching the cars coming and going along Orense Street without needing to get wet when it rained or go crazy with the horns or engine noise. It was the perfect nest for a confirmed bachelor, though he really hoped to find a partner to turn the nest into a family home.

Three years later, with all the money he had saved and the loan from a good bank, Jaime fulfilled his most biggest dream: he bought a new Porsche 911 Carrera out of the factory, metallic gray and with garnet leather seats. Its three hundred and fifty horsepower made it reach a hundred kilometers an hour in less than five seconds. Now, with more than a hundred thousand kilometers on its wheels, the value of the vehicle had been reduced to less than half the original price, and also the car sector was not at its best. Jaime knew that he could not buy a car like that now, so he wanted to keep it.

But the tragedy of losing the house and the car was nothing compared to the immense loss of prestige he had just suffered, possibly irreparable.

His reputation had gone to hell. In the future, unless the trial proved him innocent, many patients would think twice before entrusting their lives to a neurosurgeon who has been charged with homicide within the hospital. He knew he could count on his colleagues by profession, most of them aware of the dirty and unfair game he had been victim to, but from now on they were going to look at him with a magnifying glass. Whispers and glances were waiting for him through the corridors and back stabbing behind him. And he could not afford the slightest error. If of course one day he managed to recover his work.

What hurt him the most, however, was pride.

He, a simple doctor treating a patient, had swallowed the hook, line and sinker, falling squarely into the trap of a dark, ambitious, conspiratorial family. How could he have been so stupid? He was convinced that this vile bastard was in those moments uncorking a bottle of champagne next to his famous lawyer and with a stupid smile on his lips. Jaime felt humiliated.

How the hell could everything have gone wrong?

The Shapiro case was born, in a most chaotic way, at the entrance of the La Paz hospital in an emergency vehicle on the morning of June 21, the day when the spring gave way to witness summer. Everything happened in a matter of seconds. Jaime had just left the bathroom when he watched the attendants pushing a stretcher carrying an older man. That at first sight was unconscious. "A sixty-year-old man who has collapsed on the street twenty minutes ago!" One of the medical technicians informed him as he made his way down the ER corridors.

"Upon our arrival, the patient was without a pulse. After the emergency resuscitation, we managed to keep the vital signs." Vergara and his team soon got down to work. After diagnosing a stroke in the patient, Jaime spent five hours in the operating room trying to drain the cerebral hemorrhage to avoid an excessive increase of intracranial pressure. He managed to save his life, at least temporarily: the man had fallen into a coma, and neither Vergara nor any other hospital doctor would have wagered a single euro on his coming out of it.

At about five o'clock that afternoon, Jaime hadn't yet put anything in his stomach, so he decided to make a quick visit to the hospital cafeteria, where he ordered a latte and a donut. From the bar he glanced at the television set, where they were broadcasting a romantic sensationalist program, and he looked away. Still, he sensed something that made him focus on the screen again. At the bottom of the screen, a label repeated over and over again like a carousel. Vergara's eyes narrowed to read:

The businessman Juan Shapiro, owner of many of the most important fashion companies in the country, hospitalized urgently this morning at the hospital in La Paz, Madrid.

The young doctor raised his eyebrows. "So the old man is a celebrity," he mused silently, regretting his ignorance.

The news was embedded in his brain. It didn't matter at all that his new patient was a rich man, after all his work was going to be the same, and so was his responsibility. But there was something else. Shapiro. That surname sounded

familiar. And not as that of someone famous, but rather as the distant memory of something that seemed to come from a past life.

"Hey man, Jaime!" Exclaimed a voice to his right. The man turned in a reflex act. "What a fucking coincidence!"

Until the newcomer arrived and shook his hand, Jaime recognized him. A pleasant smile crossed his face.

"Ernesto? Ernesto Shapiro!" He repeated cheerfully. "Hey, I'm so sorry about your father. We will do everything we can for him."

In school, in the late eighties, Jaime Vergara and Ernesto Shapiro had been more than simple friends, they had even played on the neighborhood soccer team. The friendship ended naturally, with no more reason than distancing, after the last day of the last year of school. Each one took his way to different universities and during the last ten years they had not see each other again. At that moment, when they met unexpectedly in the cafeteria of La Paz Hospital, they looked at each other with funny curiosity. Ernesto's complexion was reddish, and his curly black hair more tangled than Jaime remembered.

Jaime's mood had suddenly improved. He invited his old friend to a coffee and they chatted at one of the cafeteria tables around a plateful of delicious cream, meringue and chocolate rolls.

Then the conversation became a friendly verbal duel about what each had done after school. They discovered that their lives could not have been more different. Ernesto Shapiro went from high school to college, and from there to the prestigious Harvard University, Massachusetts, where he studied economics as the first-born son of a powerful entrepreneur. From there he took the leap into the business world, ending up in his father's franchise and always under his protection. Vergara graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Madrid, and his entire professional life had been dedicated to study, open and repair human brains. After the two old friends took a long look at the funny anecdotes of childhood, the conversation began to revolve around the present, Ernesto's father, and his relentless illness. Shapiro put down the mug of beer, he had asked for it after he had finished the coffee and rolls, although Jaime didn't join him, and looked at his friend seriously.

"My father is the heart of the company, my friend. You have to make him survive or everything will be lost."

"As I've told you before, I'll do all I can for him," he assured him. "It's a really bad situation, but I think we'll save him."

"My wife is very nervous," the sick man's son suddenly added.

Jaime raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms.

"I didn't know she was so close to her father-in-law," he said. "In fact, you didn't tell me you were married."

"Yes, and this morning she's in a sort of anxiety attack." Shapiro leaned forward until his ribs rested on the edge of the table. "When she comes here, keep her calm."

"Yep."

"You have to reassure her, dammit. You are a doctor; she will believe you more than me. Invite her to a coffee, be affectionate with her, and tell her what all doctors always tell the relatives, that everything's going to be okay! You'll like her, she's a great gal."

"Okay, I told you I will, don't worry," the doctor repeated, somewhat uncomfortable with the subject of conversation. "Well, I have to go back to work. I shouldn't spend so much time in the cafeteria," he said, and both friends stood up.

"No more talk, I'm glad to see you, my friend." Ernesto gave Jaime a bear hug. "I really appreciate it, by the way." He lifted the beer mug and lifted it in the air. "Cheers!"

During the following summer weeks, while Vergara witnessed the null progress of Juan Shapiro's health, he received several visits from Renata Shapiro, the spouse of his childhood friend. Her appearance surprised him at first glance. For some reason he had the idea that she would be a vulgar woman, perhaps a few kilos more and aged by the anxiety that Ernesto had sworn she suffered after her father-in-law's heart attack. The woman was good looking. Not that she had a cleavage that made him lose himself in her, or that she had a crazy ass or lips that invited him to fantasize with tasting them. She used to come dressed in simple jeans, a short-sleeved T-shirt, and she liked to knot her brown mane in a ponytail that made her appear younger than the thirty-four years she actually had. But Jaime, being a single man, she seemed to be an attractive woman and being honest with himself, one with which he would have definitely tried to sleep with, if he had known her in a pub.

Every time Shapiro's daughter-in-law approached the bed to see that her father-in-law was still comatose, she collapsed. Often, especially if her husband did not accompany her, she would throw herself into Jaime's arms for comfort. Then she would remain in that position for a long time, sobbing. On those occasions, with the distraught wife of his old friend hanging around his neck, the doctor often remembered that afternoon on the first day of summer in the hospital cafeteria. "You have to reassure her... anxiety attack..." Jaime wondered why his patient's daughter-in-law was much more affected than his own son, but

soon his thoughts were flying into dirtier fantasies when he felt Renata's crotch touching his own.

To ward off the inappropriate thoughts that came upon him, and following the advice of his childhood friend, Jaime used to accompany the woman to the cafeteria, where he ordered a couple of coffees and invited her to sit at a table next to him. In this way, she freed herself from her sorrows for a moment, and he from his dark temptations.

One day in September, she settled into the cafeteria chair a few inches away from him. They had ordered, as usual, two coffees with milk and two croissants stuffed with ham and cheese. She had no ponytail, she had let go of her flowing hair, and her lips were wearing some crimson lip color. Jaime declined to give importance to these details until Renata, as usual very affected by the situation of her father-in-law, accompanied the phrase "thank you for everything you've done for us" with a hand movement under the table. Then Vergara felt her grip his right hand and he rested it on her feminine thigh, a few millimeters from her zipper. It all happened in a few seconds. There, in the sight of companions, patients, relatives of patients and waiters, sweet Renata laid her lips against the doctor's neck and kissed him until reaching the earlobe. Meanwhile, she slowly pushed his hand toward the hip area. Jaime stopped suddenly, and allowed nothing else to happen except for those wet moments. Stupidly, however, it had already been done.

Juan Shapiro died on November 7. Immediately after the funeral, a complaint landed in the police station in the name of Ernesto Shapiro. The accusation was accompanied by a series of large photographs taken from the hallways of the hospital, behind the door of Shapiro's room, or from the waiting room next to the cafeteria. They saw Dr. Jaime Vergara in a more than affectionate manner with the daughter-in-law of the recently deceased powerful man.

Chapter 6

"Why do I get the feeling that you're always in your own world, Doctor? Anyone would say that you're here inside of your own free will."

"Not at all! What things you say. But, dear Morgan, the reality is that what we are today we will not be tomorrow, and vice versa. It will never be today again. First lesson."

"So that's what this is? Are you lecturing me? I think I'm old enough, Salas."

Friday, November 10, 2006

The asphalt of Oxford streets was still damp, though it was no longer raining, when police officer Alfred Horner ran from his house. It was 02:15 in the morning. He got in his Alfa Romeo and started it. He moved between the lanes at full speed, skipping every red light that was on the road with the emergency light activated (by absolute precaution, since at that time there was no soul in the city). He had a bad feeling and wanted to get to the scene as soon as possible.

It was not the first time someone woke him up in the middle of the night (or while having sex with a woman) to report a crime, theft, or vandalism. However, not long ago fear had stalked him that way. Once, almost four years ago, when he was twenty-four and he had just begun to work for the police force, Horner was engulfed in a nightmare of such caliber that even now he wondered why.

It was the fall of 2002, and the young man was struggling to start a new adult life in the city of Oxford. He liked motorcycles and was passionate about the action of his work. He had just met a girl. Her name was Donna Miller, a hippie three years his junior who lived with her parents in the Headington neighborhood, east of the city. They met one Saturday night, when he, on duty, tried to stop her over a marijuana joint that the young woman had while she was having fun with some friends. He didn't arrest her, since it wasn't marijuana what she smoked, but tobacco. He, of course, had known it from the beginning, but it was as good an excuse as any other to enter into conversation with the beautiful girl with the curly, flowing hair.

One Wednesday night at approximately eleven, Alfred was about to walk back to his flat, which he had rented downtown. He had spent the evening at Donna's house and they had just decided that they would live together as soon as they told her parents. That night they had made love for the first time on the couch in the Miller's living room, taking advantage of the fact that her parents were on a pleasure trip.

As soon as he left the house, the newly appointed policeman turned to look back. Behind the second-floor window he saw the profile of Donna raising her hand for the last time, with a grin from ear to ear and giving graceful jumps of happiness. He lost sight of her as he entered Warneford Lane, a wide but poorly lit road, unfrequented at that hour of the night. However, he didn't know any bus routes in that area and he hadn't seen any taxi pass in the way that he had to walk, so he decided to walk to his house, which was less than two miles.

He had been walking for more than ten minutes when the first car passed him. The halo of the headlights illuminated a section of the road that, surrounded by rows of trees, offered a ghostly appearance. He didn't see him coming. Suddenly, a car went up onto the sidewalk where Alfred walked and crossed

violently a few yards from him, closing the way. The young man did not react. He continued to move forward and changed course with the aim of changing sidewalks. He didn't want problems and he had no choice. His heart pumped his blood harder than usual. As he passed the back of the car, Horner heard the door of the car open. The driver was carrying a brass knuckle in his left hand and was aggressively advancing on him, ready to split his face. Alfred paled and remained frozen. He reached into the leather holster for his pistol, but forgot that he wasn't on duty and that he wasn't carrying it. He had no time to put his hands to his face and wait for the attacker to tear it apart.

The first impact was the worst. He felt as if all the bones in his head had shifted and his vision partially blurred. Without knowing how, he had hit the ground. While he was beating his kidneys, Alfred could guess that he was a man older than himself, and despite the darkness, he could get an idea of what his face looked like. For that matter, that mysterious son of a bitch did not open his mouth at any moment. Alfred began to lose his vision. He barely felt anything when the aggressor changed his target and kicked him in the face with unrestrained violence.

A taxi driver found him ten minutes later, unconscious, and took him to the hospital.

After a couple of days in a coma, Horner woke up with several broken bones on his face, plus five ribs. They did some surgeries and they managed to return him to his natural appearance. He spent two months in the hospital. He returned to work and invested all his effort in hunting the bastard. But he didn't succeed; he didn't even get a single clue as to whom he might be. At the end of seven months, Donna, the only woman he had wanted not only for primitive sexual desire, had left him. Could he blame her? His character had changed, and the twenty-year-old had no desire to endure for life a policeman tormented and obsessed with his work. She did not want a James Bond in her life.

After that fateful event, it took Horner several months before he could sleep at a stretch. Once he had looked death in the eyes and gone unscathed, since then he hadn't felt fear again until that night.

He still had a few blocks to get to the address he had been told, when he already saw a commotion in the street. Something supernatural for those hours in the morning, a pair of police cars and dozens of neighbors in pajamas invaded Cowley Road around number 219. The officer stopped the car, put on his jacket where he kept his badge and gun, and went out to meet Carroll, who was waiting for him. He summarized the situation. He led him inside the house, where Horner saw the whole situation. Then he introduced Carl and Amy, an adorable old couple who, were nervously jabbering, explained their version: "We were

lying down and I couldn't sleep," Carl said, shivering. "Then I heard a sharp, crackling noise, like a firecracker! I got up in alarm and opened the door to look out into the street. But there was no one, just the door to this open apartment. I came over to check when I saw... when I saw this..." Carl pointed to the inert body, but was not able to continue.

The elderly couple lived in gate 221. They were the second and third people to approach the scene of the crime.

Then Carroll led Horner to the other side of the street, where a group of three policemen were taking a declaration from a frightened young woman. She must not have been more than thirty, Horner thought as he approached. "This girl was the first to arrive. Carroll brought him up to date quickly. "She was already in the house when Carl came. At least that's what the old man told me."

After presenting himself as an agent of the Oxford police, Alfred begged the other officers, including his companion, to leave her alone with him. He decided to seat her in the passenger seat of the Alfa Romeo, where he began an impromptu interrogation.

"Name and surname?"

"Sara Mora."

Alfred nodded in silence. *First conclusion: by name and accent, she's not British*, he noted mentally. Then he asked to see her documentation. *City of origin: Ámber (Cantabria). Country Spain.* The agent took some time to observe the young woman. She seemed to be in another world. It had been several hours since the attack, but her adrenaline seemed to be in the clouds. Despite her taut, tired frame and her wet hair from the storm, she seemed to be an attractive girl. And the fact that she was Spanish made everything much more interesting.

He also noticed that she had an almost imperceptible bloodstain on her right hand.

"She's the prime suspect right now," Carroll had assured him an instant ago. "Why do you say that?" Horner wanted to know. "Because of all the suspects," said his companion, "she's the only one who doesn't live here. Besides, nobody saw her arrive."

The policeman left the identity document of the girl on the dashboard and returned to her, this time in Spanish, a language that he dominated well.

"I want to know your version. What did you see? Don't skimp on details."

The young woman armed herself with courage and began her story:

"I arrived in the evening. No," she said, "it was quite dark at night. I had been walking the city on foot, so I was tired. As I passed the door, I found it open. And the light from the hallway is on."

"Didn't you hear a shot?"

"No... no..." she whispered.

"Neighbors say they heard a shot. Besides, I wouldn't want to appear hasty, but it is quite obvious that there was a shot," said the agent sarcastically, referring to the unquestionable weapon of the crime.

"I was tired and had my earphones on. I was listening to music," she said.

From the interior of the car, the street looked like a tunnel flashing by the gleaming lights of the other two police vehicles. It was as if everyone had disappeared.

"Agreed. What did you do then?" Horner continued.

"I approached, and then I knew something was wrong. I saw some neighbors coming out of their homes, alarmed, and I realized that they too were heading to where I was. I asked them about what happened when they were close, more out of strangeness than concern. Then four pairs of eyes surrounded me: two men and two women of a retired age. All four were in their pajamas, and one of the ladies wore her curlers."

"Did they tell you anything?"

"They said they heard a gunshot. That's when I really freaked out."

"Okay. Proceed."

"I made my way through them and rang the doorbell at the same time I entered the house. I don't know why I did it." She shrugged, staring at nothing. "I guess to scare away the fear. Inside it smelled of gunpowder, and I felt an overwhelming desire to vomit. Then I went to the service door, the light was also on, and then I saw... then I saw..."

Sara began to convulse and to cry uncontrollably. She covered her face with both hands, and she remained in this state of nervous breakdown for several minutes. The interrogation was automatically interrupted, though Horner did not need further details. He knew perfectly what Mora had seen.

"Get ready," Carroll had whispered in his ear when, a few minutes earlier, both policemen entered the house to analyze the body. Next to the door of the first-floor sink, a man lay on his back in the middle of a huge pool of blood. When Horner, more by police instinct than by mere usefulness, approached to take the pulse, he discovered a crater the size of a plum at the level of the right cheekbone, between the ear and the mouth. The bullet had torn part of the jaw and had come out of the nape of the neck. The right eye socket was hollow. The impact had been so violent that the tiles on the wall closest to the mirror were splashed with what had been part of the man's encephalic mass. Somewhat stunned, he asked his companion about the identification of the corpse. According to his documentation, his name was Miguel Lennard and he was forty-one years old. And that was exactly what Sara had seen.

When the suspect calmed down a little, the policeman decided that he would not waste any more time, so he continued with the round of questions:

"What were you doing in this neighborhood? And don't tell me to take a walk," he warned. "No one comes to this street to take a walk."

"No, I came to see someone," was the mysterious response of the young woman.

"Who?" Insisted Horner.

"I'd rather not say that, Officer."

"Did you know Miguel Lennard?"

"No," she responded.

Alfred knew she was not being honest. Her expression was not that of someone who doesn't know who she's talking about. It's that sort of thing that a good cop doesn't miss. Besides, he had seen them together the other afternoon under the Bridge of Sighs. There was no doubt about it: the young Mora knew the deceased.

Suspect Sara Mora lies, he wrote with a pen in his personal notebook.

As she did so, she took the opportunity to scrutinize him in more detail. If something defined the policeman was the security that he seemed to possess in himself, although she assumed that his actions were from boredom and bad mood. The bones of his cheeks, populated by a ten-day beard, were marked by a very masculine outline. Under the right eyebrow, a scar of at least five centimeters stood out above everything else. She had not yet seen him smile, though she bet he boasted perfect teeth. The eyes, sad and deep blue, were his strong point. He was by far the handsomest rugged guy she'd ever seen. The last thing that caught her attention before turning back was a bandage that covered his right wrist under his jacket. She didn't care, though. She had more important things to think about.

Horner leaned sideways on the seat so that he could look directly into the eyes of the suspect, although this, somewhat intimidated her, she again fixed her eyes on the dashboard. He formulated the million-dollar question:

"Who do you think killed Miguel Lennard?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen anything at all, as I told you," Sara replied, still looking very confused

"Listen, this is very important," the policeman insisted. "Do you know anyone who had reason to kill him? Someone with whom he owed some outstanding debt?"

Mora's answers seemed to be over.

"I don't know, I really don't know, I repeat that I don't know that man!" For the first time, Sara looked Horner in the eye. Her face was the vivid image of

bewilderment. “I didn’t know that man...!” She repeated.

The words died in her mouth as the tears came again.

Horner sighed, aware that he was going to get little more out of the conversation. He read what he had just written, *suspect Sara Mora lies*, and underlined it.

At about 5:30 in the morning, Carroll invited his partner for breakfast. There were no more photographs of the crime to take, nor any witnesses for questioning. Lennard's body had been taken to the morgue for the autopsy, and little by little, the street was returning to normal; no one was seen either on one side or the other, except for the neighbors who were early risers, most of them walking their respective pets. It was still dark, but a nearby coffee shop had already opened its doors. The two officers sat down at a table near the entrance of the small establishment and ordered a couple of donuts and a single coffee for Carroll. Horner preferred a whiskey on the rocks.

Thomas Carroll was born in Scotland thirty-six years ago. His father was a Presbyterian farmer from Glasgow and his mother an atheist from Liverpool who wrote erotic novels. It was she who took care of his education, so that when one of her most ardent trilogies rose to fame, the whole family moved to London. It's not known whether it was by a registration mistake or by a Machiavellian maneuver by his mother, allergic to everything Scottish, the fact is that Thomas' passport claimed that he was a citizen of London. The photo showed a long, zucchini-like face with a prominent chin, devoid of hair and pallor as the most genuine of the Anglo-Saxons (in their social circle they used to call him Snowflake). However, his hair was so bright and turbulent that the most ignorant dared to call him contemptuously *the albino*. And he hated it.

His appearance when working incognito, (usually all the time), was a reminder of the typical bohemian Paris artist Woody Allen. But he was neither a writer, nor a painter, nor a poet, but a conscientious policeman who had begun to work as a member of the City of London police force in the early 1990s, patrolling the streets in the center of the capital and hunting purse thieves. Almost a decade later, he was offered a position as a detective at the DCI (Department of Criminal Investigation) in the city of Oxford. The DCI had dozens of agents in the field, but Carroll had formed a partnership with a newcomer to the team, though he was very private about talking about his personal life. His name was Alfred Horner, and despite his introversion, he seemed like a good guy. And he was an excellent cop. Soon after starting to work together, Alfred invited him for some drinks on his new boat, which he used as a second home; a shelter anchored on the Thames to where he went when he wanted to disconnect. Since then, Thomas had considered him his

friend. They made a good team, and over the years, Carroll willingly accepted Horner to assume the role of leader, despite being considerably younger than he in age and less experienced. Alfred played the role of bad cop and Thomas was the good cop. Both were comfortable with their role.

"Are you okay?" Carroll asked, noticing the complexion of his companion paler than usual. "I didn't want to tell you anything in front of the others earlier, but I noticed that your lip is swollen."

"Don't worry, it doesn't matter, it's just a blow."

Thomas gave him a wary look.

"You don't look well, Fred."

"I'm fine, really," Horner said, taking the remark with a wave of his hand to dismiss it. "It's just that I've slept little, and I've been shocked by that man's appearance."

"Yes, the truth is that it has been quite mind-boggling." Carroll shook his head and took a sip of his coffee. "What do you think of the case?"

"At the moment we have very little."

"Without saying." Snowflake looked into his companion's eyes. They shone especially brightly. "You're still thinking about the witness, aren't you?"

The detective nodded thoughtfully.

"Come on, Fred, she's just a young tourist who hardly speaks our language. She wouldn't be able to kill a fly!"

"Hey, we don't know that yet." Horner, who didn't seem to be in the mood that morning, pointed at him with his index finger. "For now, she's the only one that nobody saw arrive. She was already there when Carl and Amy left their house."

"That doesn't make her guilty," Carroll said.

"But not otherwise," Alfred countered. "Besides, she lied to me."

Carroll frowned.

"What do you mean, she lied to you?"

"She knew Miguel Lennard." Horner wiped the cold sweat from his brow with his hand and ended his theory. "I saw them together the other day, under the Catte Street Bridge."

"Don't fuck with me."

"On the other hand, hasn't the name of the victim caught your attention?"

Thomas associated ideas at full speed.

"Miguel?" He said.

"Exactly!" Horner nodded somberly, though proud of his simple conclusion. "It's a Spanish name. Crystal clear."

Carroll remained thoughtful as he finished drinking his coffee. Then he pointed to Alfred's right arm with his chin.

"What happened to you?"

The man raised his right hand and rolled it over, showing a bandage from the wrist to the elbow.

"This? Nothing serious, I'll tell you later," he said. "And by the way, back to her, the suspect has traces of blood on one hand."

After putting him off once more, Horner drank his whiskey in one gulp, left a twenty-pound note on the table, and stood up.

"Let's go to work!"

Until she was sure there were no police officers hanging around Cowley Road, Grifero did not come out of hiding. She had spent the entire night shivering behind a container in the alley that separated the liquor store. It was 5:35 and it had stopped raining. She ran like a street cat, and only stopped when, just around the corner, she accidentally kicked an abandoned cell phone. She picked it up for simple intuition and slipped it into her pocket. She didn't stop until she returned to her hostel. It took longer than usual, because she tried to avoid the main avenues; the dark alleys were safer. She was breathless and frozen when she slammed the door and turned the key from inside.

She sucked in a breath, her back against the door.

She felt unhappy, and tears flooded her eyelids. "Alyssa Grifero never cries," she said. Then she wiped her tears.

She had gotten too cold during the night, so she undressed and slipped under the duvet in her bed. She was unable to fall asleep. At seven in the morning, with the first rays of sunlight invading the bedroom, she rose and, naked, went to the bathroom. She sat inside the bathtub, leaning her head against the tiles and activated the shower. She stayed for a long moment staring at nothing under the very hot water.

She remained in that position until seven-thirty, when she was so hot that it was difficult for her to breathe and her skin stung. Then she burst into tears without consolation. She hadn't done it since she was fourteen years old.

Alyssa had just spent one of the worst nights of her life.

Chapter 7

"Well, Salas, I came to the conclusion that you're an upbeat optimist."

"Don't get confused, my friend. The harsh reality is that the bad news doesn't come in pairs, but it come in streams, it pours. In fact, there must be a kind of mechanism prepared to dump kilos and kilos of shit in one place."

"You're pulling my leg, Doctor?"

"No, I'm serious. But experience has taught me that for every bad thing, there is a good thing that you're not paying attention to. For example, you are here now, philosophizing about life with a friend you would never think you would have and me too. Second lesson."

Friday, November 10, 2006

Chaos reigned in the police station of Torrelavega. The telephones were ringing incessantly, the chattering was happening from office to office, and along the corridors agents came and went rushing with piles of papers in their arms. Documents that, for the most part, contained information about Charley. The printers in the building could not work fast enough. Soon the portrait of Carlos Rubial, delirious and savage, as well as that of his brother, more appeased, appeared on the desks of each policeman. They had also been hung on the corkboards. In room B52, drops of coffee dripped down the wall, and, scattered on the floor, the broken pieces of what had previously been a Rolling Stones themed mug.

The madness had begun an hour earlier, when, in the early hours of the morning, the British newspapers came out with the news of the murder of one Mike Lennard. No one would have stopped even a second for this news, however, if Marcos Tena had not done his usual review of the websites of major international newspapers. The rookie was about to spit out his first morning coffee when he clicked on The Sun's page. The English newspaper dawned with a striking cover. SHOCKING MURDER, said the engraved title, and below, in large, a close-up of...

"Charley?" The young policeman whispered, absolutely puzzled, still observing the image. "It's impossible."

He rose from his chair like a spring and ran down the aisles of the station before the surprised look of the other members of the force, who didn't understand why he was in such a hurry early in the morning. Julián Barreneche was waiting at his desk, and when he saw him come in so fast, he shouted from afar:

"I just found out, Tena. Come on, it's an urgent meeting," and he raced out of there.

They both entered into the B52 meeting room, each with a wad of papers.

Room B52 was not a very large room used by the police as a meeting place. The entire space was occupied by a sturdy rectangular wooden table and matching chairs with wheels. There were no pictures on the walls, just a corkboard now empty and a whiteboard with markers. A small television and its corresponding video player was catching dust in one of the corners, waiting for a detective to use it to search for clues in some mysterious recording. Because of the Internet, nothing had been used for some time. In the center of the table, a photograph of Mike Lennard absorbed the looks of the two agents. It had been printed in color and A4 size. The snapshot was his Facebook profile photo; it was the most that they could get out of his social network, since Lennard barely

updated his profile. What is known in the police jargon as a corpse account. In it, Lennard posed smiling with the London Tower Bridge in the background. It had been taken on a sunny day, although the wind blew his hair in all directions. It was the photograph of a normal guy enjoying a day of sightseeing in the capital. The picture couldn't show the whole body, but it would not be unusual to see the man with a travel guide in one hand and an ice cream with vanilla cookies in the other. Next to Lennard's close-up photograph, Charley's photograph, which, taken on the day of his capture hours before his suicide, was contrasting.

Both policemen looked at the snapshots and their companion alternately, in absolute silence.

"What do you think, Tena?" Asked the superior as he rubbed his chin with his fingers.

"Fuck, they're identical," he said, not raising much his voice, in fear of putting his foot in it. "That is, Lennard and Rubial were like two drops of water."

Barreneche nodded.

"Come on, you say it first. I'll give you the honors," he said, as if he were doing someone a favor.

"They were... brothers?"

The chief of police looked into his eyes, making him see that the situation was so obvious that it wasn't worth answering.

Marcos Tena rubbed his temples and dropped his back against the back of the chair. *Fuck, that shit*, he told himself, overcame by circumstances.

Barreneche pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and made some calls. In a few minutes the building went into a flurry. Mike Lennard's life landed on the computers of the police station and the rumor soon became a reality: Carlos Rubial had a secret brother who had just been brutally murdered in an Oxford home. Barreneche was in charge of executing a search warrant against Alyssa Grifero, and make sure that her name and her image was plastered in all the news in the country. He also contacted the Interpol office in Madrid, which in turn sought help from Interpol England through the International Cooperation Division. It was urgent that they did not let that young monster out of the country. The case had become a matter involving two nations.

The police chief was gesticulating and shouting louder as he paced the room, always on his cell phone. Marcos Tena watched him with some fear.

"Aren't we rushing things, chief? We have no evidence against her," he said when his superior hung up the phone. The young policeman thought it necessary to offer his opinion on the matter.

Barreneche took a sip of coffee from his personal cup, decorated with the well-known red tongue of the Stones, before answering with superiority:

“Carlos Rubial lances down a ravine and his only friend, or whatever that little fox is lands in Oxford a few days later. That same day that she arrives, the twin brother of Rubial is found in the same city with a bullet in his head. The coincidences do not exist in this profession, boy. Rule number one.”

Tena nodded, though his reasoning told him otherwise.

"You'll have to inform the judge," he said.

The boss replied immediately:

“No way. The next time I talk to Callejo, I'll give him that girl on a silver platter. Didn't he want to close the case? Well, that's what we're going to do.”

"What about Sara Mora?"

Barreneche arched a single eyebrow, forming an acid cartoon expression.

"What about Mora?" He repeated almost mockingly, as he seemed to rethink the current situation of the neurosurgeon.

"The victim is the twin brother of her aggressor," said the youngest cop with a boldness unheard of for the police station. "I think we should at least follow her."

At that moment Barreneche's phone rang again, which allowed him to ignore the demonstration of his new detective. He picked it up and kept listening, opening his mouth just to pronounce monosyllables. The call lasted less than a minute. Barreneche repositioned his glasses on the bridge of his nose. His hands were shaking. He took another sip of the cup, and then, in a fast movement, threw it into the air with inappropriate violence. The container passed a few inches from Marcos Tena's left ear, spitting coffee before it smashed itself against the wall and exploded into several pieces.

Julian Barreneche had just been informed that Alyssa Grifero had landed at the Madrid airport early in the morning. Her current whereabouts were completely unknown.

In Oxford, Tallent woke up with the sound of her own groan. She suddenly opened her eyes, and immediately she felt herself soaked in warm sweat. Her nipples were rigid and she felt a pleasant tingle in her most intimate area. She covered her breasts with the sheet and breathed hard. The embarrassment experienced by the realization that she had just had an erotic dream turned to bitterness to remember the details of her fantasy: once again, she should have already surpassed some kind of record, she had taken off her clothes for Brunet and they had made love wildly on the dining-room table.

She gave herself only a couple of minutes to relive the details of her dream between the sheets. When she considered that she had already been punished enough, she washed up, dressed in sports clothes, and went to the gym to run the five miles a day she had imposed to keep her ankle strong.

"It must be a nightmare." Sara Mora kept repeating these five words. She was in shock. From the flowery quilt of her Victoria Road bed, the warmth that came through the window. The morning was splendid. What day was it? She was not entirely sure. She was no longer certain of anything.

She had not slept all night, but she hadn't tried to sleep either. Since she had returned to the Connors' house after the uncomfortable interrogation that she had survived. She simply slipped into her humble room, sat her bottom on the bed, with her hands in her lap and without even changing her clothes. Her hair was full of knots and her cheekbones were stained with running mascara. She was a disgusting mess.

She spent time visualizing in her mind the inert body of Mike Lennard, the hole in the middle of his face. The bathroom wall splattered red, the smell of death. She wanted to vomit several times, and she had done so as soon as she got out of Agent Horner's car and she had no more bile left to throw up. "Agent Horner," she said aloud, and her fear deepened. To be an accomplice in a medical secret as she had been to Verónica Salas was one thing, especially for a good reason, but as a leading witness to a cold-blooded murder? That was too much. If that agent were to learn that the victim was Charley's twin brother (i.e., her rapist), her life would immediately become a Hitchcock movie: they would use the desire for revenge as the main motive for the crime, and therefore, she would become suspect number one. She was definitely glad she had not told the truth about it.

What kind of action movie had her life become? She, whose biggest adventure was to watch romantic movies on Friday nights.

Everything swirled around the figure of Mike Lennard, so she struggled to form a mental scheme that made sense. The newly deceased was at the center of the composition, and around her Sara imagined everyone who had a connection with the murder: Carl, his wife Amy, police officers Carroll and Horner, Charley... *Charley? It didn't make sense. He's dead!* A new chord struck her as she remembered the disgusting amputee. Sara came to the conclusion that some secret had to be kept by Lennard so that someone would want to end his life in that way. If he were a millionaire and the murderer would only aspire to his money? She questioned herself, and immediately dismissed the idea by remembering the humble aspect of his house.

The doctor shook her head and was ashamed to play detective again. Even she, who had collapsed like a child in front of the police when they took her as a witness. Police. She who had lied for being a coward, in fact, seen from a calmer point of view, it could very well buy her a problem. Was she losing her mind? She wanted to cry, but there were no tears left. She didn't know what to do, or

where to go, or who to talk to. For a moment she was tempted to catch a plane and return to Ámber, to her hospital, from where she should have never left. She wanted to talk to someone, and then a name came to mind that she had completely forgotten about since the case of Alfonso Morales.

"Jaime!" She whispered in the air, whimpering. "My dear Jaime, forgive me..."

She threw herself headfirst towards her purse, which she had left lying on the floor of the bedroom as soon as she entered, and threw it inside. She wanted to call Jaime Vergara, her friend from the faculty, and just unload everything on him and tell him everything that had happened. Surely, such a good guy, Jaime would make her smile as he always did. Unfortunately, her cell phone was not in the bag. She then inspected the pockets of her coat and all she found were a pair of coins.

She put her hand to her mouth and paled. At some point in the night she had lost the phone and had no way to retrieve it. Sara felt alone in the world, as much as she never thought she could be.

That morning, at the newly opened Terminal 4 of the Madrid airport, Alyssa knew for sure that she had gotten in a big mess.

She had just gotten off the plane that had brought her from London and she was already in the commercial area when she stopped in a cafeteria with the intention of putting something in her stomach. The distress caused by the Cowley Road tragedy was still fresh in her mind, and she hadn't eaten anything from the kebab piece the other night, at which point it had been more than twelve hours. She was hungry and exhausted, though she had taken the flight to rest her eyes.

While devouring a muffin, she saw that the television of the establishment relayed a morning program on affairs of the heart news. The bun held Alyssa's full attention until the broadcast was interrupted by an informative breakthrough that opened with the shocking image of a murder at Oxford. A Spanish nationally known reporter with huge glasses, who put a voice and face to events abroad, explained in explicit detail how a man named Miguel Lennard, an ambassador to the British country, had been found dead in his home during the night. At the back of the picture, Cowley Road's number 219 was sealed and guarded by numerous English journalists.

The bun became a heavy paste inside Alyssa's mouth.

The news linked the initial findings of the National Police Corps' criminal departments and the Oxford police, who were working together on the case. According to the reporter, "a young female Spaniard who had a relationship with Lennard's brother traveled to Oxford from Santander on the day of the crime."

Alyssa shrunk in her chair. She began to tremble.

"As commented by the police chief of the police station in Torrelavega, she was living a life based on drugs and sex along with Lennard's twin brother, Carlos Rubial. After Rubial's suicide, everything indicates that Grifero, a demented soul, was looking for some kind of family revenge." The exclusive concluded with the full-screen image of Alyssa's close-up. It was the photograph on her identity card. Above it, the monitor occupied a sensationalist red capital word:

WANTED

"Grifero is at an unknown whereabouts, although the latest rumors put her back in Spain." The spectacled reporter was about to close the advance. "More information, in the three o'clock news."

Alyssa didn't wait to see the end of the news. She rushed out of the establishment, leaving the remains of the muffin with butter and half coffee unfinished. It took her a few seconds to detect the nearest restroom and she slipped into the restroom. There she acted on instinct. She took from her bag her sunglasses and an intense red lipstick, which she used to become another person. She also collected her hair in a ponytail, since in the photograph that was circulating through the news media in Europe she came out with her hair loose. The next thing she did was pull out a Nokia N80 from her pocket and turn it on.

The cell phone had come to her hands by chance as she fled the alley between the liquor store and Lennard's house. She had accidentally kicked it, catapulted it several meters forward, and then tucked it into her pocket for no apparent reason. She didn't think of it again until she came out of the shower that morning, once she had cleared her inner demons. At that moment she had nothing to do and she didn't know what her next step was going to be. And the walls of the hostel overwhelmed her. She simply had no plan.

The device turned out to be a silver Nokia N80. She connected it to the charger of her own cell phone, because it was dead, and after a few seconds she turned it on. She was surprised that it didn't have an access PIN code (apparently there were still innocent people in the world who did not use passwords) and above all that the menu was in Spanish. *It's hers*, she confirmed internally. Once on, Alyssa couldn't avoid the temptation to pry. She entered the MESSAGES menu, but found nothing that caught her eye. Then she tried her luck with the mail server, which fortunately had cookies stored, so which, again, she could access without knowing the user and password. Among dozens of advertising emails and subscriptions to magazines, supermarkets and medical forums, there was one factor that stood out in the inbox: Jaime Vergara had written eight emails to her in the last week and all were lacking response! It took her less than

ten minutes to read them all, each looking more interesting than the last one. That man spoke, among many other things, of Alfonso Morales and his illness. He also quoted little Oli, which caused a tremulous smile in her expression. Apparently, this Jaime was a doctor, just like the owner of the mobile. And she was in trouble like her.

Alyssa Grifero had come up with a plan.

In the women's bathroom of Terminal 4 at the Madrid airport, the young fugitive looked at the Nokia anxiously. Her situation was desperate. Her heart almost stopped when suddenly the cell phone began to ring to the beat of Pretty Woman. It was an incoming call.

"It's a sign," she told herself as she checked the identity of the source.

Jaime Vergara was trying to communicate with his friend, only this time she was not the one behind the device. Alyssa waited for the last ring to ring, then counted to ten. Unusual excitement invaded her body. She pressed a key and began to write a text message.

María Vergara raised her eyebrows, almost at noon, when she saw her brother leaving his room completely disheveled and still yawning. Jaime's apartment was located in the neighborhood of Tetuán, a few steps from the roundabout of Cuzco and right above a post office. María had spent the night in the guest room.

She glanced at the digital clock of the living room DVD player. It was eleven twenty, and María was waiting for breakfast together. He said good morning, stretched and dragged his bare feet toward the bathroom.

"What do you want for breakfast?" She asked as he came out, somewhat cleaner. Immediately he realized that he was being rude. "Sorry, I wanted to be in bed lazing and I didn't feel like talking."

"Don't be silly little brother! Come on let's have breakfast, I'm starving."

María got up from the sofa and went into the kitchen.

"Do you want some toast with grated tomato?" She said as she took two cups from the cupboard. "Coffee?" She suggested. "It is freshly made."

Jaime nodded, rubbing his eyes.

"They just named your case on TV," her sister informed him from the counter.

"And what did they say?"

"More or less the same as yesterday, but much more summarized. That Juan Shapiro is dead and that his son has denounced the doctor who treated him, that is you. But this time they didn't mention your name. Calm down, in a few days your story will have become old news by the media."

Jaime nodded with a lost gaze.

"How are you?" She wanted to know.

Her little brother shrugged and dropped into his own personal chair, one of leather that he had really wanted to get just as soon as the ink was dry from buying the place and from which he had views of the street. The room was simply decorated; it had only one dining room table, a large cabinet where he kept the dishes and glassware, the chair, a sofa and some practical shelves. A 42-inch TV hung from the wall, and an American bar divided the room from the kitchen. Jaime looked at the TV, where the program of events continued.

"I suppose it's a matter of time, but right now I feel like I've been tortured."

"Somehow that's what happens," María said, then deposited two plates of toast and coffees on the bar. "Come on, sit down, this is ready."

He obeyed and sat down on a stool in front of her.

"Do you know anything about Mom?" Jaime asked, still stirring the coffee with the spoon.

"She called, she's worried. I've finally calmed her down and saved you this time. But sooner or later you will have to face her."

"You believe me?" He asked curtly.

She looked at him in disbelief.

"You think I'm innocent, don't you?" Insisted Jaime.

"Come on Tato, don't talk nonsense."

"I'm a good guy, María. I didn't murder Shapiro."

María Vergara felt that her brother was worse than she imagined. He was a cheerful man, very vital, and she had never seen him as depressed and resigned as he was now, at the most critical moment of his professional life. She circled the bar and hugged him from behind.

"Tato listen. We both know very well that you haven't killed that millionaire. You have simply been played. Now it's time to grit your teeth and dance the tune."

"Dance the tune! The accusation has been a stab in the back. I can't stay here waiting that those full of rabble rousing journalists to shoot me with questions."

Mary's face changed.

"You're not going to leave!"

"It won't be forever, there's no reason to dramatize. I'll have to come back for the trial. I just have to be smart and stay low for now. Besides, I don't even have a job."

"And running away seems like a clever stance?"

Jaime shrugged once more and took the coffee to the sofa, where he deposited his butt. She accompanied him. She took his hand in a sisterly way and carried it to her lap.

On television they were talking about a Spanish woman under twenty who had liquidated a man in cold blood. It had happened in England and half of Europe was looking for her. Jaime changed the channel with his free hand that wasn't in his sister's embrace.

"Why don't you give a sort of press conference and explain what actually happened?" Mary had turned to him and gesticulated as she spoke. "Tell all of them that you didn't sleep with Shapiro's daughter-in-law, that she was the one who accosted you, and of course you didn't kill anyone."

"Okay, I tell the truth, and then what? What do you think will happen?"

"You're a doctor, for Christ's sake, they have to believe you!"

"And they belong to one of the most powerful families in the country, María. They have money to buy the press, the police and justice if they want. And I can't prove anything."

"So you're just going to leave, to wait for this to be solved on its own?"

"For now I just want to rest," he said. "I'm up to my ears; I don't want to think about the subject. Then we'll see, there should be something that can be done."

María rested her head on Jaime's shoulder and stroked his arm as if it would give him strength.

They chatted about their things for half an hour more. Then they said goodbye and Jaime was alone in his apartment. He tossed a Coldplay record into the DVD player and began to scrub dishes. His head kept spinning. The Shapiro case was not the only reason for his discouragement. There was Sara. Why didn't she respond to his emails or his calls? Since the last day on the 12th, when he received that mysterious call that lasted only ten seconds, he hadn't heard anything more from her.

"Do you remember the strange case I told you about in Madrid, about my mentor's daughter and her brain tumor? Well, you were right. The whole case was rotten! As soon as I've proved it, I'll call you back. Now I have to go. See you later, and thank you!"

Those had been her only words, and he had not even had a chance to respond; Sara hung up instantly. After the strange conversation (monologue, rather), and despite having promised him, she didn't call him again. A day later, Jaime learned from the news that the case Sara was working on in Ámber had changed a hundred and eighty degrees: Sara was sabotaged by her former mentor, Dr. Salas, who she had spoken of with so much love and hatred, and it all concluded with the surprising death of Alfonso Morales, husband of the patient, on the sand of the beach. What had become of Sara after all this time? Why on earth did she refuse to communicate with him?

When there were no dishes left to wash, he sat down in front of his laptop and checked his e-mail. He didn't have any new messages, except for junk and spam, which of course he deleted without reading. He opened the sent emails folder. The last eight were addressed to the same person, and none had been answered. *Sara, I miss you.* He was surprised to experience that sense of nostalgia for a girl who had been out of mind a few days ago. His sister, before leaving the apartment, had advised him to talk to people, to vent, to focus on other things. But Jaime did not need to talk to people. He needed to talk to Sara. Nothing more.

Now Jaime knew that, for some reason, the chance encounter with his old friend in the cafeteria near the Hotel Puerta de América had kindled a burning flame inside.

He stood for several minutes staring at the computer screen, waiting. Every few seconds, He pressed the refresh screen key in case any mail was stuck. Nothing. Was his friend in danger? Had something serious happened to her? That would be too much for him.

Desperate, he picked up his cell phone and decided to try his luck for the umpteenth time. He looked for her name in the menu and pressed the call key. He waited for it to stop ringing. No one answered. Jaime let out a stifled sigh and the sadness contracted the muscles of his face. Then came the miracle, and his surprise was such that the phone almost slipped out of his hand. Sarita (that's how he kept it in his contact list) had just sent him a text message:

I'm in Madrid and I need to see you. It is important. Please tell me when and where. A kiss. Sara.

Jaime thought he was going to have a heart attack. He stood for several seconds looking at the words, not knowing what to answer. She was in Madrid and wanted to see him urgently. What was happening? The tone of the message wasn't too informative. Whatever it was, he must and wanted to be reunited with her. He drew in a breath and began to write an answer.

Alyssa stepped out of the bathroom as another woman. Her beautiful black eyes were hidden behind sunglasses that covered almost her face, and a dark, tight-fitting T-shirt almost showed off her navel that appeared above the button of her pants. She also wore a new lip color, as red as the throbbing of her heart as when she left the airport and set foot in Madrid. She had a mission. Everything she needed to know was now focused on the Nokia N80, which, by accident, she had kicked the night before.

She got into the first free taxi she found and indicated to the driver a very specific direction to go. He lost five seconds in admiring, through the rearview mirror, the beauty of the young woman who watched him above the glasses with peculiar sensuality. So stunned was he that he didn't even notice that in the back seat of his Toyota he had the homicide suspect with which they had opened all the news that morning.

The vehicle started and took direction to the center of the capital. Alyssa felt radiant. She wasn't able to take her eyes off the Nokia throughout the trip.

Sara! I'm so glad to hear from you! Meet me on my floor. Street Orense, number 53. I'll wait for you here. I hope you are well. A kiss. Jaime.

Chapter 8

"I thought I understood that you're married, aren't you, Morgan?"

"Indeed, I'm a man with a ring."

"Then you'll know there are women who inflame your soul, don't you? A woman who appears at the precise moment that even the perfume on her neck scorches you with a scent just by being close to her. Here where I'm at, I, myself become small in her eyes, because she was so overwhelming, and when I least expected it, that woman became my world, I didn't know how to live without her! I wanted to feel that fire until eternity, because I had never felt so alive. As they say if you desire scabies, then it doesn't itch. She was the dart that goes to the center of the target, the ball with the winning number, and the goal in the last second of the game. Now we return to the sad reality. Lesson number three."

"I've gotten lost, Salas. Are you talking about your wife now?"

"My ex-wife: Violeta. If people were water, I would be mud, and she, a tsunami."

Friday, November 10, 2006

As soon as he woke up, Rafael Salas left his narrow bedroom and went without breakfast to the lounge room. He advanced through the many corridors that crossed his path and got lost on a couple of occasions (he hadn't yet memorized the journey), so he had to retrace his steps. When he finally reached the front door of the room, he remained motionless. He had plans to be in the lounge room with Dr. Grau *at the earliest hour of the morning*. Apparently, his concept of early morning differed with that of the director of the center. He leaned sideways on the old wooden frame of the door and valued very seriously whether to enter or, on the contrary, turn around, hide behind some corner of the labyrinthine corridors and wait for the doctor in silence. He chose the path of courage and stepped forward. That morning he wore the white shirt with which he entered the center, only with the top two buttons unbuttoned, his trousers, and a doctor's robe that before the end of the day, one of the nurses after great insistence on his part had given it to him.

Watching what was happening inside the room, he experienced the same feeling of uneasiness that he had on the first day, when Dr. Grau entered his room (without knocking on the door), interrupted his conversation with Saul Morgan (without apologizing), and accompanied him to the same room where he was now with the purpose of introducing him to the legion of stupid people. If he had ever had the idea of writing his memoirs, Rafael thought then, he would not fail to describe how much he was affected by what he saw when he formed an overall picture of the room. What was in there, in the way they all called it the lounge room, that so terrified even to such an extent the ruthless Dr. Salas? He couldn't even explain it to himself, for at that first moment he didn't dare fix his gaze directly on any other person present. If he had been a child, if he were Oli, for example, and not a wrinkled old man, he would have sought shelter under Dr. Grau's arm and kept his eyes closed. "No," he said instantly, "Oli would never lower himself to such an act of cowardice." It was not the physical violence of the individualities that frightened him, he was not in a maximum-security prison, for God's sake, but in a Psychiatric Center. But the anarchy of the group as a whole, the random movements and disconnected sounds, reminded Salas of a nursery. He was in front of an army of adult children, drooling and crying. And they looked sick. The first thing he noticed while repressing a grimace was that they were all different from what was supposed to be normal. At a glance, he found that most of the prisoners had malformations on different parts of the body: hunchbacks, dwarfs, quadriplegics who lived in wheelchairs, cripples and giants. But all of them didn't traumatize him, who had spent his life opening skulls to keep them from ending up just like the ones in front of him. Those who

gave the sinister air to the room were the others. Their faces and bodies were well configured, yet they didn't follow a pattern of logical behavior, they were ghosts enclosed within four walls. In the end he felt uneasy and had no choice, and as Grau introduced him one by one, he dared to look them in the face. After all, how would he know them, how would he be able to help them and take care of them, if he didn't even dare approach them?

The first person he met was a man in his fifties, bald and with a beard, and so physically normal that it came to Salas' mind the ironmonger on his street in Ámber. His peculiarity was that he kept talking, almost in whispers, about the process of photosynthesis in plants. And yet he was not addressing anyone in particular. He also nodded, and sometimes even raised his voice as if he were arguing with someone from the real world, but his eyes simply stared into infinity.

"His name is Cándido, but here he is known as the Tertullian, because of his obvious interest in the debate," Grau had explained with the naturalness of a guide in a zoo who runs a tour.

"The process known as photosynthesis consists in the manufacture of food for vegetables by means of light, from water, mineral salts and carbon dioxide, releasing oxygen; photosynthesis is done during the day because it is the only period in which there is sunlight; photosynthesis takes place in leaves; in photosynthesis, the stem carries the raw sap to the leaves and collects the processed sap." Cándido expounded his knowledge to no one in particular, interestingly behaving with his raised chin.

"What's wrong?" Salas wanted to know, struggling to keep his voice steady.

"He has severe hallucinations, but he's getting better."

"Getting better? This man is like a fucking watering can with holes all over. He's not even aware that we are here, by his side, talking about him."

"Oh, you should have seen him when he came in almost two years ago: he was not sleeping, he barely ate, and his verbal duels were screaming matches." After the explanation, the director of the center hardened his face as if he were about to strangle a tourist who has fed the apes without permission. "And don't disrespect him that way, neither he or anyone else. Even if he doesn't look at you, he listens to everything you say. You'll learn about it."

On that day all the inmates had been introduced to him, and there they were again in the lounge room, while he waited for his appointment with the director. The room was devoid of furniture, with the exception of a wooden board that circled the entire perimeter as a backless bench, and six tables in the center containing simple three-in-a-row table games. On one of the walls, a pair of windows provided a minimum of natural light. According to the mental

calculations of the old doctor, the room had to be about a hundred square meters, which, considering the number of patients that occupied it daily seemed fair to him.

Salas felt a sense of *deja vu* when he realized that all the inmates were doing exactly the same thing as that first day: absolutely nothing. It was Cándido the Tertullian, demonstrating to a plastic spoon that Coppola was, and not Scorsese, the director of the trilogy of *The Godfather*. Pedrito, a hopeless troublemaker, who found special fun spitting in the faces of the other patients, the boxer boy, who spent his time stamping punches against the wall until his knuckles became raw (he especially caught Salas' attention by his particular behavior), and Maruja, an endearing old woman that walked bent on her walking oak stick, and that did not present any apparent incapacity. Until Salas caught her standing in front of a mirror that covered one of the dining room walls; then her expression changed, she faced her own reflection with an energy that only God knew where she got it, and threatened it, pointing at it with her walking stick. "Don't look at me!" She shouted then, and whenever she came across a reflecting surface, she saw the devil, "I've told you a thousand times to stop looking at me, witch!"

As he studied these and the rest of the patients from the doorway, Rafael watched with disgust as a young pale-skinned skinhead, whose name he didn't remember, pulled down his pants and, as naturally as blowing a bubble gum with his mouth, squatted down and began to defecate on the floor itself. *WTF, but what the hell does this boy do?* Salas wasn't able to tell if his stupor was due to such an extreme act of social indecency, or to the fact that no one present had even spared him a minimum of attention. What kind of social debris surrounded him?

He grimaced with disgust and took some paper napkins out of his doctor's coat pocket. Then he advanced with deep breaths to avoid concentrating on the ugly pile, and just as he was about to bend down to pick it up like a puppy's, he noticed someone touching his waist with their fingertips. He felt a tingling sensation that rose up his spinal cord and he rose in a reflex action.

"Forget that pile of shit, Salas, and follow me."

Rodolfo Grau had just arrived, accompanied by his arrogance to save him from the bad taste in his mouth.

"You're not thinking to leave that filthy mine in the middle of the room," Salas protested simply for the pleasure of doing so, for in reality he was delighted to have gotten out of the repulsive task. "And if any of these patients tread on it as an oversight?"

"It'll be picked up by some of the assistants, Salas." The director spoke as if each word was a huge effort. "Follow me and let others do their work."

"But... social work..." The retired doctor had in mind a speech to gain a little favor from his now superior, but he had already left the room, leaving him as Cándido, the Tertullian: talking to himself.

As soon as he took his seat in front of the wooden oak desk in his office, Rodolfo Grau offered a cigarette to the old doctor. Salas looked at the gift suspiciously.

"Smoking is not allowed in here, sir," he said the last word with his characteristic sarcasm.

Shrugging, the man opened the first drawer of the desk and took out a wide glass and a bottle of Jameson. He poured the liquor into the glass and offered it to him, too.

"You're with me, the director of the center, in my private place of work," he said as he filled his own glass. "If I offer you alcohol and nicotine, it is because you can accept it."

Salas replied with a half-smile, as if wondering whether this was a sign of comradeship or whether it was a trap.

"I quit smoking years ago, so I'm going to turn down your little friend with a filter," he said, "but the whiskey does appeal to me."

Director Grau nodded smiling. Then he began to speak as he lit his cigarette with a match.

"Sir, tell me, what did your first few hours feel like in the Center?"

"Are you kidding, Rodolfo? This place is hell."

The mentor drew imprecise forms with the smoke while he thought about his next sentence.

"Don't you fit in? Come on, I'm sure some friend has helped you."

"Only Saul Morgan. If it weren't for the conversations I've had with him, I would slice my veins with a nail cutter."

"Saul Morgan," Grau repeated, as if he wanted to keep the two words in his memory for the rest of his life. He put the cigarette in the ashtray and typed something on his laptop computer. Then he continued with his questioning: "How do you feel spiritually?" The old man opened his eyes so wide that his interlocutor was obliged to rephrase the question. "I mean... your goals. Do you have any personal goal set in here? Because I assure you it's elemental."

"I have come to serve my sentence, not to seek answers or justifications. Now, you have *cojones* to ask me that question, so I'm going to open up a little for you," Rafael said as he submerged the ice chip in the whiskey. "Between you and me, Rodolfo, I thought I might find something of God in this pain. I don't want to say that picking up shit from the floor or dealing with patients is a mystical experience, but if we understand that every day locked in the center is a

penance, then maybe I can give back some of the pain I've caused. And so, hopefully, I can be at peace."

"I confess I find it difficult to understand."

"Maybe it's hard for me to explain. I haven't talked about myself in this way for decades."

"I've noticed that you change your expression every time you take that glass of whiskey to your mouth. Do you often drink a lot of these?" Grau changed the subject suddenly.

"Before, and practically at all hours. I had my drunken time without a respite, you know? Now I still have no respite, but at least I'm sober for life," the old man explained sarcastically, and burst out laughing like a foolish child.

"What happened to make you drink?"

The question made the laughter dry up until his lips became a thin expression line on the ex-doctor's face.

"We don't even know each other enough so I can answer that question, lad," he said, so Grau suddenly felt as if he were talking to a war veteran who he owed the utmost respect.

"Then tell me why you stopped drinking. That must have been very good news for you."

Salas crossed his legs and let out a tired sigh.

"What do you want, Rodolfo? You bring me here, you offer me whiskey and cigarettes, and you start harassing me with questions about my private life. Why?"

"I want us to be friends, that's all."

The old man spat a new laugh.

"I'm not a person who delights in friendships, so, dear director, I'm afraid you're wasting your time."

"But Saul Morgan has become your friend faster than the cock crows," he said mystically, and then spread the ash on the tip of his cigarette in the ashtray.

"I suppose he reminds me of my son-in-law."

Grau raised his eyebrows. Maybe he found the opening he needed?

"Do you miss him?"

"A lot. Alfonso was an exceptional boy, and indeed I admired him. He was successful where I failed: he made his wife happy."

Dr. Grau poured more whiskey into the old man's glass and continued the round of questions.

"Now that you've mentioned her, do you hope to be reconciled to your daughter?"

The retired man looked at the director with a layer of sadness covering his eyes.

"Verónica hates me. But she is pregnant, and I recognize that the only thing I want in this life is to see the face of my new grandson."

"What do you think of the guys?" Grau asked, sipping Jameson's glass and adding a new twist to the conversation.

"Guys?"

"Yes, the ones in the lounge room. For example, Nico, what do you think of him?"

"The boxer boy?" The old man made a funny grin on his face. "That boy is very fucked in the head! Punching his knuckles against a concrete wall..." he stated between teeth as he shook his head.

"Yes, he obviously has an illness." Grau strove to maintain professionalism in the conversation. "But what do you think is his problem?"

"Don't ask me, Rodolfo, to answer those questions, it's up to you, the experts. I'm just here to pick up crap from the floor. You know..."

"Yes, social work."

Someone knocked on the door of the office from outside that startled Salas. He turned back to the origin of the sound and director Grau, demanding an explanation.

"What the hell was that?" He asked, confused.

"It's Félix. You shouldn't pay too much attention to him," Grau said matter-of-factly as he brought out a plastic cardboard. "What do you see in this picture?"

Salas took it as disoriented as if he had taken any card from a magician's deck, and watched it for a few seconds.

"A tractor that is about to pass over a man with one arm. In the distance there is a girl playing ball," was his answer.

Félix pounded on the door once more, as forcefully as if he had used a wooden log.

"Can you tell me three words that rhyme with heat?" The director continued with his survey.

"Beet, seek and teak. Hey, why the fuck are you asking me these questions?"

The director gave two consecutive puffs to his cigarette before answering:

"It's an intelligence test we do to the patients. Don't put on that face of indignation, the test is not intended for you. I simply want you to know it so that in the future you will be able to do it to the new patients."

"Do you think I'm going to be here for so long?"

"That's not for me to answer. Nevertheless, I must make sure that you knows all our procedures and protocols, for now you're one of us," Grau explained with exaggerated professionalism. "You need to pay attention and respond. Can you name the twelve months of the year in reverse order?"

The old man closed his eyes and tried the test:

"December, November, October, September..."

"Okay, you don't have to go on!" He congratulated him: "you have more mental efficiency than an eight-year-old boy," he said amusedly. "Okay, now give me three movie directors."

"Garci, Amenábar and Pedro Almodóvar."

"And some that aren't Spaniards?"

"Spielberg, Hitchcock and Woody Allen. Is there really anyone in this center who is not able to perform this test correctly?"

"There are many who are unable even to say their name and surname, my new friend. Remember that they are mentally deficient; dead souls, so to speak. Now touch the tip of your left foot with your right hand, then the right with your left hand."

The subject did it perfectly and without question.

The door was struck this time continuously from the other side. Salas interrupted his test.

"Hey, aren't you going to let him in? How long will Félix be banging the door?"

"Félix doesn't have to come into this office. He's suffering delusional disorder, or what is the same, paranoia. I assure you, you don't want to chat with him. He will leave voluntarily when he finds another entertainment that is not my door," said Grau with renowned cruelty.

"Delusional disorder... you mean he's a neurotic?" The old man asked with growing curiosity.

"Psychotic, to be more exact." Rodolfo Grau gave a new puff on his cigarette, and immediately moved the glass with Jameson to his mouth.

Salas pursed his lips. As if he could read his mind, which at that moment he was trying to remember the difference between neurosis and psychosis, Grau went on to explain himself better.

"As you do know, neurosis is the delusional diagnosis that is preceded by traumatic experiences, that is, by events that the patient suffered at some point in his past. Traumas that is so powerful that they modify the mind of the subject. A good example of neurosis can be found in Maruja. Did I introduce you to her?"

"The maniac who verbally throws her insults at the mirror?" Asked rhetorically the elder. "Yes, I know who she is."

"This peculiar little old lady, who always lived as a single woman, committed a sin that you can't imagine."

"What did she do?"

Apparently, his eagerness to know was already so great in the ex doctor that he didn't realize that Félix had stopped pounding the door with his fists.

"Lady Maruja had a twin sister whom she loved dearly, which was not an impediment to her committing one of the greatest transgression to a sister. Her sister was going to marry a very attractive Portuguese man, a worldly man but significantly younger than her. And he was a womanizer. Well, on the very day of the wedding, while the rest of the guests danced, Maruja, who had never been touched by a man, was seduced by him. And she let herself go. From that day on, while her sister was married to him, Maruja took her brother-in-law as a lover to bed, not once, but several more times."

"Don't fuck with me, did she really?" Salas was so intrigued that he seemed to jump out of his chair at any moment.

"Yes, until her sister caught them in the middle of the act. And something terrible happened. The deceived twin, hurt as she was, ran and left the house without seeing the car that was just passing the main gate and it threw her several meters in the air."

"For goodness sake."

"Maruja provoked, with her null willpower and fraternal infidelity, the death of her beloved sister. Her brain wasn't able to bear it, much less forget it, so she modified her own nervous system to eliminate the event from her mind. The guilt, the regret and the embarrassment of having caused the death of her sister so upset her that today she is the sweet old woman who argues with herself thinking that she is looking at her deceased twin through the mirror. And, for all this, her diagnosis is clearly neurosis."

"I get it. And Félix, did he suffer any trauma?"

"Not at all, or else we'd know. Félix, unlike Maruja, suffers from acute psychosis. His brain has been sickly since birth, but increasingly severe. He lives completely apart from reality, as if in another world, but he has no reason to do so. Like the someone who has always been blind, Félix was born with slight delusions that became more acute with the passage of time. Today he is a difficult human being. He is harmless, of that I have no doubt, but neither do I recommend that you get together with him."

"What is your motive?"

Director Grau's eyes narrowed and they gleamed. No doubt the conversation had taken a path as unexpected as it was interesting.

"Because he's an asocial madman who lives surrounded by beings and things that do not exist for us. He's like a monster, a rabid dog, just that Félix doesn't throw himself at anyone's neck."

There was an awkward silence in the study. "Are you satisfied with the scientific information?" He asked arrogantly as he crisscrossed his fingers.

The old doctor nodded distractedly, for his mind seemed to continue to revolve around the cases of Félix and Maruja.

When, nearly half an hour later, the stupid intelligence tests were over, the center's director gave permission for Salas to leave and return to his room.

"See you, Rodolfo." He said good-bye with an unobtrusive squint. "Enjoy your whiskey!"

"The ice has melted, now it's more water than alcohol."

As soon as Salas left the office and closed the door, Grau put the cigarette down in the ashtray, he reached out and pulled the fixed telephone that rested on a corner of the oak desk. From memory, he dialed a number. Judge José Miguel Callejo took the call on the second tone.

The director identified himself as Dr. Grau and, as if he had been waiting for days to make the call, he blurted the message:

"Salas already knows of the existence of Félix."

"So soon?"

"That soon."

"Well, you already know my opinion: there shouldn't even be a *hello* it's dangerous."

"Yes, I'm afraid it'll be difficult to avoid that."

No one spoke for seconds, and Grau could feel Callejo biting his nails in a cloud of uneasiness on the other side of the connection.

"Have you talked to him?" Said the judge at last.

"With Salas? Yes of course."

"And?"

"Baffling."

"Well, look, keep me informed of any news." The director, skilled at psychoanalyzing everyone, gave him the impression that Callejo was trying to stay as distant as possible. In fact, the following words he heard saying farewell was "I wish you the best."

As soon as he hung up the phone, Rodolfo Grau leaned back on his chair and, absorbed in his thoughts, finished the whiskey with the remaining melted ice.

Rafael Salas was tired, as if during the interview with the director he had been forced to hold a pile of books on the palms of his hands. He took a few

steps down the aisle away from the director's office, and when he started to pay attention, he realized: he was lost again. He walked aimlessly for some minutes in which he didn't meet anyone. Through the few windows that illuminated the deserted corridor, the sun still glinted among the dark clouds. Shortly, he reached a long hallway limited by the wall that led to the exterior of the building (on the right), and a gray wall with metal doors along (to the left). He was forced to wonder about what the doors were. Why metal? What or whom were they hiding or locking up with such vigor? The old man's eyebrows arched more for every door he reached: all were open, and there was absolutely nothing in them. The rooms were replicas of each other, and the word that best defined them was a hole in the wall. Devoid of windows and furniture, Salas exaggerated, thinking that not even an insect would survive locked up in such conditions.

Rafael's interest suddenly shot up as he passed the last of the gates: it was closed. Why? Was anyone inside? Although it was what his body begged him to do, he was not able to extend his arm and force the lever unlocking the door. It was the umpteenth time in a few days that Dr. Salas felt overwhelmed by fear.

Footsteps were heard in the distance, approaching the corridor, and the disturbing atmosphere suddenly settled in the mind of the old doctor when he saw that it was one of the nurses (the same one who had obtained the doctor's white coat). She was less than thirty years old, infectiously sweet with her permanent smile, decorated with braces. She came to mind as the ill-fated Twin Peaks star, Laura Palmer, every time Salas saw her. She must have seen him very lost, for without exchanging words she took his right arm and prepared to accompany him to his room. The old man's heart skipped a beat when, just before turning the corner, a loud rumble came from the only closed door... as if someone had struck it with all its might from within, aided by a wooden log... The old man wanted to turn in an instinctive act, but nurse Palmer, who acted as if she had heard nothing, forced him to keep moving.

A few minutes later Salas was safe between the four walls of his room. From time to time, there was a soulless cry, more typical of an animal than a human being, and he wondered if it was Nico, the boxer boy, or maybe the kid with the shaved head who habitually defecated on the tiles of the lounge room. In that taciturn moment, Rafael realized that he had fulfilled 72 hours, three days, since his entered the center.

After a long hot shower and many minutes of reflection, Sara Mora left her room and went downstairs feeling like a heroine under her skin. Without pausing to say good morning to anyone who was watching television in the living room, she left the house with a determined attitude. The sky had dawned overcast, though it had not rained since the night before, and the asphalt of Victoria Road

was practically dry. A gust of wind slapped her, however, as soon as she opened the door, which caused Sara to wrap herself in her jacket and harden her gesture.

She stepped forward, took Banbury Road and didn't stop, didn't even look away, until she found the first phone booth. Well, it was free. She slid inside, inserted a two-pound coin, and dialed a number by memory. At the third tone, someone picked up.

"Ámber Health Center, what can I do for you?"

Sara sighed relieved to hear a voice from her comfort zone. It was possible that it was Loreto, a grant student who had been hired at the center to attend the reception area and who had not yet been presented to her. She decided to get to the point:

"My name is Sara Mora, and I'm a doctor in the center, neurosurgery department. I need to talk to the doctor Encinas, please," she said, as politely and professionally as possible that her state of anxiety allowed her.

"The psychologist?"

"Yes, tell him it's urgent."

"I'll put him on with you," said the new receptionist, very polite, as if trying to look professional. "Don't hang up."

Inside the booth, she felt like an easy prey. What an absurd feeling, she thought as she surveyed the street through the glass. Why would anyone want to take her? Luckily, a male voice emerged from the other side of the connection rescuing her from her paranoid fantasies.

"Sara, is that really you?"

The one who spoke was Dr. Luis María Encinas, the only psychiatrist on the payroll with whom Ámber's clinic counted. He had three years left to retire, and although his office was only one floor above Sara's office, until October 12th, they had exchanged no more than a formal greeting when crossing in the elevator or the corridors of the building. From that fateful day, however, they came to see each day, about an hour each day, in the old psychiatrist's office.

"Luis, I need your help. I'm desperate," she pleaded, not wasting time.

"Take it easy Sara, and take a deep breath. Let's see, where are you calling from? Are you still in Oxford?"

"Yes. I'm calling you from a pay phone. Something terrible has happened."

"I'm listening, Sara. What has happened?"

"I saw a man die yesterday." She paused to breathe, it was the first time she had heard herself uttering such a strong phrase. "In his own house. There was a shot that the whole neighborhood heard, and I was the first person to hold him in my arms. But he was already dead, Luis, he was already dead..."

A new pause to breathe, fast and choppy.

"Sara, you're suffering from an anxiety attack, you have to calm down. Tell me, do you know who the victim was and why they shot him?"

In the midst of uneasiness, Sara preferred to ignore her relationship with Lennard. After all, she didn't have so many coins for such a long story. She decided to address the issue for why she had called him:

"Luis, last night a police officer put me inside his car and interrogated me. Me! What is happening lately with me? Am I going crazy?"

"No, no, nothing like that. Let's see, I told you that the therapy was working, every day that passed you look better, and when you told me about taking a few days off to go to Oxford, I thought it was a fantastic idea." Encinas' calm voice seemed to Sara the best restorative she had. "Now, you have simply had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. You have experienced another trauma, just as unpleasant as the previous one, which has caused anxiety to explode in your body like a rocket. Apparently, girl, you have a knack for getting into trouble, but you're not going crazy, and you won't die because of this."

"I get it. But then, what do I do?"

"Well, you have to do your best to reassure yourself. Are you still taking the pills?"

"Not for the last couple days. You told me to stop taking them."

Sara clung tightly to the receiver, as if it were all she had left in her life.

"Yes, but that was before this whole story. Continue taking them, for a while at least until you get better."

"I understand, I'm going to take the medicine again today."

"One more thing: I think you should come back to Ámber. Here we can resume the therapy."

Sara bit her fingernails as she pondered her answer in silence.

"I can't, not at least until I have done one more thing." She reached into the pocket of her jacket and saw that there were no more coins left. "Luis, I'm out of time for the call. One more thing."

"Tell me."

"I have to ask you for one last favor. Can you call the La Paz Hospital in Madrid and ask about the Neurosurgeon Jaime Vergara? It's very important that you locate him."

"You say Jaime Vergara? Wait a minute, let me write it down." Sara imagined her psychiatrist with his round, wide glasses, leaning over his old office desk and writing in pencil and in exaggeratedly large handwriting. "It's done. What's the message?"

"You must introduce yourself as my psychiatrist, he knows me well. Tell him I lost my cell phone with all my contact information, but it's very important that we talk. For him to connect to his Skype account this afternoon at 6 pm peninsular time. I'll be waiting for him online. Did you get it?"

Luis María Encinas repeated his patient's orders as he carefully scribbled them down on his paper.

"Important... to connect to the Skype account... today at 06:00 pm..."

"You got it?" At that moment, the balance of the call was zero, and the connection was cut off. "Luis? You got it? Shit!"

Sara slammed the phone with rage. Hoping that her old psychiatrist had written down the message, she left the booth and headed for the city center. She had a date at six in the afternoon, but before that she wanted to stop by to check something out.

Chapter 9

"Allow me to meddle, Morgan. Do you and your wife love each other?"

"Of course, doctor. What's the question?"

"I don't see your eyes twinkling as you answer. When you love someone, your soul must shine."

"Of course I love my wife, Salas, don't be picky."

"Don't make the same mistake I made, my friend."

"Be more specific."

"I mean, getting up early when it's dark at night to go to work at the hospital was a hell of a bitch, but it cost me a lot less when someone else was doing the same thing on the other side of the bed. Two cups of coffee are better than one. That when the varnish wears off at the beginning of the exciting stories, the real person comes to the surface, and that's where you must decide if the unvarnished person is for you or not. That in the end, she is always going to be the fire in your eyes, she is also extraordinarily gutsy, and you are the championship asshole, only with one small difference: she will be your chain and ball, and you, the asshole. And that's when, with luck, you'll be able to build a rocky eternity but not enough to end up in court. Fourth lesson."

Friday, November 10, 2006

The unlikely pair of officers composed of Alfred Horner and Thomas Carroll, waited in the autopsy room for the coroner to appear. They were dressed in the same clothes from the night before, and their tired looks showed that fatigue was beginning to make a dent in them. In a desperate attempt to regain strength after the incidental night, Carroll had managed to get a nod for less than two hours in the back seat of the patrol car. Horner, on the other hand, had not even tried.

The autopsy room of the Oxford forensics was small, cold, and so meticulously clean it almost made him nauseous. It was situated in the basement, so that the sunlight did not reach it. Stainless steel skeletal tables, all free except the one in front of the policemen, occupied the dungeon. Above it, inside a sack of cloth and fastened through its center by a zipper, hid the inert mass of what a few hours ago had been the living body of Mike Lennard.

The two men grimaced, each according to their style, when the coroner entered the room twelve minutes late: Carroll gave a sigh to one side, while Horner, less given to staying in line, gave the newcomer a more sullen gaze "Shit, the Buddha has touched us," he commented under his breath to his companion, who couldn't suppress a childish chuckle.

The Buddha (a nickname that Horner had just picked from his sleeve, as he did from time to time) was Kurt Payne, the Police Chief of Forensic Science in the City of Oxford. In a small white dressing gown, he was a man with a disproportionate face. He could not be said to be a monster, but the fact was that both his eyes, as his full lips, occupied most of his facial surface, creating the strange effect that something was not in place. It was as if someone had misjudged the scale of certain elements at the time of his conception. Carroll used to say that he was a giant in the body of a human. He had his hair shaved (including his eyebrows), and although he did not lose the rehearsed smile from the door until he reached out to the pair of policemen, the truth was that he did not fool anyone: Payne was a strange man. He rarely interacted with other policemen, collecting unpopular weapons (one day Carroll saw him take out brass knuckles and a collection of ninja stars), and since a few months ago he was associated with some kind of Buddhist sect that had managed to soften his bipolar character in exchange for contributing to enlarge his fame as an strange bird). Horner and Carroll simply did not like him.

They didn't waste their time in formalities and they went directly to the point: Horner requested to see the body, to which Payne obeyed without resisting by opening the zipper to the neck.

"Fuck..." Snowflake snapped at once, as if it were the first time he saw the grayish mass typical of a corpse to which an autopsy had just been carried out. Alfred swallowed.

The coroner began reciting the findings of the autopsy as if he were in an oral test and he had studied and memorized it the night before, all in a surprisingly high-pitched voice (a giant in the body of a human and with a whistling voice):

"The victim, according to the facts around the hole that pierced the skull when we did the analysis, was killed shortly before midnight yesterday. It was by a firearm that is evident, almost certainly of a small size. A single bullet shot was enough to make him drop dead.

"When you say facts, do you mean...?" Horner asked, betrayed by a subtle gleam of fear in his eyes.

"Larvae." The coroner rushed to finish the question with the answer, with a tone that made them think he was enjoying the two policemen's discomfort. "It's a joke. I was teasing you. These bugs take a minimum of 48 hours to appear in a decomposing body."

The detectives glanced sideways to confirm their irritation at Payne's caustic sense of humor.

"All right, go on," Horner snapped.

"As you can see, once the body was cleaned of its own dried blood, we found a deep groove in the throat." He added the comment to the damaged area with his index finger. "Despite being an important wound, it doesn't reach the trachea, so it appears that the homicide tried to strangle the victim before shooting him with the gun."

"Let us take care of rebuilding the scene, and you go and look for insects, will you, Kurt?" Alfred took the first opportunity to leap against the coroner.

Carroll broke the tension with police philosophy:

"Fuck... we cops live the worst twenty minutes of other people's lives." He couldn't stop looking at the gap that almost split the victim's head in two.

After a few seconds of almost ceremonial reflection, Horner asked the usual question in cases of murder by gun:

"When will we know the model of the gun?"

"I'm afraid we won't know exactly," Kurt said mechanically, wanting to make it clear that he didn't care at all.

"Like what...?" Carroll was within a tenth of a second of losing his temper when his companion stepped forward.

"It's because they haven't found the bullet." Alfred confirmed, more than just said, and then sought confirmation in the coroner's round eyes.

"Exactly," said the Buddhist. "Without the bullet that was fired you cannot know the model of the weapon with precision. Ballistics don't work miracles, you know." He let this last remark spill from his tongue. "Let's see, we know it was a small weapon, like a revolver or a small-caliber pistol. In addition, because of the shape of the gap, it is very likely that the shot was projected at a short distance from the target, maybe a meter and a half, or even less. It is all I can say."

"Then we'll find that bullet and give some work to the ballistics," Carroll promised. "Sometimes we do miracles, did you know that Kurt?"

After the declaration of verbal war, a provocative wink of the policeman's eyes that the coroner received without the slightest symptom of offense in his expression.

"There is something else," he added, with the classic power of the class nerd when a bully pleads for his homework minutes before a surprise test.

Horner's eyes narrowed as if he were blinded by some sunlight, and he paid close attention; something told him that the *Trojan horse* of the case was about to be revealed.

"Go for it, Kurt."

The man opened the zipper more, leaving the torso of the corpse in full view, and refrained from commenting, for the image spoke for itself. The agents looked worried as they stared at it. In the area of the chest between the nipples, marked in the same flesh as one carving an inscription in wood with a chisel, you could read a clear message:

OJO x OJO

The calligraphy was irregular, trembling, like that of a child learning to write. The furrows, in this case, were not as deep as the one in the neck. They all came to the conclusion that the murderer, once he murdered his victim, had paused for a few seconds to leave the message on his skin.

Horner gave Carroll a nod with his head and they turned to speak more privately.

"It's in Spanish," the blonde said in a whisper.

"I know."

"You're thinking about Sara Mora, am I right?" Thomas lowered his voice a little more. He knew that, although Kurt Payne was moving around the corpse, he didn't really lose detail of their conversation. They noticed that when he heard the name of Sara Mora, his huge, blue eyes opened wide. He said nothing. He turned and continued to move as if he were pretending to do something.

"Well, of course it's more evidence against her," Horner said with extreme caution. Then he glanced over his shoulder at the coroner and grimaced uncomfortably. "We'll talk about this later, Thomas, when we're in private."

He had whispered it with just enough force to make sure Payne heard the hint.

The couple bid farewell to Kurt with formal handshakes and left the claustrophobic room, not before Carroll took some photographs of the body focusing most of the shots on the mysterious message on the torso. When they surfaced the room, both of them took deep breaths and unbuttoned the first button of their shirt. So much dead flesh and verbal grief had upset their stomachs.

Sitting in the last row, Marcos Tena listened almost without blinking all that was said in the press conference of the court of Torrelavega. Judge José Miguel Callejo was the lead speaker; it was not usual for a judge to appear before the press, but Callejo considered that this exceptional situation required it. He explained that the investigation concerning the murder of Miguel Lennard, committed that early morning in Oxford and of which the motive was not yet known, was directed entirely by a police unit from the British city. However, Callejo himself would manage the rest of the investigation, that is, everything related to the search for Alyssa Grifero and he reported that the Police Chief Julián Barreneche (on his left on the podium), and his team would be in charge

of this case. Grifero, therefore, Alyssa was the main suspect of the murder of Miguel Lennard, at least from the point of view of the Spanish justice. Nothing was said, however about Carlos Rubial's suicide or of Don Rafael Salas' falsification of medical information.

While Callejo was speaking, Tena glanced at some files he kept in a corporate folder. It was a five-page report that had been used by the judge to summarize the important points of the press conference. The young policeman was glancing swiftly through the pages for a very simple reason: he had written them himself that morning, and he knew every word by memory. In it, he had explained chronologically the fraud committed by Dr. Rafael Salas and given the circumstances that led to his son-in-law, Alfonso Morales, to collapse and perish on the sand of the beach. He had also described how the police found Carlos Rubial's body on the rocks at the foot of the cliff as well as the mysterious murder of his lost brother, the British Miguel Lennard. He had spent more than a full page explaining why Alyssa Grifero was a prime suspect, trying to omit everything the press had written about her and her *addiction to sex and drugs*, a fact that was not even minimally proven. Proud of the good work, he closed the folder and set all his interest in the podium again.

Judge Callejo explained to those present that, although he was not accustomed to making such appearances, he had decided to call them in the wake of the headlines with which they had opened the newspapers and news reports that morning. The main reason for the press conference was none other than to cool the minds of the journalists and to deny certain information treated as irrefutable which was unfounded, for which he had already received numerous calls.

"With what we know at this time, I dare say that the young suspect Alyssa Grifero, who, as you know, lived under the protection of Carlos Rubial, and that we are searching to detain for being one of the main suspects in the Lennard's case. However, based on the information that is in my possession, I cannot affirm with certainty anything beyond a mere suspect."

"Does the girl have any relationship to the death of Carlos Rubial?" Shouted a Spanish TV reporter.

"She lived with him, but she is not suspicious of that death. We can assure you that Rubial took his own life without anyone's help."

"Does she have any ties to Miguel Lennard?"

"We don't know. Lennard was the twin brother of Rubial, but we have no evidence that he and Grifero ever met, for not even the brothers had a relationship since they were children. At that time Alyssa Grifero wasn't even born, and therefore, unlikely to ever coincide."

"Then what are the motives as to why she is guilty?"

"Suspect, I repeat, not guilty."

"What's the reason that she's a suspect?"

"She went to Oxford on the very day of the murder, and we know she has returned to Spain this morning. On the other hand, although we still don't know the details of her relationship with Rubial, she may have wanted to take revenge on her friend's brother for reasons that we do not know, or maybe she went to visit him for some reason and ended up arguing. We're investigating."

"Do you know anything about her past and her fondness for bad living?"

"Define bad living."

"I mean the rumors of her disordered sex life and her love for drugs and other substances."

"Those rumors are completely unfounded, and please, I would ask you to stick to the truth. The research will be simpler without details of a sordid life."

"Give us some more information about the Rubial brothers."

"There is little interesting information, but if we consider the unexpected disappearance of his father, the Mayor Rubial, some decades ago, we can deduce that it is a tragically, dysfunctional family."

Marcos Tena looked thoughtful. He noticed that his boss, Julián Barreneche, was looking at him from the stand with an annoyed attitude. He scratched his head and waited for the conference to end.

Not five minutes had passed since the closing of Callejo's press conference, when Barreneche gestured to Marcos Tena from a distance, urging him so they could speak privately in his personal office.

"Sit down," he ordered imperturbably from his chair, on his side of the desk.

Tena obeyed without a word.

"I've been interested in you. I understand you're on a rookie contract."

"Yes. I've been here for a month, and I have five more months."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"Who asked you to write the report for the press conference?"

"Judge Callejo. This morning he asked me to summarize the whole situation of the past few days. It didn't take me more than a couple of hours."

"Did he call you or did you go to him?"

"He called me."

"Why do you think he did it?"

Tena hesitated. He had been working professionally for a very short time to know whether this interrogation by his superior was normal or, on the contrary,

he was at a crossroads. In any case, he was beginning to feel uncomfortable in that cubicle.

"I suppose he wanted to test the newbie," he said, trying to sound relieved with a half-smile.

"And he knows that you're twenty-five years old, that you're dying to get into the police station, and that he can use you at his whim for his cause."

"His cause? I thought we all paddled in the same direction."

"Callejo is a fucking softy. He still believes in that roll of presumption of innocence, and that is why he doesn't want to take a false step and condemn Grifero without being completely sure."

"I get it. But I..."

"You're just as soft as he is, normal, on the other hand, being wet behind the ears. But if you had put your time in like me, you'd be on my side."

"I'm on your side."

"You didn't prove it today."

"Excuse me!" Marcos Tena's neck muscles tightened.

"I thought I'd made it clear to you that this was not Callejo's business, and that we were not going to tell him a single detail until we had Grifero handcuffed and in jail. And you go off and write a whole detailed report, five pages!"

"I am sorry."

The young man understood that he was in the middle of a conversation that could negatively affect his future.

"I like you, Marcos, and I consider you an excellent policeman with a lot of potential. You apply yourself and you have a good eye for the investigations, so I will forget what happened today. But I will go straight to the point and I will summarize it in a single sentence: if you again disobey my orders and act on your own, you can forget about your internship here. You will never enter this police station."

"Understood, boss."

"I've decided to put myself on your side from now."

"I expect that."

"I'll give you the case entirely. I want you to take this investigation and bring me Grifero. Without research, capture her period. Do it well, and you will have many cases to finish your internship."

"All right, thank you."

"But you will not talk to the judge about anything you do."

"No problem."

"Well, let me know whenever you want to extend your contract."

"Of course yes."

"You'll have a chance to show what you're worth, a real cop, not an ass kisser. Do you agree?"

"I think it's great." Tena, who had been struggling to keep his composure for a while, had to ask one last question, "What do we do with Sara Mora? She's in Oxford."

"I know she's in Oxford," the Commissioner drawled. "I myself informed Interpol, so now that girl is in the hands of the Bobbies. Does the Kinder cop care?" He waved the last sentence to make him look ridiculous.

"Very good!" Marcos said very firmly.

"That's it then. Subject clarified."

After a frosty handshake, Julian Barreneche beckoned him to leave the cubicle.

About two hours after the visit to the autopsy room, after reviewing certain reports on Miguel Lennard's life and answering some calls, Alfred Horner and Thomas Carroll were leaning on the Eagle and Child's bar and concentrating on their lunch, two raspberry muffins and espressos, as JRR Tolkien and CS Lewis did half a century ago. They ate the muffins in silence.

"Listen, Fred, I can't stop thinking about it," said the blond, licking his fingers after the last piece of muffin. "Suppose the killer didn't kill Lennard from the head shot. That is, the cut in the neck was quite deep. Suppose he ended his life strangling him with a rope, a cable, or the like, and then, once dead, shot him in the face. In the end, Kurt said that it must have been a shot near the bottom, and, on the other hand, you have to have a lot of aim to hit him full in the face while he is a moving target. If he were already dead, however, it would be another thing."

"But what are you saying?" Horner reacted as if he were trying to convince him that the Earth was flat. "You mean he could of shot him once he had him on the floor, lifeless? What's the point of that?"

"Maybe he did it on purpose in order to confuse us. Maybe it's all part of a set up to drive us crazy, God knows why."

"Look, suppose your hypothesis made sense." Horner immediately smiled unwillingly to soften the arrogance of his comment. "We would have found the bullet dented between the floor of the sink and Lennard's head. Also, in that case, the wall tiles would not be spattered with blood. My friend, use your brain."

"Shit, you're right, I'm saying bullshit." Carroll shook his head repeatedly, embarrassed. "The bullet is the key to everything. We should check down the alleyway to the bathroom window. Chances are it's stuck there after the shot."

Horner said nothing for a moment, but Carroll could almost hear the shifting gears of his mind evaluating and analyzing the stage for weaknesses.

"It's not necessary, it's not there," he said.

"How the fuck can you know that, Fred?"

"The bullet came out of the back of Lennard's neck and hit one of the tiles beside the mirror. Then it fell to the floor, inside the room."

"Wait a minute. I thought you said there were no traces of the bullet."

"There wasn't. There was no need for it. The killer, aware of the importance of the bullet as evidence of the crime, picked it up from the floor once the work was done and took it with him, but that would have been impossible if the bullet were found between the victim's brains and the cold, bloody floor. Impossible without rummaging around the corpse, I mean."

Carroll wondered how he had been so clumsy not to notice the gap in the wall tiles, and he felt how, once again, he lagged behind his brilliant companion.

"And the message marked on his chest?" He jumped from one point of evidence to another in order to tie up some loose ends and hang an imaginary medal on himself.

"He does it after rescuing the bullet. He knows he has a short time before the first curious neighbors arrive, but it will not take him more than twenty seconds, after all he is dealing with a few swift lines on a dead person. It was certainly part of a premeditated murder. Not only did he want revenge on Lennard, but he also wanted to leave us a message, tell us something."

"But what I mean is, what does the fucking message mean?"

"Isn't it clear to you?"

"Not really. Do I have to guess something because it's a symmetrical riddle?"

"It's not a riddle, but a Spanish saying. Symmetry, if nothing escapes me, is mere coincidence."

Carroll stared at his companion and waited for him to continue with his presentation.

"*Ojo por ojo... diente por diente*," he said in perfect Spanish from the peninsula, "or what is the same: revenge. I told you that a moment ago."

They stood leaning on the bar in silence and gazing at nothing, side by side, for several minutes. Carroll's mind was more focused on the powerful gift that Alfred had for collecting clues and recomposing scenarios, than on the murder itself. For him, Fred was like the typical out-of-tune note that, however, he liked to hear it. While he was sure that he would never match his partner's ability to solve cases, he made a point:

"The message makes the killer's motive clear."

"Not only that. He made two things clear: the murderer's motive was revenge, and he wanted us to know that."

"But for what reason?"

"That's what we don't know."

Carroll shrugged and, as if he were a fantasy character created by Tolkien at the same wooden bar, he asked Gandalf for his opinion.

"Well, reviewing the info," said Horner, and unfolded a paper napkin on the bar, "we have the following information. Do you have a pen?" He felt his jacket outside and felt something he didn't expect in his inner pocket. "Wait! I have a pen."

"I didn't know you use a pen."

"Neither did I, really," said Alfred, and then he turned on his hypothesis, which was all he cared about at that moment. "Let's see: we know that the homicide is Spanish, or at least dominates the language well enough to express himself through Spanish sayings."

He wrote *Hispanic* on the napkin.

"Besides, the guy seemed to be in control. He shows he know about the subject of the bullet, the speed to disappear in time, and, of course, the exquisite aim with a gun."

He underlined *expert killer*.

"Don't forget the motive, Fred, it's important," said the older of the two agents.

Horner added *revenge* to the list of tips. Without saying anything else, as if his fingers worked faster than his tongue, he extended the list with two more hypotheses, both between question marks:

- *Get police attention?*
- *Symmetry?*

Horner had a way of working in a team that made Carroll feel much inferior.

"Conclusions?" Snowflake said, struggling to appear necessary.

Alfred drew a vertical line that divided the napkin in two, and in an enigmatic way that enraptured his companion, he deduced:

"We have a firm candidate right now." And while he was speaking, he wrote *SARA MORA*, in large letters, on the left division of the paper. Then, as Thomas's countenance told him that he was rushing, he proceeded to argue: "She is Spanish, she lied to me in the interrogation, and she had no reason to be there. To make matters worse, this morning Interpol has informed us that Lennard's twin brother was about to rape her a few weeks ago, before committing suicide."

Carroll sighed heavily as he listened to the sequence of arguments. "Also, don't forget that she carried traces of blood on her hand."

"Okay, but we must weigh other options. Remember that Interpol asserts that the Spanish have more than enough evidence to indict a girl, whose name I don't remember right now, about Lennard's murder." He licked over the crumbs that had remained at the corner of his mouth, and he continued to wonder aloud: "Apparently the girl had a relationship with her twin brother, and they have also discovered that she traveled from Madrid to Oxford yesterday, that is, the day of the crime. God, this case is crazy," he said, massaging his tired eyes with his fingertips.

"Precisely that's why I have divided the napkin into two equal parts." Horner said this as if he had just made the final move of a magic trick, and then wrote *TRAVELER SUSPECT* on the right half of the paper.

"Fuck you, man, you're brilliant." Carroll had no choice but to give in to his colleague's demonstration. "Sometimes it's as if you're one step ahead of the rest of the mortals. Anyway, you see things that nobody else sees!"

Horner took the compliment as something to ignore, so that he only showed a half smile and rose from the stool.

"But....wait a moment. There's one thing that doesn't fit at all." The blond cop put his hand to his chin and prepared to give a new twist to the matter: "neither that young woman they suspect in Spain, nor of course the Sara Mora we spoke with yesterday, respond to the profile of calculating psychopath. They're practically two kids!"

"You're quite right there, Thomas, but we can't be fooled by appearances. In short, any human being is capable of doing something terrible at any given time. I know what I'm talking about."

Horner was absorbed for a fraction of a second, until finally he spewed:

"Come on, we have a lot of work ahead of us yet. It's urgent to investigate the background of these two girls also Lennard himself. It's clear that he did something in the past to annoy someone to the point of wanting to shoot him dead and mark his body. However, before that I want to return to the scene of the crime."

"To Lennard's house on Cowley Road?"

"Yes, are you on board?"

Thomas Carroll nodded without hesitation.

Jaime Vergara didn't remember the last time he had been so nervous, and even more so that a woman was the cause that unnerved him. Since Sarita had sent the text message to his cell phone, he had found it impossible to focus on anything else. He'd just wandered around the room, holding the phone in his

hand and reading the message every few seconds, as if it were a nervous tic he couldn't control. He thought of how surreal it was that the imminent encounter with a woman with whom he had almost lost all connection, moved the unfortunate Shapiro case into the background.

And yet he could think of nothing else. What would happen when Sara knocked on the door and met, face to face, on the landing? He would invite her in, of course, and then what? What would the encounter bring about? Focus Jaime, fuck! Sarita comes to tell you something important, don't behave like a teenager. Unable to concentrate on anything concrete, he approached the window of the room and began to contemplate on the traffic of people coming and going along Orense Street. That was one of the things he liked most about his bachelor floor: Orense was full of life practically twenty-four hours a day, and when he sat by the window he never felt alone at all.

Suddenly the cell phone rang in his hands, and his heart skipped a beat. It was a long number that was not kept in the agenda (that discarded Sara). He pressed the green button and brought the device to his ear.

"Yes, tell me."

"Am I talking to Dr. Jaime Vergara, from La Paz hospital?"

"Look, if you're calling from the press to ask me uncomfortable questions, I'm not available, is that clear?"

"The press? No, no, nothing like that. My name is Luis María Encinas, and I am the psychiatrist at Ámber clinic."

Something stirred inside Jaime when he heard the word Ámber.

"Ámber's clinic? I'm listening."

"I have a message for you from Dr. Sara Mora. Does that name mean anything to you?"

What's going on here?

"Yes of course. She is a friend of mine. Is something wrong?" Someone rang at that moment through the doorbell. "She's finally here!" Jaime's soul shouted excitedly. "One second, please," he said to the telephone, "I have to go and open the door."

The young doctor, with the cell phone still attached to his ear, approached the door telephone that hung on one of the walls of the receiver and pressed the open button without asking who was calling. Then he resumed the telephone conversation.

"Look, I have to leave you, I have a visitor."

"Before that let me give you the message, I repeat that it is very important to Sara."

"Okay, I'm listening," Jaime agreed with a snort, thinking that whatever Sara had to say to him, she could tell him in person in less than a minute.

"According to Dr. Mora, you must connect to your Skype account this afternoon at 6 pm, Spanish time. She will be waiting for you."

Connect to Skype to talk to Sara? This must be a misunderstanding, Jaime thought logically. The doorbell rang. "Message received, sir. Now I must leave you, my visit has just arrived. Thank you very much for the information. Bye."

There was no time for the psychiatrist to say goodbye. The young neurosurgeon hung up the phone as he opened the door without even looking in the peephole to see who it was (something that he was going to consider, that maybe he should have done).

"Hello Sar...!"

What Jaime saw on the other side of the door made such a knot in his throat that he couldn't finish the salute. He had perfectly recognized the young woman who had murdered a man in cold blood in England the day before and who today was the headline in all the news in the country. Now she was standing in front of him with a casual smile.

Chapter 10

"Doctor Salas, I've been wanting to ask you something for a while."

"Shoot, Morgan."

"Do you regret your past?"

"What do you mean?"

"You look like a wise man, balanced and at peace with yourself. Would you act differently from knowing then what you knows now?"

"Bingo! You've hit the spot with that topic. You see, we're never happy when we're supposed to be. We tend to think that our life will be better when we finish the class, when summer arrives, when we pass a test that has been goal, when we find a beautiful girlfriend, or a good job; when we get married, when we buy a car (and at that point, we'll crave a better car), when we stop smoking, when we have children, when we have more money, when we pay the mortgage, when we win the lottery, when we divorce, when we get a promotion, when we have grandchildren, when we retire..."

"Okay, okay, I get it."

"In my case, I got used to wasting my little great achievements generating the illusion that the best was yet to come. And in the meantime, I complained. I gave more time to the people who are passing by, than for those who would die for me. The bills and reports heaped on the desk ended up burying letters of love, congratulations, and drawings, but then I couldn't explain why the hell I was alone."

"And this is lesson number... yes, I think it's number five."

Friday, November 10, 2006

Jaime Vergara found himself face to face with Alyssa Grifero and his knees began to falter. In a reflex act, he stepped back.

"Good day, sir," said the visitor, in a strange good humor. "I know you were expecting someone else. Still, can I come in?"

Without waiting for the answer, Alyssa crossed the threshold and closed the door, pushing it with the heel of her boot. She looked curiously at a framed laminate that occupied almost the whole wall of the hall. Positive slogans such as *to be inspired is great; to inspire is incredible*. Then she took a quick glance at the still-unmade bed of the little bedroom while. Jaime's universe went upside down. *What the hell? What is she doing here? What has she done to Sara?*

"Is there anyone else on the floor?" She went on talking as she walked into the kitchen like Peter Pan in his house.

Vergara stood petrified until he saw Alyssa go into the bathroom and look behind the shower screen. He approached her without thinking.

"What are you doing?" He shouted, and immediately realized his high tone and lowered his voice.

Alyssa, who was checking that Jaime was in effect alone, stopped, turned her head, and met his eyes.

"We have to talk," she said dryly.

Sara felt a chill creep up her back as she stopped a block away from the brick townhouse at 219 Cowley Road. The appearance of the street was calm, almost familiar. The patrol cars had disappeared, there was no trace of the neighbors and no man lay on the floor of his apartment with his head destroyed. Nor was there any trace of the journalistic army, which she no doubt feared to be found; Apparently at that time they was no more carrion left over to pick at. Although the gray clouds were giving way to uneven sunlight, the temperature was around 13 Celsius degrees, which, added to the typical British humidity, and caused an uneasy sense of discomfort in Sara.

She looked at her wristwatch for the fifth time since, less than an hour earlier, the telephone conversation with her psychiatrist had ended. It was 2:40 in the afternoon, which meant that she still had more than two hours to find a cybercafé and go on time for her virtual meeting with Jaime. At that time she also planned to go into the first pharmacy she could find to buy the pills that Luis María Encinas had prescribed.

But all that, the pills and the call, would be after she went back in the mouth of the lion.

Her teeth chattered, not only from the cold, but also from the stress of watching the scene of her last nightmare. From her position, a few steps from the

liquor store, she could see that a yellow plastic tape sealed the house around its perimeter until disappearing through the alley that separated the liquor store from the house itself. The building seemed to Sara as a sinister fortress, and in her mind even the bricks, once reddish, seemed to have darkened.

She gathered courage, whispered several times, just a house, and took a breath to take the first step. She didn't get to take the second, however, because she detected something out of the corner of her eye that drove her to hide behind the corner of the liquor store like a delinquent.

A patrol car was approaching at moderate speed with the emergency lights off at the other end of the road. It slowed down and parked in front of the house. Sara felt the blood rise to her head when she saw two men get out of the car.

Shit, it's them! She lamented inside, at the same time hiding behind the side facade of the building. Her heart was racing.

Sara glanced a second and that was enough to identify the two policemen of the other night: the blond platinum and the arrogant handsome police. "Well, I've not been found." She risked another sneaky turn of her neck and managed to see them both crouch under the seal. They were about to enter Mike Lennard's house.

They had gone ahead of her by seconds.

Vergara closed his eyes tightly, wishing it were a horrible nightmare. He was in a state of rational paralysis. The situation seemed surreal, almost paradoxical, and his mind refused to function. He had never been face to face with a fugitive. *How could she know where I live?* It was the only thing he could think of. Then she said something that Jaime, at first, didn't understand.

"Do a body search on me," she repeated. Then Alyssa stepped in front of him and raised her hands with her palms open.

"What-how are you saying?"

"On your face, I gather that you have recognized me from the news. Clearly you're in full panic attack. However, I need to talk to you, and I can't do that if you're afraid of me. Come on do a body search on me. I'm not armed and I'm harmless."

She went a step closer, and Jaime stepped back a few inches when he felt the touch of her t-shirt against his arm. He realized that it wasn't right for him to argue with a dangerous stranger, and on the other hand, it would not be too much to make sure that she wasn't carrying weapons on her, so that, submissively, he obeyed.

Trying not to stare into her eyes, he stood in front of her. He had never body searched anyone, so he remembered and visualized in his mind some scenes from his favorite police film: *Lethal Weapon*. He started at the top, grabbing

Alyssa's wrists and slowly lowering her arms. He overcame her breast area with great care not to touch her breasts, a movement that caused a silly and spontaneous smile on the young woman. She kept her eyes on the wall, however. When he reached her waist, Jaime experienced a contradictory sensation: for the first time he was aware that he housed a ruthless, unarmed murderer in his hall, totally at his mercy, and he seemed morbid. He was surprised to take a few seconds to feel the area around her waist and examine Alyssa's body as a whole. In that posture, with arms raised, the T-shirt was stuck to the skin, molding her narrow figure, especially in the area of the breasts, and still with his hands on her waist, let his black pupils absorb her.

He cleared his throat, and time went by.

"Checked. You're clean," he coughed as he took a step back.

"You forgot my legs."

Jaime stared at her like a fool as he pondered a coherent response; although the reality was that there was nothing coherent about the situation itself.

"Hey, what are you doing?" His spirit of survival had suddenly awakened. Once assured that she was unarmed, Jaime's fear gave way to anger. "Do you know that I can call the police right now and they'll take you in?"

"It's not going to be necessary," she said quickly.

As they spoke, he glanced around the corners of his apartment for something he could use as a weapon if things got dangerous.

"I did not come here with bad intentions, I swear. If you want me to go, you just have to tell me. But I assure you that you need me as much as I need you."

"But what are you saying?" Now it was Jaime who took a step toward her and cornered her against the corner of the hall. He realized she was much shorter than he. "What have you done with Sara? You said I'm going to need your help, how can that be if I don't even know you? Are you crazy?"

He put his index finger to his temple and began to tap like a lunatic.

"Don't worry about Sara for now," she said, ignoring Jaime's gesture. "Look, it's no secret I know you're not in your prime professional moment. You have problems with the justice and I can help you but first we must talk."

There was silence.

Jaime was more than surprised. After a second's reflection, he decided that the young killer was telling the truth, so he nodded. Stammering, he offered her a cup of coffee in the cafe below, *where there are witnesses*.

"No, not at all. I can't leave the house, let alone go into a public place, man. Have not you heard? At the moment I am being looked for in half of Spain. It will have to be here."

Not convinced, Jaime waved his hand to the room's sofa. Then he went into the kitchen, filled the *Nespresso* with water, and heated up two coffees. After a few seconds, he offered one of the cups to Alyssa and sat in the chair in front of her, expectantly.

"Okay, let's see what happens in this venture and find out where all this nonsense takes us."

While Grifero poured the sugar and stirred the coffee with the teaspoon, Jaime examined her carefully. She dressed like an adult woman and her body was fully developed. Her lips were a deep red. And in spite of all this, she was still a child. She didn't seem to be capable of killing a full-fledged man, much less squeezing the trigger of a pistol. She was not, in short, the prototype of a serial killer. Her eyes, however, were those of an adult: calm and expressionless.

"You're scared of me?" She said suddenly, breaking the ice with only four words.

"No," said Vergara.

"Well, I didn't come to kill you, or to hurt you, or anything like that. On the contrary, we need to be friends."

There was a new silence.

"Perfect, I'll give you a quarter of an hour to convince me. After that time I'll call the police," he snapped.

"Fifteen minutes? I warn you that my story is complex."

"Cut short and simplify, you look like a smart girl. Fourteen minutes."

She raised her hands, making him see that she had caught the idea.

"Now, why are you here?" He demanded.

Grifero changed her face and became serious. Her eyes were tired and sad. All the security Jaime had sensed when she stepped into the apartment had vanished, and he understood that the preliminaries had ended. He couldn't even begin to guess what was going to happen next, but he felt a gray cloud flood the atmosphere.

Officer Thomas Carroll gazed with appreciation at the cracked tiles on Mike Lennard's bathroom wall, and was shocked at having been so slow-witted that he had not examined them the other night. Horner was imperturbable at his side.

"Well, you were right: there's definitely a whole bullet hole in the wall," Thomas said with crossed arms. "That rules out that the shooting occurred with the victim already on the floor."

The room was the same as they had left it, except for the pool of blood on the floor, which had been scrubbed (although traces of blood clots could still be seen in the joints of the tiles), and, of course, the corpse, which at that time lay in the autopsy room of the anatomical forensics as they had already seen. Otherwise,

they were inside a normal single man's bathroom, with his toothbrush and anti-plaque toothpaste, his only shampoo bottle and his generic white deodorant.

Carroll gave a weary sigh, as if he had just realized how complicated this investigation could be.

"I don't see any sharp things here, so the wounds on the chest must have been made with an object that he brought with him, or he took afterwards," he said, looking around.

"I'll bet it was something personal, a kind of letter opener or something," Horner said, and then explained, "If he had used a machete or a sharp object, the prints would be deeper and more bloody right?"

"Actually it could have been anything that was found around the house, like a razor or a needle."

"I really doubt it." Horner expounded his theory with such confidence that he crushed his companion's arguments one after the other. "Clearly, writing that message on the victim's skin was the culmination of a well thought out plan, so the tool would normally be part of a ritual."

The blond grimaced. The word made him shiver. *Ritual...*

Tired of lacking evidence, he went to the window and looked out at the inhospitable alley. He noticed that there was nothing of interest and returned to the room.

"Come on, let's inspect the rest of the house," Horner said, clapping his hands enthusiastically. "We'll split up to go faster, if that's okay with you."

Snowflake nodded.

"What exactly are we looking for?" he asked.

"Anything that gives us any extra information about Lennard. Papers, articles, photos, videotapes... Someone killed him for revenge and we have to find out why. You'll check the first floor and I'll check the top floor. Let's start!"

That day he preferred to work alone. In fact, and no matter how much his partner liked him, since he had interrupted his day off with that morning call, he had felt Carroll as a constant pain in his ass.

He went upstairs, located Lennard's bedroom and closed himself in it. He looked at the room with defiant eyes, as the class nerd looks at the blank questions at the beginning of a test.

He didn't know what he was looking for, but instinct told him that among so many drawers and in his wardrobe he would find something to give him more information about who Mike Lennard really was. He did not expect to be faced with the definitive clue that the murderer's name and his motives for committing the savage crime would be handed to him on a platter; that was a utopia. But he was aware that he had many options to find some interesting document.

The first thing he did was to peer under the bed (following instinct more than logic), but all he found was a thin layer of dust. Opening the largest closets served to confirm that Lennard was fashionable, perhaps something modern for his taste, but he imagined him, in short, as a dashing man.

Horner was moving quickly from furniture to furniture, which caused him to slam the door of a music box that was used to hold watches, he hit his right arm with the wooden edge. A deep pain invaded his extremity, for it was the same arm that he had cleaned and bandaged the night of the accident.

He gave a hollow, mute grunt.

He inspected his forearm and checked that there was no blood on the bandage, which meant that the wounds had not been opened. The pain waned almost disappearing; however, the shadow that had sifted over his figure when he discovered that someone had entered his house wrapped him again. What was most disconcerting to him was to have the supposition of having struggled with someone (because of the furrows that had appeared on his forearm), and yet not remember anything. It seemed obvious that someone was playing with him, torturing him and adding new pieces to the puzzle every time. He pondered the idea that his abuser was directly related to the murder of Mike Lennard. He felt uneasy.

It was when he opened the first drawer of the nightstand that he discovered something that made his dark thoughts fly from his head. It was the kind of tip he was looking for. And it was disconcerting. Under some papers for old contracts and bills which gave him no information other than that Lennard rented and spent very little on water and electricity he found a blue plastic box filled with handwritten letters in Castilian and with an exquisite calligraphy. What seemed most peculiar to Horner was that the letters weren't addressed to Lennard. All the correspondence contained in the folder was affectionately dedicated to the same person:

"Diana."

He took the first letter and noted that it actually corresponded to the last one to be received. It had been delivered on Monday, October 16, that is, less than a month ago. It was an irrefutable fact that at that time Mike Lennard was living in that house, which opened a range of possibilities: Had Lennard received all those letters by mistake? Did he live with a woman named Diana? Where was she now?

Intrigued, he spent a few minutes reading the letter, which took up a page and a half. It took only a few lines for him to be aware of it being an important discovery within the investigation. The person who had written the letter told Diana with total confidence a series of misfortunes that had happened to her in

the last few days. She was talking about an attempted rape in her own home, the resolution of a case about a patient who had a tumor (at that point Horner assumed that the sender was a doctor), and that in the end it turned out to be her husband who ended up dying. It was obvious that the lines were written as a therapy and dedicated to someone very special. He raised his eyebrows as he read the following paragraph:

Diana, what I'm about to tell you is very strong: Charley, the bastard who tried to rape me, committed suicide the other day. They found him on the rocks, on the cliff. I'm in shock right now.

He felt a shudder as he recognized the suicidal name. Lennard's twin brother! Could more casualties occur in such a few days? He then wondered if everything that had happened in Spain could be related to the murder of Cowley Road, and immediately materialized in his head the figure of his main suspect. He continued reading:

I made the decision to travel to Oxford next week. I think that's what's right for me right now. Actually, I need to see you.

He raised his eyebrows even more. The energy in his whole body altered, however, when he finished reading the farewell that was signed:

With all my love, Sara.

The folded page trembled in his hands. Sara. Sara Mora. S-A-R-A M-O-R-A. A torrent of questions with no apparent answer crowded his head. *Who the hell is Diana? Why did Sara write all this correspondence and why did she send them to Lennard's address, if they were not really meant for him? Or was it?* The image of Sara and Lennard leaving the other afternoon under the Bridge of Sighs shot back into his head.

Horner grimaced.

Then the agent's mental questionnaire jumped to the night of the crime. Sara Mora was there, and it was not a coincidence, as he had sensed right from the beginning. There was a certain connection between Mora, Mike Lennard, and the enigmatic Diana. Now the puzzle contained another piece that made it more complex. But in turn, he had found one more point to investigate. He had to find Diana any which way.

A familiar voice sounded in the background in the form of a cry, interrupting Alfred in his thoughts. It was Carroll, who informed him that he had found nothing of interest on the floor below and urged him to continue the investigation. Still shaking with emotion, Alfred folded all the letters twice in half and tucked them into the inside pocket of his jacket. Then he closed the drawer, left the room and met his companion. He didn't say anything about what he had discovered.

Alyssa Grifero set her *Ristretto* cup of coffee on the coffee table and set out to engage in one of the most difficult and determining conversations in her life.

"I have a huge problem on my hands," she said, "and I don't know where to start. I think it's best to try to convince you first that I'm not a murderer."

"No, first explain to me how you found this apartment and how you know me," said Jaime, who seemed ready to waste no time.

She gave him a nervous smile. She expected that reaction from her.

"Your friend, that Sara, she is in Oxford."

"Oxford? What the hell is she doing there?"

"I don't know that, I don't even know her," Alyssa said, trying to compose a series of convincing phrases in her head. "But for some reason, your little friend was in the same place and at the same time as the murder of Mike Lennard, which all the news programs associate me."

"But you had nothing to do with it, I suppose."

Alyssa noticed pure sarcasm in the words of Jaime, possibly destined to make her have to give the maximum detail to her story.

"Of course not."

"And then who killed that man?"

"I don't know," she lied without the slightest hesitation.

He snorted.

"All right," he said, "continue. Sara was at the crime scene and then what?"

"Several policemen withheld her. One of them put her in his car and kept her there for a long time. I guess he questioned her."

"Okay, and in the meantime, where were you?"

"I saw it all from behind a dumpster in an alley next to the house. No one knew I was there, not even your friend." At this point in the story, Alyssa was already talking almost to herself, as if she had difficulty remembering the scene. Then she turned to Jaime with a new determination in her voice. "Then, when they all left, I left my hiding place, and when I was crossing the road I accidentally kicked a cell phone that someone had lost. I picked it up and turned it on. It turned out to be owned by Sara Mora, the girl who had just been questioned and who had been receiving persistent emails from a certain Jaime

Vergara, that is, from you. Coincidences of life, that Jaime had been news of course of attempting homicide. Same as me. And I had been given the opportunity to meet you.”

For the first time Jaime looked impressed. Much to his regret, he had to admit that the story was beginning to interest him.

Alyssa gave him her most frail look as she leaned toward him.

"Jaime, we're both just as fucked up. That is why we have to help each other.”

"So you set yourself up as Sara to get my address and come here," the host accused loudly.

"I know it wasn't the most honest thing, but what else could I do? I didn't know where to go, they're chasing after me!"

Jaime made a face that she interpreted as a sign of suspicion. It was going to cost her a lot to win the confidence of this man.

"Well, I suppose you're telling the truth, and you have nothing to do with the Oxford murder. Why are the police chasing you then?" He insightfully wanted to know,.

Alyssa spent most of her time telling him the rough details of her relationship with Charley Rubial until the time of his suicide. She omitted nothing.

She also told him of her lightning trip to England, the unexpected death of Charley's then-unknown brother, and the reasons why the police had related that death to her trip.

"Why did you travel to England? And what were you doing in the middle of the night next to the house of Charley's brother?" As she had foreseen, Jaime had arrived on his own at the same conclusion as the police.

Alyssa looked at her watch.

"My fifteen minutes are over, but I don't have much more to finish. Can you give me some extra time?"

Jaime nodded.

"Okay, but answer: What was the reason for your trip and what were you looking for in that apartment?"

"You're going to have to trust me on this. The answer to your question is something I would rather keep secret, at least for now.”

Vergara seemed to plunge into his own thoughts. The silence lasted so long that Alyssa began to rustle impatiently on the couch. Finally he waved his arms in disgust.

"I still don't understand. What do you intend by coming to my house and telling me all this?"

"We are reaching the key point of the question. To begin with, what I need is for me to take shelter in your house until the storm is over."

Chapter 11

"You haven't answered my question: Do you regret your behavior in the past, or not?"

"Never ask that question, Morgan, listen to me, because we all regret everything by nature. And besides, we like it."

"How do we like it?"

"I'll put it another way: the human being has found a way to harm himself and then experience the pleasure of healing. There goes the sixth. Think about it."

Friday, November 10, 2006

The fifteen minutes set by Jaime Vergara had already expired, and yet the girl was still on his sofa and no one had called the police. Jaime was so baffled that he had to ask Alyssa to repeat what she had just said to make sure he understood correctly. *Providing refuge for a fugitive? For the love of God!*

He had risen from his chair and stood in front of the window massaging his neck as he watched the traffic. Accumulating information: A complete stranger that the police were looking for all over the country had found Sara's cell phone in England, had flown back to Spain by circumventing border security, and had planted herself at his house posing as his friend and asking for help. She claimed to have killed no one, although she confessed to being the sexual partner of a suicidal madman. Skepticism had seized him when he asked the girl specific questions about her intentions in the Anglo-Saxon country, and she decided to keep her secrets to herself. However, the story had not reached the end, and by then Jaime was too intrigued not to hear the denouement.

"And you, what are you offering in return for my hospitality?" He asked Grifero when he met her gaze again.

She smiled bitterly.

"Sara is in grave danger," she said dryly.

Jaime raised his eyebrows at this resounding statement.

"Go sit in your chair again," Alyssa suggested. "In the meantime, I'll smoke a cigarette."

Sara Mora hadn't looked away from the house since the two policemen entered it. More than fifteen uncomfortable minutes had passed and the detectives were still inside. It was as if the earth had swallowed them. During that time, she weighed very seriously the option of turning around and leaving where she had come, now that they were busy, and avoiding to be found sneaking around. In the end, curiosity was greater than her fear, so that she remained waiting in her position from behind the corner of the store.

Somewhere a street band sounded. In keeping with the intensity with which the melody reached her ears, she guessed that the group was approaching. In fact, a set of flutes, violins, guitars and trumpets soon emerged from a street perpendicular to Cowley Road, a couple of blocks from the liquor store. The musicians turned towards her with the intention of climbing the avenue, so that she faced them. The group consisted of about a dozen men and women. Sara flipped her body so that her back was turned on them (she had decided that the less people saw her hovering around the house, the better it would go for her) and she noticed how the band passed by. When she made sure that they were far enough away so that they couldn't identify her, she turned back to the sealed

house. She was startled to find that at that very moment the front door was opening.

She tensed her body and took refuge behind the corner like a scared cat. Less than eight meters, exactly the width of the liquor store, now separated her from the two policemen. If one of the two turned his neck a little to the right, he would see her. She held her breath and counted to ten in silence.

1, 2, 3..., pleasepleaseplease... 4, 5, 6..., well, it seems they haven't seen me... 7, 8, 9..., and ten!

She cocked her head slightly to observe with her right eye the activity of the two detectives: they were moving away from the gate and were waiting impatiently for the band to finish passing so that they could cross the road. They seemed worried. Sara leaned a bit more to focus her gaze on the front of the house and made a discovery.

They'd left the door open!

She noticed how, after the agents exchanged a few words in a completely unintelligible English to her from that distance (and even more with the musical banging still sounding in the background), the blonder of the two pointed towards the front. In front of them was a place where, according to the sign on the entrance in bright colors and the poster of *Take Away* from the window, they served Turkish food to go. They entered it and both figures disappeared behind the door.

Sara was alone again by the liquor store. The little orchestra had passed the number 219 and its popular melodies were now like whispers between the roar of the cars. She watched with suspicion the shadow of the door of the house and she felt a surge of a powerful temptation. If she ran out to the house, she calculated, it wouldn't take more than five seconds to reach it. Then she could hide inside and camp at her leisure. There was a risk, however, that in those five seconds, one of the two policemen would look that way through the glass of the premises, and that he would detect a mad girl running down the street, look more closely at her, and recognize her as the suspect that they found next to the victim's corpse the night of the crime.

She didn't risk it. She looked around to see that she wasn't catching anyone's attention, pressing her body against the wall, she kept her eyes fixed on the entrance to the Turkish restaurant. At that moment her wristwatch marked thirteen.

Alfred Horner was still carrying Sara's letters in his head as he crossed the front door and joined his companion in the doorway of Mike Lennard's home. He rearranged his arm bandage before sitting at the bar. They both stared at the road thoughtfully.

"Looks like we've wasted our time getting back here," Thomas said, not looking away from the front.

Horner did not speak.

"What do we do now, Fred? Any ideas?"

"They sound good," he remarked.

"What?"

"The band. They're good."

He saw Carroll turning to him and looking at him as if he were looking at someone who had just uttered a supreme stupidity. What his companion was unaware of was the whirlwind of ideas that he was spinning around in his head that prevented him from thinking of anything else. S-A-R-A-M-O-R-A...

He shrugged to hide his distraction.

"I don't know, let's go back to the police station and continue the investigation. We'll go over Lennard's past, shall we?" Horner proposed the first thing with meaning that occurred to him, for what his body was asking for was in fact a time for reflection.

"Wait a minute." Carroll raised his hand, taking the lead role this time. "We're going to snoop a little more before we go."

He accompanied the proposal pointing to the road, which at that time was occupied by the members of the aforementioned musical group. Horner followed the imaginary line drawn by Carroll's finger and looked over the slow-moving musicians, oblivious to the detectives' conversation. Across the street was Ahmets, a small, humble-looking place that seemed to offer Turkish food.

"You're craving kebab, Tom?" He asked ironically.

"No, fuck, but it's the closest restaurant to Lennard's house. If he minimally liked Turkish food, surely the owner of the premises knew him, and in that case he could give us some information about him."

Horner gave his companion a smile of admiration.

"Great idea."

"Thank you. In addition, he could have even witnessed the crime. We won't lose anything by asking."

"Well, although I think you're optimistic. The murder took place around midnight, and at that time it was already closed."

"What do you mean, these Turkish places never close!"

Carroll gave his partner an affectionate punch on the shoulder and set out to cross the street, now free after the passage of the musical procession. Horner followed without suspecting that the woman who was in all his thoughts was watching them a few paces away.

A middle-aged man with curly hair, a swarthy complexion and sparse in words was attending Ahmets. He identified himself as Mirsad, and didn't seem intimidated when Thomas Carroll showed him the plaque that credited him as a police officer. On the contrary, he dedicated a smile full of arrogance to the pair of detectives.

"We won't take up your time for long, Mirsad. There will only be a few questions."

Carroll paused in case the man wanted to say anything. Then he cleared his throat and began a brief interrogation in which Horner remained in the background.

"Well, did you know the man who lived in the opposite house, number 219?"

"I don't know who lives on this street. I go to my business and then I leave." Mirsad spoke with a strong Arabic accent.

"His name was Mike Lennard. Does that name sound familiar?"

Mirsad shrugged and shook his head.

"He was a Caucasian man, dark-haired and upper middle class." Carroll accompanied the description by showing a photograph of Lennard they had printed that morning at the police station. "Have you ever seen him in this place?"

The restaurant owner peered at the image for less than a second.

"He doesn't look familiar, but dozens of customers come here every day. I can't tell. Why? What has this guy done?"

"This man was killed last night in his own house. Right across from your place."

Mirsad changed his face. He looked at the portrait again, this time with interest.

"I have not seen him in my life, I swear."

"Didn't you see or hear anything that caught your eye last night?"

"We shut down at night. If we were open, I would have known."

Thomas turned to look at his partner and gave him a gesture that recognized that he was right about the times of the Turkish restaurants in Oxford. Then he continued:

"What time did you close yesterday?"

"At midnight."

"At that time the firing had already occurred, according to witnesses and the coroner's opinion. Although the police cars, that is we, the investigators, didn't arrive until at least a quarter past twelve," he calculated.

"I don't know what to say to you. Here we usually have the TV on, maybe we had it at such a high volume that it didn't let us hear what happened in that

house.”

Carroll squinted at the other side of the bar and found that there was indeed a television.

“It’s fine don’t worry. We have no further questions for you.” He saved the close-up of Lennard in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a business card. “If you remember anything useful about this man or any strange event that happened in the neighborhood yesterday, call me at this number.”

Mirsad accepted the card and nodded. When Carroll was crossing the door, Horner opened his mouth for the first time since they entered the room:

"Is that camera working?"

On the roof, next to the doorframe, an old security camera pointed towards the exit from inside the restaurant. Horner had discovered it, and taking into account the position of the target, he was sure it recorded everything that happened at an important place outside the premises.

"Yes, of course it works," said the Turk, almost offended by the question.

"In that case we're going to need a copy of yesterday's tape, Mirsad."

Sara stepped through the opening of the front door of the house immediately after the detectives' car disappeared into the horizon, down the street. Although the vehicle was already out of sight, she had left her hiding place with a jump (she was getting fed up with the damn corner of the liquor store) and sprinted to the threshold. She entered the number 219 between gasps, caused in equal proportions by the emotion and the effort.

Keeping her eyes on the front (in this particular case, towards a storage closet that Lennard had placed in the hall) became Sara's first challenge inside the house. The reason was simple: the first door on the left that was just next to the entrance hall was the bathroom door. The last person to leave it (possibly one of the police officers a few minutes ago) had left the door open. If the doctor had turned her neck in that direction, her gaze would have landed flat on the scene of the tragedy that she had not yet permitted herself to see.

Better not to torture herself, she prevailed. Let's keep going.

She had a singular nostalgic moment when she set her feet in the largest room of the house, which served as a living room. She kept herself absorbed in silent observation of every corner, and felt how she traveled in time. She discovered that she had been there before, many years ago that it felt more like centuries. And yet, now it was as if she had never left, as if everything lived from then on was not of the slightest importance.

She found that quite a lot of furniture had been moved, and some even replaced with newer ones. Dozens of magazines, most of them specialized in dance classes and cooking classes, were piled up on the floor next to an old

beige sofa. The television cables, the mini-cassette speakers, and the console controls hung from the cabinet to the little table like a futuristic and arbitrary spider's web that contributed to the deep general disorder.

"No doubt it's a man's room now," Sara said, pursing her lips as a patient mother trying to teach a disobedient son.

She noticed the color of the walls, light gray, and made an effort to remember the painting it had in the past. It was not necessary to think very hard, for in the thin separation between the skirting board and the wall; one could perceive the color on which Mike Lennard had probably decided to paint his dull gray.

Pistachio green.

A new wave of memories hit her in the chest, and a sad smile was on her face. She looked down at herself on the beige couch as she listened to Paul Simon on the radio and always surrounded by that vivacious pistachio green. Thus she passed her afternoons, in that earthly paradise that someone had created for her.

No, Sara, no! Focus. She shook her head and returned to the real world: 219 Cowley Road, November 10, 2006.

The pistachio of old was immediately replaced in her thoughts by the three faces that had entered in her nightmares in the last hours: the slow agent "A" (thus she had decided to call him, because she didn't remember his name) that of his inquisitive companion semi albino, and the fragile and calm Lennard.

She turned and climbed the stairs, climbing the carpeted steps two at a time. The reason that she was hovering around number 219 on the night of the murder was that she had been sending correspondence to the same address over the past few years. Not with the intention of reaching the hands of the then unknown Mike Lennard, of course, but the letters had arrived, and therefore Lennard must have received and read them. That explains why he knew me so well from the beginning, and also knew all the details of my story, such as Verónica's pregnancy. Anyway, Sara concluded, the letters were in the house and she had to retrieve them, if those policemen hadn't found them first. She reasoned that in that case, if the detectives had discovered that the witness of the crime had invested all her youth in sending letters to the house where the murder had been committed, she would become the main suspect.

She swallowed.

I have to find those papers anyway, she told herself with a buildup of anguish in her throat.

She inspected each room on the top floor one by one, and spent more time snooping around Lennard's bedroom, which had once belonged to Diana. With a

quick breath, she moved around the room, opening the closets and drawers. There was no trace of the letters. It was as if they had not existed or maybe they were locked up in some cabinet in the police station, she thought with growing annoyance. What if Lennard had destroyed them? That was another of the infinite possibilities. After a few minutes of unsuccessful search, she abandoned the top floor.

She was going straight for the outside when she ran into something she didn't expect. In the hall, near the front door, a rustic pedestal table held a fixed telephone. Sara had not even noticed its existence before, because she was too focused on not looking towards the bathroom area. The doctor perceived the corner of a paper that protruded from underneath the apparatus, and, as she approached, the corner of the paper became the edge of a letter that had been handwritten. Something flipped inside her. She reached out, lifted the phone and released the piece of paper, which came close to her face.

Only the inventor of the Rosetta Stone could understand the excitement of Sara when finding the paper hidden by Mike Lennard a few hours before. She read the first few lines of the first paragraph quietly.

Diana,

I'm writing from the bus. It is eight thirty in the afternoon and it is already dark, I think I must be on the verge of arriving. I am exhausted, but the long journey has been worth it, how beautiful this is! It is always said that the weather in England is based on rain, cold and fog (you should see my suitcase, it looks like an Eskimo's), but today makes a splendid day. It was very, very early when I left Ámber, and the train that took me to Madrid took more than five hours. I took advantage of the breakfast being served in the cafeteria...

It was her last letter!

She recognized with absolute clarity the words she had written to Diana the other day, sitting next to Porky on the bus that took her from the airport to Oxford. An isolated tear slid down her eyelid and ran down her cheek. She wiped it quickly with the back of her hand and thought. Now it was clear: Mike Lennard had received the letter (in fact, most likely he would have received all of them, without exception), so that from the beginning he knew when and how she had arrived in the city. That is to say, when he found her inside the Turf Tavern giving her a death scare it hadn't been a coincidence. He was really looking for her. Would he have any kind of obsession with her? Then she looked at the phone and felt a shiver.

From here he telephoned me the other day, hours before he was killed. He had my letter in his hands as he spoke to me.

She made an effort to remember the telephone conversation with Lennard, and concluded that what Mike wanted to confess to her so quickly was that he was in possession of her letters, and that consequently, they had never reached its real addressee, the former tenant of the dwelling.

A bittersweet moment.

Sara realized she was wrapped in a cold sweat. She put it in the back pocket of her trousers, it was the only memory of Diana she had found, and left the house trembling with three clear thoughts in her mind, each more disturbing than the last: the first was that her trip to Oxford had resulted in vain. The second, and more painful, that the letters never reached Diana and it was very possible that she would never see her again. And the third and at the same time more shocking, that at this point a photograph of her starred the panel of suspects at the city's police headquarters along with a bunch of letters with her name.

Alyssa Grifero exhaled the first puff of her cigarette and prepared herself for all the objections Jaime was likely to raise. Meanwhile, he shook his head in disbelief.

"This is crazy!" Cried Jaime. "Why would Sara be in danger?"

"Because, like me, she's fully involved in Mike Lennard's murder, only her face hasn't been on the news yet. That's something that certainly plays against her."

"Alyssa, none of this makes sense." It was the first time Jaime called her by name, a detail she appreciated. "It's impossible that Sara hurt someone."

"Neither did I, and yet here I am."

Alyssa had decided to go to the attack with all the conniving she was capable of.

"Jaime, I can help you find her and protect her. She needs you and you need me."

Jaime sighed.

"I've heard enough. I want you to leave my house right now, or else I'll call the police," he exclaimed again, this time raising his voice a little louder. He stood up and, as a threat, picked up the phone from the landline.

"I don't think you will. On the contrary, you will work with me in this house and we will form a good team."

Jaime shook his head incessantly.

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'm going to offer you something that no one else can give you and not all the money in the world can buy."

Jaime was puzzled for a second.

“What are you talking about?”

Alyssa's eyes glowed like two fireflies.

"I can deliver Shapiro to you on a silver platter. I have at my fingertips evidence that he is a liar and a manipulator. Help me, hide me in your house without asking too many questions, and you will make Ernesto Shapiro regret the day he decided to use you."

Jaime's legs were so shaken that he had to sit down again. When he gaped at her, Alyssa gave him a wry wink of complicity.

Chapter 12

"Seventh lesson, Morgan: we always fight to the end because victory doesn't taste the same if we don't take the risk of defeat. It's because we are aware of what we could stop having, which makes it much more exciting. We love the expression; hairs standing on the back of my neck, because playing close to the heat, near the fire makes us feel alive. That's why I helped my grandson with his naughty plan, and that's why I'm here right now with you, all locked up. You already got it out of me. Happy?"

Friday, November 10, 2006

Tallent watched the stars through the skylight of the bedroom ceiling and realized that for months, perhaps years, she had not paid attention to such a beautiful sight of nature. Lying on her bed with her legs outstretched, she felt exhausted. Warm sweat drenched her bare skin, and the brown hair of her bangs had plastered against her forehead. Turning her neck on the pillow, she stared at her companion's lethargy. Her breathing was comforting, moving her shoulder blades to the beat. That night they had made love until they could no more.

She smiled with all the happiness she thought she could experience, and then she fell into a state of semi-consciousness.

During a period of time that could range from a few seconds to several minutes, her mind traveled through different places in her youth, as in a succession of slides jumping from one to another abruptly. These projections showed, as in a dream, pictures that immortalized those moments that had remained embedded in her heart like glass shards that remain on the floor for days when a glass breaks. Brunet's gaze on the day they met behind the bar of the Red Lion formed the first vision. The same aura of peace she perceived around her appeared to her now. That magical first encounter gave way to Orbison's song, under the snow and with the witness *Minifalcon*, which accompanied what turned out to be the dance of her life. Then the first time their skin brushed beneath the comforter, which was when she felt the world had been created for her. The last image represented, somewhat imprecise, the ankle injury that she suffered that fateful last day. Tallent's trance culminated in a crash like the engines of an airplane about to take off.

Silence.

She opened her eyes quietly. The stars continued to glow in the closed night. She looked back to her left and found that everything had been real. Brunet slept next to her almost five years later. Just now that she was beginning to give up, to assume that she would never look at her vivacious eyes again. She grabbed the edge of the sheet and pulled it to her head; embarrassed she covered her stupid expression of uncontrollable joy.

Many hours before the best night of her life, Tallent was giving a loving kiss to her cat Vader. Then she took the violin case and the sports bag, and went out the door of her apartment to the local gym, of which she was a member. It was 10:30 in the morning, and the day seemed, at that moment, dark.

Sara Mora seemed to float as she left Mike Lennard's house with the last letter to Diana in the pocket of her jacket. With the indecision of someone who leaves prison after a long period between bars, she looked at both sides of the road and chose to walk in the direction in which she had come. She walked the

distance of a block, changed to the other sidewalk and went into a pharmacy, where she ordered a box of paroxetine. She had to show her prescription that had been signed by Dr. Encinas so that the pharmacist, a sulky black girl, agreed to sell it.

Getting the medication, she thought it was time to get her strength back, so she stopped at the first Costa Cafe she found, chose a turkey and cucumber sandwich with a mayo sauce, and devoured it as she looked out the window. The sky seemed apocalyptic, and it wouldn't be long before nightfall. When she finished eating, she swallowed the first paroxetine pill in the box. Then she resumed her march along the Cowley Road toward the center, which she reached in more than half an hour. She stood just in front of the Carfax tower (popularly known as the meeting point of the city), and asked in a tourist information booth for the nearest cybercafé. Luck smiled at her this time: around the corner, behind the tower, was the C-Work Cyber Cafe.

Just opening the door of the premises, its painful ambience imitated the vanguard of the film *Blade Runner*, she found a free station in the back. "As if someone were reserving it for me." She crossed the narrow room and sat down in the only empty chair. After obtaining Internet connection, she acceded to Skype, and logged in with her account, and verified it in the list of contacts that Jaime had not yet connected. The computer clock ticked 16:50. She waited.

When she left the gym, she was another woman. Tallent had spent almost an hour and a half beating her body. In addition to the forty-five minutes of the routine jogging session and some other series of weights, she had gone through the torture machines, which was what she called the leg machines, to strengthen her injured ankle. As soon as she stepped out the door, she took a deep breath of cold air and blew it out, causing a cloud of mist to come out of her mouth. Even though the day was gray, there was a comforting sense of well being.

She then entered a Tesco supermarket and bought biscuits and a bunch of bananas, two of which she ate on the road on the way to Exeter College. She spent the morning in the Exeter auditorium, rehearsing violin pieces with the Oxford Symphony Orchestra. She was surprised that it wasn't raining when, four hours later, she returned to the street with her umbrella with her. She made a new stop to fill her stomach and then waited standing by the bus stop in front of the Ashmolean Museum. The first had arrived, though Mark, Jennifer, and the rest of the band were soon to come.

At one-thirty they started the song with a funny rendition of Glenn Miller's *In the mood*. Mark, the orchestra's leading trumpeter, was a good friend of one of the town's representatives. Three weeks earlier, he had asked her as a favor to bring together the youngest boys in the group to form a street band of about ten

members. The reason was none other than the autumn music festival that the representative in question had been determined to organize and promote, as he was a fan of outdoor concerts. Mark thought the idea was amusing, and the fact of gaining an extra pay for a job that seemed to him pleasurable ended up convincing him. The band simply had to dedicate two hours a day, from Monday to Friday, to walk the streets of the city interpreting some classical music. Each participating orchestra was assigned an area of the city, and Mark and Tallent had been awarded the Cowley neighborhood.

The mechanism that moves the wings of the butterfly was about to start functioning.

About two forty-five in the afternoon, when the band had been wandering around Cowley Road for an hour, they passed a sealed building in the doorway in which a patrol car had been parked. This impressed Tallent so much that she almost made a few mistakes on a couple notes. Frowning, and still moving the bow of the violin to the beat of the music, she fixed her gaze on the facade of the house. At that moment she detected from the corner of her eye the figure of a woman who, according to the silhouette of her body, was young. She was in the street, with her back to the road and in an unnatural posture. She seemed tense, and there was something in her that caused, now for her to make a mistake on a note.

Nobody noticed the mistake (or at least no one showed it), and when the band passed the house, two very serious men came out the front door with the determination to cross the street. Would they be the patrol car cops? Everyone asked the same question with the exception of the young violinist, who kept thinking about the same issue.

A few blocks later, when the song was over and they were getting ready to start the next one, Tallent explained to her companions that she was feeling bad and that she needed to stop for a while. She persuaded them to continue without her. Mark nodded without asking any questions and the band continued to interpret the music while Tallent, who felt like a miserable liar to her friends, went walking back on the road to Cowley Road. In the next few minutes she crossed where the police car had been, which had already left the sealed building, and reached the point where she had seen the woman hiding behind the corner. An imaginary stone fell on Tallent when she saw no trace of her at 219 Cowley Road.

She shrugged and, cursing her stupidity, ran out to find the band. When she found it a few blocks later, she put on her best innocent face to explain that she had only suffered a slight dizziness and was already much better, so she resumed

walking with her companions. Tallent's violin rang again in the streets of southeast Oxford.

A few minutes later the first drops of what was going to be a good downpour began to fall, forcing the band representing the Oxford Symphony Orchestra to suspend their music tour.

The butterfly fluttered its wings.

Tallent, Mark, and the other members stored their respective instruments and got on a bus that would take them to the center of the city, specifically to the historical Carfax tower. It was about five o'clock in the afternoon.

Jaime Vergara felt reborn after the hot shower he had just enjoyed. As soon as he left the bathroom, he was seized by a comforting soul music that, he was sure, had never before sounded in his apartment. Black music simply wasn't cataloged. He looked about him with a peculiar detachment from one who had just awakened from a long nap. The floor was dark, except for the whitish light that indirectly spread from the monitor of his computer, placed on a desk inside the bedroom. Alyssa was sitting in front of the screen, so that the artificial glow illuminated part of her face. Jaime stared for a few seconds and wondered if the picture disturbed him or, on the contrary, amazed him.

"Do you mind if I use your computer for a while?" She had asked, just before he locked herself in the bathroom. He had nodded. Total, once accepted that he was giving asylum to a fugitive persecuted by the law, what more could he do than for her to use his things? "You can use it, as long as it's not for illegal purposes," he had jokingly replied, though his throat croaked as soon as he uttered the sentence. No matter how convincing the young woman might appear in her story, in the end Jaime did not believe that she had the power to present evidence against Ernesto Shapiro. *How could she help me with that? It is totally impossible. By God, she's just a child!*

But there was something about her, a kind of gleam in her gaze that suggested sincerity and determination. She was a peculiar human being, of that there was no doubt, but from there to being a criminal that was a long stretch. And considering that he was in a dead end, it was worth taking the risk and to try his luck. In addition, they had something in common: they both had problems with the law. So yes, she could use his computer, she could sleep on his sofa, and she could be his friend.

"Do you like Nina Simone? I'll take it off if you want," she said from the darkness when she realized that Jaime was watching her.

He watched her with concern and looked at her disheveled hair, which gleamed by the computer. Ignoring the comment, he entered the bedroom,

passed behind Alyssa being careful not to touch her and looked for a shirt and a sweater in the closet. Then he turned to her.

"I'm going down to the grocery store to get some food. Do you want anything special?"

The young woman turned towards him and her face got lost in the backlight.

"You're very kind, but with a little cheese, that's enough. And, of course, I'll pay you for everything when this is over," she said in a low tone that seemed to Vergara close to shame.

"I'll write down the cheese then. We will have a fondue dinner."

"Bye!"

"By the way, I like that Nina Simone," he added from the front door.

She gave him a pleased smile.

It was 8:15 pm when Jaime walked out the door of his house leaving Alyssa entertained with his computer. He had a fleeting sense that something was missing. He shook his head and climbed into the elevator with the cheese fondue in his mind.

Grifero sailed aimlessly on the Internet when the bathroom door had opened, letting out a torrent of warm light and then the corresponding cloud of mist. Jaime had come out the door, rubbing his hair with a towel, and he had planted himself in the illuminated area like an island in the darkness of the floor. He was wearing only jeans. Then they both had stared in silence, and Alyssa couldn't help but notice that his abdominals were still wet. He had said something about the musical thread, and she had held her breath as he approached the room and passed, still bare-chested, inches behind her back. After feeling like a complete idiot when he told her about making the purchase for dinner, she had watched her new roommate walk out the door. She was alone again.

She turned her focus back to the computer. She immediately connected to her Skype account and started a videoconference with Jasper, who was also connected. She updated the events at Oxford in less than fifteen minutes. Although Jasper was shocked to discover that Alyssa had become a hypothetical criminal in the eyes of the rest of the country, there were other things the girl wanted to do before Jaime returned from the supermarket.

When she closed her Skype account and opened her mail, her eyes sparkled. It took less than five minutes to write a private message:

Dorian, I need you to do me a favor. Write this name: Ernesto Shapiro. Find out everything you can about him. I have the hunch that he's up to his neck in shit, so it won't cost you a lot of work. I owe you one. And you know, no trace or names, all anonymous.

She pushed the send button and waited. Dorian was online at the time, because he immediately replied:

Easy as pie. Anything else?

Grifero was waiting for that question. She moistened her lips as she weighed the answer:

Yes, there is one more thing, and this is a tad exceptional. You'll have to trust me...

Alyssa's hands trembled as she finished writing the last message and sent it. She then erased the cookies from the computer's memory and turned it off. She undressed and slipped into the shower.

It's a new dawn, It's a new day, It's a new life for me... and I'm feeling good, Nina Simone chanted through the speakers as Alyssa felt the warm water fall on her body.

The computer's digital clock ticked 4:59 pm, which meant that the peninsula was about to hit six in the afternoon. If Dr. Encinas had conveyed his message correctly, Jaime would connect in a few seconds, it may have been minutes, as she had always considered him a bit unpunctual, and she would finally talk to someone she trusted about everything that was happening to her. She would come into contact with her world again.

The clock digits moved to 5 pm. Sara held an emotional shudder that made her hold her breath. She had been drumming the desk with her fingernails for some minutes. She couldn't remember exactly, but she would have sworn she'd never been so eager to talk to someone through a damn computer. Had Jaime become her best friend, even though in the last few years they'd only had a few minutes together? The question answered itself when, for some eternal minutes, Sara kept her eyes still on the cloud that accompanied the user Jaime Vergara on the screen. It should be painted green, which would mean that her friend was connected and could start talking. But it was already 5:08 pm and the cloud was still white. Sara's fingernails stopped drumming the desk. With increasing discouragement, she marked quarter past five as a cut-off time. If he had not connected at that time, she would understand that Jaime had decided to move on and not connect. In that case she would no longer consider him her best friend anymore, but a selfish bastard in her long list of selfish shit friends.

She waited until five-twenty, but at that precise moment, more than five thousand miles away; the wings of the butterfly were fluttering at number 53

Orense in Madrid. Sara turned off the computer, clenched her teeth in a gesture of rage, and went out the door of the Internet café.

She was so absorbed in her own misery that she didn't realize that it was raining hard until she reached the foot of the Carfax tower, where she had to catch the bus back home. Then her eyes fixed on the group, for something had to be seen if her eyelids were open, there a group of young English men and women who said farewell under the protection of their respective umbrellas. Then she looked more closely at them. The first thing she thought was that, perhaps, based on the instruments covers that they carried, it was the band that had passed by while she was hiding from the two police officers next to the liquor store. The second thing that stuck in her head struck her with such a force so enormous that she could not help but moan.

It can't be true... it can't be true.

One of the members of the band was a young girl with short hair and pale skin that carried the casing of what appeared to be a violin. The girl was saying goodbye to her companions with a nice hand gesture and then she continued her way under a green pistachio umbrella.

Sara was astonished to see Diana walking down Cornmarket Street under the magical glow of street lamps against the rain. It was almost night.

Diane Tallent walked with raindrops hitting her umbrella to Walton Street and entered her apartment. She slipped off her soaked boots, undressed, and enjoyed a shower. When she left the bathroom, she wrapped herself in her bathrobe and headed for the kitchen with her hair still wet. She cut a generous piece of homemade cheesecake that waited for her in the refrigerator and completed it with a layer of raspberry jam that she layered over. Then she sat down by the window and watched the storm as she savored the cake.

There was a knock at the door, a fact that startled her; she rarely received a visit. As soon as it opened, a light flashed inside. She put her palm to her mouth in an intuitive gesture and felt her knees flutter.

"Diana. You didn't answer any of my letters," the visitor said in a neutral tone that seemed to feign resentment.

Tallent's eyes widened so that they seemed to explode. There was only one person on the face of the earth who called her like that.

"I... I moved," was the only sensible thing she was able to articulate.

"I know you moved, otherwise I wouldn't be here, would I?"

The violinist shrugged and her skin flushed.

"Well, are you going to let me in or not?"

"What... what are you doing here?"

"Well, you're the only person I know in this damn town, and since you didn't read any of my letters, I wondered if you wanted us to catch up."

A stupid grin of perplexity flashed across Diana's face before she let the visitor in and offered her a piece of cake.

"Do you prefer coffee or tea?" She suggested as she extracted two cups from the cupboard.

"Coffee with milk, you know that."

Diana smiled even harder. Then she set to work.

"I'm sorry I moved without saying anything," she said, still looking at the coffee pot. "I wanted a little change in my life and I didn't imagine you would write to me. How did it go?"

Though she had her back to her, she felt Sara watching her with expressionless eyes. *Those eyes.*

"Diana, I thought something had happened to you," the visitor finally said. "When I saw that you didn't respond to the letters, I thought I would never see you again, or that you might have decided to leave me."

She paused heavily.

"Did you decide to move on?"

The British girl gave a furious smile.

"Don't even dream it," she said.

"Still, I continued to write letters to you regularly."

Tallent set the coffee and tea on the table, and looked at Sara with something that resembled fear in her pupils.

"How many... how many did you write to me?"

"A lot, a long time ago I lost count." Sara drew the last letter from the inside of her jacket and set it down on the wooden table. "This is the last one, a few days ago. I found it in your... well, in your old house."

"Does Mike still live there?"

"You mean Lennard? He lived, but..." She paused as if she were looking for some good way to announce a tragedy. "He was just murdered"

"OMG."

The hostess swallowed and sat at the table next to her old friend.

"Why would they want to kill Mike?" She asked, her voice trembling. "He was a phenomenal guy."

Sara looked up and raised her voice, unaware that she was taking on a defiant tone.

"I don't know. Did you know him?"

"We met a couple of days when we went out in a group to have a beer, a long time ago. It turned out that his tango teacher studied solfeo with me, and

introduced me. When I wanted to change apartments, he told me he was interested, so I talked to him and he stayed with the Cowley Road rental." Suddenly, a spark flashed in Diana's head. She paused briefly to visualize it, then came to a conclusion: "Wait a minute, that's why the house was sealed!"

"Yes, the police are investigating. They even interrogated me and everything."

Diana's face darkened slightly.

"They questioned you?" The British wanted to know. "And why were you there?"

"Because I wanted to see you."

The answer rang in Diana's eardrums like a hammer striking an anvil.

"Aren't you going to read the letter?" Sara insisted, pointing at the paper with a gray, neutral gesture. Her hostile tone of voice from the beginning had subsided, though she was still on alert.

Diana nodded as if obeying the command of an older brother, and she thought something had changed in her the whole time they had not seen each other. She took the paper with respect and read it. As she progressed in the paragraphs, an increasingly thick layer of teardrops were accumulating on her eyelids. She had to swallow a couple of times before continuing the conversation.

"What you're saying here." She lifted the paper up. Her hand trembled, "Is it true? Was he really about to rape you?"

Then Sara brought her chair closer to her friend, took her hand in an act of reconciliation, and explained even the smallest detail of her life in Ámber: the harsh beginnings in the clinic next to a bastard doctor surnamed Salas, the stranger case of his daughter, Verónica Salas, and the conspiracy by which she concluded everything with the death of Verónica's husband. Nor did she omit the attack at her own home by an amputee son of a bitch (who turned out to be Mike Lennard's twin brother), as well as her trip to Oxford and the crime of Cowley Road. All in all, she'd been talking for forty minutes without a break.

When Sara finished her story, Diana was so dazed that she stood up and started toward the living room with her hands over her face. She was shaking.

Sara followed.

"I'm so sorry" sobbed the violinist. "Shit, I wish I'd never moved, so I could have read your letters."

"I would have gladly answered them! You needed me and I disappeared from your life like a miserable person."

They stood facing each other like a pair of chess figures of opposite colors.

At that moment, Sara smiled with glee, and Diana knew that every second thereafter would be a serious candidate to become an unforgettable moment. "Okay, I've had enough," seemed to suggest Sara's mischievous smile.

She turned to Diana until they were separated by a few centimeters. Gently she opened her bathrobe, put one hand on her breast and stroked, rather brushed, her left collarbone tenderly.

The British allowed herself to be touched, absolutely amazed and expectant. Their gazes crossed.

As she caressed her, Sara reached up to kiss the corner of her mouth.

Time stopped.

"Brunet," Tallent blurted, her eyes nearly closed.

"You're the reason I came back to this damn town, mate," Sara whispered in her ear, and kissed her again.

"How I've missed you," Diana said with a groan, then jumped astride Sara. They kissed with desire.

Vader watched from the kitchen table as he lapped at the tea, which had gone cold from his owner.

The fluttering of the butterfly had just caused a hurricane.

Chapter 13

"May I ask you something, Doctor?"

"You're very questioning this morning. Shoot, Morgan."

"Do you believe in God?"

"The truth is that in my long career as a surgeon I have discovered that the walls of the hospitals hear prayers more sincere than those of the churches. This leads me to think about airports."

"What about airports?"

"Which undoubtedly witness more sincere hugs than wedding altars. This has been the eighth lesson. I hope you're taking notes, Morgan."

"I get it."

"And my answer is that I wish."

"Sorry?"

"I wish I were a true believer. I envy those guys."

Saturday, November 11, 2006

A bank of dense clouds, which had magically materialized in the blue sky, gradually passed in front of the sun, which caused the outside temperature to drop a few degrees and that the video room at the Oxford Police Station stayed in the shadows. Horner didn't seem to notice. As he meditated, he tapped his index finger against the edge of the videotape. On the other side of the door, the usual hustle and bustle in the corridors of an ever-fluorescent police station didn't seem to alter his relaxed introspection.

Thomas Carroll opened the door with a bang just as Alfred sat down to push the tape into the VHS player. He looked worried.

"Newbies," was the blonde's welcoming announcement. The only thing that he carried was a plastic cup containing the disgusting hot drink that some called coffee from the machine.

Alfred frowned as he did that time, when Ania knocked on his door just as the decisive tennis match for the 2005 Wimbledon final between Andy Roddick and Roger Federer was about to be played.

"Wait a minute, Tom. Let's look at this, and then tell me what it is," he said, and without waiting for a response, he slipped the tape in and pressed play.

Carroll snorted, frowning and sat down next to his companion in a padded chair between the center table and the audio-visual equipment. The darkness almost invaded the room. He took a sip of the bitter coffee and focused his attention on the screen.

The recording began with a static take as it could not be otherwise, since it had been filmed by a fixed camera on the ceiling of the Ahmets that focused directly on the door of the establishment, so that it encompassed the corner of the counter, the entrance of the whole building, and, behind the door glass, also part of the street. The quality of the image was, under an optimistic prism, mediocre, but at least it had color. It contained no audio.

"We're not going to see much with this shot," Thomas said, still staring at the monitor. By the tone used, it was clear to Alfred that Tom wanted to finish the film session so he could have all his attention and be able to tell him the news about the case.

"Well, we'll see."

According to the digital clock that had been superimposed on a corner of the recording, the camera had begun filming at 10:30 in the morning, which was probably the opening hour of the venue. Horner picked up the remote control and pressed the super fast forward button until the clock struck at 9:00 p.m., and from there he slowed down to X2, so that they could sense if there was some kind of suspicious movement without the need to lose too much time. They spent

more than fifteen minutes watching a fast-paced film whose only argument was the continuous rattling of citizens (most of them young immigrants) entering the premises, eating something in record time, and marching again. By 21:30, the Ahmets was already buzzing with excitement. When the clock in the picture was 21 hours, 37 minutes and 15 seconds, Alfred pressed the pause button.

"A very rough looking girl," he said aloud as the frozen image focused on a hooded, soaked figure coming through the door. She had on essentially dark tones, and although there was no corner of her face from the sharp angle of the lens, it was evident that she was a young woman: she was to be no more than five feet, and her legs were slender and in shape. Horner captured the image mentally and kept it along with his most irrational memories.

He pressed the button again and the image ran again, this time at normal speed.

"She ordered a kebab for take out. And she seems uneasy." Horner informed everything in a rough voice that was drawing his attention.

"What the fuck," cried the blond more to himself. "Who would be doing that, who thinks of ordering takeout food? Wouldn't it be better to use that money in an umbrella? Or in a taxi to take her home?"

"Strange, isn't it?" Alfred said, in a sarcastic tone, he turned his head to Carroll for the first time as if in a statement of "I told you so."

Thomas nodded shyly, as if he had interpreted the gesture perfectly and decided to let it pass.

"She's eating it on the street, by the door," Horner said, pointing to the screen and showing more excitement as the hooded woman left the room with her dinner and began to gobble it up right there under the canopy that protected the facade of rain. "Wait! She has thrown it in the bin!"

"Why did she do that? She had more than half left. How bad is that fucking Turkish food?"

What they saw next prevented Carroll from finishing the sentence and caused both cops to lean toward the screen with extreme intrigue.

"She ran out onto the road!" The semi albino added with more excitement in his voice than he intended to show.

"To the number 219."

They looked like two kids who just found a treasure map.

"It's her," Carroll murmured.

Alfred's gaze was lost, as if behind the monitor was the answer to the riddle.

"It's evident that girl was the one who killed Lennard!" insisted the blond, who now saw it all too clearly. "She came to that point on the street on purpose, and she didn't mind the damn rain a bit, because her goal was to find Lennard."

He was repeating his hypothesis as he moved his index finger on an imaginary keyboard. "So she stopped in front of the house and decided to get a kebab while she waited for her prey to arrive. As soon as she saw Lennard appear, she tossed the food and lunged at him. She struck him in the bathroom, which is the nearest room to the entrance, and before the neighbors arrived she carved his chest with a pointed tool." He gestured at the screen with his arms outstretched and sentenced with satisfaction, with the passion of a man who had just had a revelation, "I think we're dealing with Mike Lennard's killer."

Horner nodded as he reviewed his colleague's theory for cracks. Meanwhile, the tape continued to reproduce images that didn't contain any interest.

"It makes sense," he said. "I wouldn't go so far as you, but in any case, that hooded girl must have had a lot to do with the incident, there's no doubt about it."

Carroll looked at him questioningly.

"Fred, let's be clear."

"What do you mean?"

Thomas sat up and began to wander aimlessly through the dark room. He tossed the coffee cup into the wastebasket before adding tension to the conversation.

"You're bent on blaming Sara Mora, aren't you?" His voice had increased.

"No, that's not it," Horner said, gesturing with his hand to reduce his companion's tenseness.

Carroll turned on the light, causing Horner's eyes to squint. When he became accustomed to the new lighting, he noticed that Thomas's gaping grimace was tenser than he imagined.

"See Fred, let's think objectively," the blond said with his arms in a pitcher. "We know from Interpol that there is a girl named Alyssa Grifero, with a troubled past who has reasons to take revenge on the victim's family. We also know that on the day of Mike Lennard's death she flew to Oxford, did something we still don't know and returned to Madrid the next morning. We now have evidence that a young woman with the appearance of an expert killer was on the scene of the crime a few minutes before it happened. *Expert killer*. Horner understood that Thomas had chosen those two words for the purpose of refreshing the underscored on the napkin the other afternoon.

Carroll paused to stand beside him and concluded:

"I think it's time to set aside Mora and focus on this new goal."

Horner wondered if his partner was really upset with him. Or maybe it all came from a problem of self-esteem, since it had been a long time since his luck had been smiling when trying to follow a clue. Should he talk to him about it?

He missed having some good times with a couple beers together. He decided that as soon as they closed the case, he would organize a barbecue with him on the esplanade next to his boat, on the bank of the river. Then he stashed the idea and returned to the million-dollar affair.

"What did you say the suspect from Interpol's name is?"

"Grifero," said Carroll. "Apparently she's an 18-year-old girl."

Alfred had acid reflux and was thoughtful, as if he were remembering the details of a recurring nightmare. Then he spoke:

"Tom, listen to me. Sadly, this recording does not provide any extra proof to the case, except that it was the work of a woman, which we already assumed." At that instant, a new idea landed in his head as if by magic: "It may even be that both women, Mora and the hooded girl, were associated with the goal of sending Lennard to the other side. After all, the two come from the same town. Maybe they know each other."

Carroll leaned on one of the chairs and gave a long sigh.

"Fred, it's time I told you what I came to tell you."

Horner sensed a special glow in the eyes of his half albino friend, which gave him renewed curiosity.

"I called the phone company this morning to investigate calls from Mike Lennard's landline phone the day of the homicide," he explained. "Well, a few minutes ago I got the call back with the answer."

"And?" Alfred knew with certainty that Tom was about to give him another piece of the puzzle.

"Only a call was made that day. At 7:32 p.m. The destination was a mobile number of Spanish origin."

At that, Alfred dropped his back against the back of his chair and began massaging his eyelids with his fingers.

"Well, that means the poor little man was in direct contact with one of our two favorite Spaniards," he said with sudden self-assurance. "I'll bet it was Mora."

Thomas looked out the window and was surprised to see that it was night. Then he looked at his wristwatch, which marked seven-forty. At that moment he realized how tired he was.

"I'll make a call to Telefonica Spain, the owners of the line first thing in the morning," he promised, with a hint of a boss rather than a companion. "Then we'll know who Mike Lennard called."

Horner nodded in a weary sign of agreement. He rubbed his face and yawned. When he looked into his colleague's eyes, he had the feeling that he was watching him with brotherly concern.

"How've you been?" Thomas asked, confirming Horner's suspicion.

"Don't worry, I'm better," he replied as naturally as he could. "Last night I fell asleep on the sofa watching a chapter of House, and I slept for a stretch. When I woke up it was time to eat."

Carroll nodded at each sentence with a frown that was too puckered not to be worried. Horner caught him glancing at the bandage that still covered his forearm, but neither of them said anything about it.

"I hadn't even set the alarm," he continued, taking a carefree stance that didn't fit him. "Bah, I think I deserve half a day's rest after the many hours I've spent on my days off, don't you think?"

"Oh, Freddy, Freddy... you don't have to give me any explanations. I'm not your superior."

Thomas gave Horner an affectionate peck on the cheek that, according to all the codes of masculine friendship, meant reconciliation. Then he sat up, ending the conversation.

"I think that's enough for today," he said, looking at the total darkness outside. "Tomorrow we will continue with this damn puzzle."

Horner stretched the muscles of his body, picked up his jacket, and followed his companion toward the exit.

"Come on, I'll take you home." He offered as they both walked out the door.

A gust of icy wind assaulted Horner as soon as he stepped on the first pavers on the sidewalk. He grimaced not only at the cold, but also at the sinister wall that was forming between Lennard's death and his own person. In front of him, in the shadows that invaded the pavement of St. Aldate's, a new stone awaited him that would enlarge his sinister wall. Someone had committed an unfortunate crime in front of the police station, in front of their very noses. The two companions approached the Alfa Romeo without giving credit to what they were seeing. In large, dripping letters, painted with a red spray and covering the entire side of the body, the following threat was read with absolute clarity:

WHO PERSECUTES WHOM? WATCH YOUR BACK

"It seems like someone doesn't like you working on this case," was Carroll's lapidary conclusion.

Horner swallowed repeatedly.

That afternoon, Diana was making coffee and toast while Sara lay naked and disheveled between the sheets. The neurosurgeon sat up and lit a cigarette from a pack that she had found abandoned in the nightstand drawer (she hadn't smoked since the rainy afternoon when she discovered the lie of that fucking Dr. Salas). She stared at Diana through the open door. She wore only a T-shirt that was her pajama because it fit quite big. Sara had never touched a skin as soft as Diana's, and in her opinion she had a thin waist that made her look impressive. And she

envied her ass. Not that hers wasn't great, but Diana's seemed a ten: small but firm. Surely she worked out with a certain routine, she thought.

Diana's mother was from Wales, while her father came from France. Sara knew that both had died in an accident when she was a child. The mother's British genes were appreciated in almost every trait: the bluish-green color of the eyes, the freckles that peppered her pale skin, and of course the peculiar taste of tea with a splash of milk. The father had contributed a sleek, elegant hair that gave Diana a very particular look. She had enormous eyes that she hadn't inherited from any of her parents.

She realized that she was in love with her.

A beautiful black cat with large green irises like those of his mistress appeared in the corridor, leaping over Sara's knees, interrupting her analysis.

Diana returned with a tray containing a cup of coffee, an orange juice and a plate with several toast with butter and jam. She set the tray on the table, climbed back into bed, and kissed her.

They laughed without reason, as would two teenage girls who have kissed a boy for the first time.

"I have to tell you, Brunet. You're as good in bed as I remembered."

Sara blushed and stretched her body for a toast.

"Well, it's a relief," she said with her mouth full of the first bite. "But please." She paused to swallow. "Don't call me Brunet."

Diana cocked her head.

"Why not?"

"It's been four years since then, now I'm a completely different woman. Brunet no longer exists," she said, so convincingly that anyone would have said that she had rehearsed it in front of the mirror. "Besides, it brings back bad memories."

"Bad memories?"

"Yeah, specifically the last day we saw each other, you know, when you got hurt." Sara's expression changed suddenly, as if she had just remembered something. "By the way, how's your ankle?"

"The truth is they had to operate," Diana replied, unable to help glancing at her foot.

"And it doesn't hurt anymore?"

"It hurt every day," she said. "Until yesterday."

The two pairs of eyes crossed with tenderness.

"Diana." She paused to ask the question, "Have you been with anyone in these past four years?"

Before she nodded, Diana hesitated for a moment.

"Once, a long time ago."

"Is the person already forgotten? I don't want to stick my nose where it's not wanted."

"She's past, she's more than forgotten."

"Woman?"

Sara, who was about to speak out on a subject from which she could finally speak freely, felt like an invalid who has regained the ability to walk.

"Yes, it was a woman," Diana said curtly. Then came her turn: "And you?"

Sara answered immediately.

"I haven't."

Diana's face clearly stated that she expected more information than a simple monosyllable.

"I did not tell anyone I'm..."

"Lesbian?"

Sara nodded, half guilty and half embarrassed.

"I missed you so much, Diana. I don't know if I'm a lesbian, bisexual, or just a weirdo, but I just didn't want to be with anyone if it wasn't with you."

By the sudden transformation in Diana's gesture, Sara knew that her heart had just softened.

"You missed me so much that you kept writing me letters even though I didn't answer any of them." Diana confirmed, more than she asked, staring at the sheets. Neither woman was laughing anymore. The atmosphere was vitiated.

They remained silent for a moment.

"I intend to reward you for each of the unread and unanswered letters."

She put a hand between Sara's back and the mattress, and rolled her to her side of the bed. She kissed her again.

"I want you to play something of Orbison, as in the old days," Sara pleaded, her eyes almost smoldering. Her breasts were swelling.

"In a little while."

She leaned over her with such force that Sara gasped for a moment. They looked at each other with laughter. Then Sara settled in and kissed Diana fiercely.

Clutching the doorknob with his sweat-soaked hand, he paused to wonder what the hell he was doing. Alyssa was still placidly asleep on the couch in the living room when Jaime had gone to run his seven routine miles. He realized that he had not assimilated the idea of housing in his singles flat an unmarried girl wanted for murder. At that moment he understood that he was a stranger in his own house, so much as to feel uncomfortable as he walked through the door. It was not the first time that Jaime had thought to telephone the police and end all

that mess. He unplugged his music player, slid the earphones from his ears, and opened the door with his breath still weary from the effort.

As soon as he entered, an endearing picture captivated him. The beauty and peace of the scene were combined with the aroma of freshly made stew to make life seem simple and fundamentally good for a moment. Alyssa was standing in front of the kitchen fire, standing, still, humming something gracefully as she cooked less than four feet from him. The windows of the room were wide open, and both the autumnal sunbeams and the singing of some birds had endowed the room, despite being in the center of Paseo de la Castellana, with a bucolic atmosphere. Jaime, aware that she had not noticed his arrival, paused in shock at the calmness of her pose. She seemed so... so lonely... and, at the same time, so deeply connected with what she was doing. It was as if she hadn't a care about her situation at all, and was just enjoying a period of well being.

Putting him unawares, without any pre-warning signal of the feeling, the view softened his heart.

Holy cow, was he suffering some kind of collapse from the effort he made? Feeling dizzy, he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and leaned against the wall for balance.

Maybe it was that subtle movement in the outline of her field of vision, or perhaps the sound of his choked breath, which caused her to turn and stop humming. She looked at him and smiled slightly, but said nothing. He had the particular impression that Alyssa was trying to compensate him, with kind gestures and food, the favor he was doing. He stood next to her in front of the counter and watched the fabulous appearance of the chicken pieces submerged in the vegetable broth. She put her right hand on his back and gave him a sincere *good morning* that Jaime felt with glory.

Jaime studied her face as she stirred the stew in the pan. He was touched. It was as if the beauty of the morning reflected in her expression, fresh and without makeup, and as if she enjoyed it.

After a few seconds, Jaime was not sure how many had passed, she asked him while she was still staring at the pan.

"Did you want to tell me something?"

"No, nothing specifically. It just looks spectacular."

"I'm glad. Are you hungry?"

"I'm starving."

They didn't speak again until Jaime came out of the bathroom after a revitalizing quick shower and they met again in the living room. Alyssa was setting the table.

"I bought a bottle of wine yesterday," he said.

“Great! I'll open it.”

Alyssa pulled out a bottle of Rueda from the refrigerator and a corkscrew from the cupboard that contained the cutlery.

“What?” She looked at him curiously and blushing, with the corkscrew tip about to pierce the bottle.

“Nothing,” he said. “I was just looking.”

Alyssa pushed hard, and the metal spiral pierced the cork. She looked at him again.

“I'll get the napkins,” said Jaime, who felt the need to do something.

He returned to the kitchen and opened the drawer where the napkins were, but before he took them out he stopped and looked at the stove. With a clouded look, he imagined her humming in her sweet voice and dancing lightly as she stirred the vegetable broth with the wooden spoon. An intense, lacerating feeling seized him. He struggled to identify the causes of his pain. He wondered why a young woman so bright, charming, and attractive had ended up hiding in the apartment of a stranger, cooking for him and behaving as if she had known him all his life. Was she really an angel that someone had taken from clay to save him, or on the contrary, was she a wolf in sheep's skin that tried to play it in the same way that Ernesto Shapiro did? A shiver ran through his body as he pondered such a possibility.

He returned to the living room with a pair of napkins. Alyssa was waiting for him at the table ready to start eating. Jaime smiled. The scent of the chicken in beer sauce had penetrated his olfactory sensors, interrupting any opaque thinking.

“The food is served!” She exclaimed brightly as she pointed to her masterpiece with her arms outstretched.

By eight, Alfred Horner had already brought Carroll to his door and was already home. He had dropped the keys on the small table by the door of his apartment, and for the hundredth time he had seen his cracked plasma TV and his racks of bookshelves. The living room was an absolute mess.

After digging in the fridge and thawing a couple of chicken thighs, he undressed and got in the shower. While lathering, Horner's restless mind skated around a series of tricky questions: *Was he really in danger? Whoever came into his apartment the other night and smashed up the room, was it the same person as the coward's message that had been left on the side of his car? How did the hooded woman fit into all this? What actually happened in that town of northern Spain? Should he invite Thomas to a beer to close any open wounds? What was Lennard's relationship with Sara Mora? And what was Sara Mora's relationship with this Diana? Who killed Mike Lennard? And why?*

He felt an imperative need to label and revise, to collect the huge amount of information and possibilities that crowded into his mind and order it in a logical way. A foamy stream slipped from the tattoo of his right bicep and reached the scratches that still remained on his forearm. The stinging interrupted his thoughts. After a brief, muffled moan, he looked around and was aware that he had been in the shower far too long. Now he was a clean man with the same muddled thoughts of a little while ago.

As he dried himself, his mind spontaneously traveled to a question that was on the edge of his mind and he cursed himself for having almost ignored it.

What really happened in that town in the north of Spain?

Mora was from there, and also Lennard's brother, whom they had found dead at the foot of a cliff. In addition, the Spanish police claimed that the girl with whom the suicide victim had lived with had traveled to Oxford on the same day of the death of Lennard (the young woman from the videotape?) Suddenly he felt an uncontrollable curiosity to investigate it. Although the discovery of a new door in the labyrinth did not reveal the exit of this one, Horner felt as if he had advanced a great section of the tortuous road in which the case had become.

Once dressed in comfortable clothes, he poured himself a glass of Four Roses with ice and settled himself on his leather sofa. The letters Mora had addressed to Diana were scattered all over the table. He took one at random and read it. When he finished, he filled the empty glass and read another letter. His now drunken consciousness had been caught up in the same two words:

Sara Mora.

SARA MORA.

S-A-R-A-M-O-R-A.

Four whiskeys later, he threw the letter he had in his hands at that moment on the floor, and went blank, staring again at the chaotic shelves. After some incalculable minutes when nothing happened, someone knocked on the door. Behind him he recognized Ania with difficulty. The stunning and sensual Ania. He took her by the hand and led her to the bedroom.

The chicken thighs were going to rot on the kitchen counter.

Chapter 14

"How long have we been in this strange conversation, Salas?"

"I have no idea. I acknowledge that I've lost track of time."

"We should go back inside, it must be lunchtime already."

"Morgan, have you ever thought of committing a madness?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know, anything: moving abroad, parachuting, or in my case, I might escape from this center..."

"It's dangerous to leave the comfort zone, doctor."

"Dangerous, eh? Tell me: how long ago did you leave the comfort zone with your wife and children?"

"Ok, you've caught me off guard. I wouldn't know how to answer."

"I suppose. The fact is that if you think the adventure is dangerous, you shouldn't border the path of the routine: it is lethal. This has been the ninth lesson, I think."

Sunday 12 and Monday 13 November 2006

A few minutes before the events in Ámber's psychiatric center changed completely, Rafael Salas was weighing the idea of moving the bishop or, on the contrary, moving one of his pawns to take out the black pawn of Cándido the Tertullian. He opted for the second option, and, after executing the movement, looked up as if to say to his opponent, *your turn*.

"Ainge, Maxwell, Bird, McHale, Parish," whispered Cándido in a whisper, his pupils pinned to his figures. "Substitutes: Archibald, Buckner, Henderson, Carr and Robey."

Salas heaved a sigh that represented how tired he was of always hearing the same names.

One of the youngest nurses in the center, one who combed his hair so slick that the top of his head looked like the black billiard ball, stopped short as he passed the table where the game of chess was playing. That morning his shift was to work the lounge room.

"What is he reciting this time?" He asked Salas with a funny grimace, referring to the Tertullian.

"The Boston Celtics roster sometime in the 1980s," he said dryly, looking up at the boy with his chin resting on his hand, as if boredom had caused the weight of his skull to be heavier.

The young nurse let out a smile and gave Salas a sympathetic look.

Suddenly something happened in the room that made the boy with the shiny hair tighten the muscles of his face. When Salas turned his head to where he looked, he found that the activity of the whole room had stopped to observe with some terror the newcomer. The old neurosurgeon had not seen this man before, for he knew with certainty that if he had, he would remember such a grotesque description.

A chimpanzee. That was the image Rafael formed in his mind as he focused his interest on the visitor. It was the perfect example to demonstrate the well-known hypothesis in which Charles Darwin's theory of evolution is based: man comes from the ape (if that was really a man). Even stooping as he moved, Salas could tell that his real height was no more than five foot 2 inches. He did not walk, but dragged his feet in a grotesque gesture that, had it not been for the facial details of the above, it would have undoubtedly been his most shocking facet. But it was the gesture of the face that caused the most chills among those around him. Huge and round green eyes watched him closely, like two headlights; and the eyelids seemed unnatural because, among other things, they were devoid of eyelashes. His skull was covered with a rough, viscous skin, stained and scarred, but without a single hair. The creature had hair in abundance

on the area of his chin, building a dark and tangled beard. Salas had the ironic and untimely occurrence that, from having his head upside down, i.e. the chin at the highest point and the skull where the chin is, the subject would possibly be less monstrous.

But more than his physical appearance, what called Salas' attention was the effect on everyone present, both patients and nurses. The lounge room had suddenly been invaded by a frigid silence, only altered by the almost imperceptible murmur of Cándido.

"Ainge, Maxwell, Bird, McHale, Parish. Substitutes: Archibald, Buckner, Henderson, Carr and Robey," continued the Tertullian, absorbed, as if everything outside the chessboard did not exist.

The seconds that continued were strange. The madman because if something was clear, Rafael Salas at that moment was that it was another patient that gave a quick review to the room with lively but confusedly soulless eyes, and then moved to where the game of chess was playing. The young nurse turned away from pure instinct as he passed him. Rafael, for his part, waited expectantly for the next movement of the creature, which would surely arrive long before that of the absorbed Cándido.

"Look, Félix, what a surprise. The mad senile cheater!" The chimpanzee suddenly snapped, staring at some lonely world in his brain.

So confused did Salas find the phrase as the fact that he communicated aloud to himself (probably because he had no one else to talk to). He soon realized that each of his movements was like the logic of a slot machine: totally unpredictable. The creature turned on itself to the point of finishing his sentence and ran out from where he had come.

"It's Félix," the nurse said over the deep silence. He had paled with the event. "Hell, he shouldn't be loose."

Salas became like a spring, associating immediately the name of Félix with the violent blows produced the other afternoon against the door of the office of director Grau. *Strong as if he had help from a wooden log...*

It took a few minutes for the room to return to normal, and almost half an hour for Rafael to get tired of waiting for Cándido's next move. The ex doctor got up and went out the door, without a word and left the game of chess.

"Ainge, Maxwell, Bird, McHale, Parish. Substitutes: Archibald, Buckner, Henderson, Carr and Robey..."

He walked alone in the middle of the garden looking for Saul Morgan with his eyes, when a cry as if from another world made his skin prickle.

"You're a senile cheater! Senile cheater!"

Turning his head, he found Félix sitting on one of the cold stone benches in a corner of the garden, by the wall. He wore an old woolen sweater and white slippers. He was looking at him. The creature lived confined inside its dark cell, which explained that almost no other patient had seen him before. That morning turned out to be an exception to his routine.

"Hello," Salas said matter-of-factly.

He approached very slowly without looking away from the grotesque figure and stopped half a meter from him, standing by the bench.

"Félix is scared," he moaned softly.

"My name is Rafael, and I'm not going to hurt you." The old man reached out and touched Félix's shoulder with the wisdom of a man about to feed a Bengal tiger. For his astonishment and relief, he didn't flinch at the touch. "Your name is Félix, isn't it?"

"The iron keeps a very ugly secret," he said, not paying attention to Salas's questions. "*After the music of bells.*"

Rafael frowned.

"Are you trying to tell me something?"

"The incomplete protects the iron tube, Félix."

"May I know what these things mean?" Asked Salas, who suddenly felt a deep curiosity for the patient.

"Look, Félix, the crazy senile cheater wants to know about the bell music," he continued with his nonsense. "And the incomplete protects the secret with the iron tube."

"I see you like puzzles, my friend," said the old doctor, gaining confidence. The Bengal tiger was turning into a kitten.

"The mad senile cheater is clever, Félix."

"So they're riddles!" He raised his voice, euphoric. "I got it right, right? Let's see... who's the crazy, cheating senile? It's me?"

Excited as a gifted child, Rafael tried his luck with the language the other practiced.

"The senile cheater is clever," Félix repeated.

"It's me!" Cried Salas as he clapped his hands.

"If this crazy monster thinks I'm crazy, he's fucked," he mumbled, more with irony than with indignation.

"And tell me, why do you say I'm a mad senile cheater?"

"The mad senile cheater is clever. But Félix will not tell you what the iron tube holds. It's a secret."

"Félix, listen to me." He grabbed the creature's arm, still unresponsive. "Why am I a cheater?"

"He's a madman, and he's dangerous, is he not, Félix?"

"Oh shit!"

"Stop repeating the same and answer me!"

Dominated now by exasperation, Salas' hand tightened around Félix's wrist and waved it. Suddenly he scrambled like a rabid dog and threw Salas hard against the lawn.

"Félix is in danger!" He yelled at himself, as if he had not realized the danger was from himself. "Help!"

Terrified, Salas saw from the ground how the sick man rushed over to him and imprisoned his neck with two monstrous hands. More than squeezing him, they gripped him. Rafael would remember forever the dreadful emptiness of those eyes. Martians, dumb.

"Félix, I don't want to hurt you!" The old man groaned. A sick man was strangling him.

"Félix is going to annihilate the mad senile cheater. Yes, I'll do it!"

The old man, who was beginning to notice the lack of air, desperately sought the help of someone out of the corner of his eye, but from his position, he could only see bits of grass. He tried to scream, but he only managed to spit out an agonizing hiss.

"Félix will annihilate you!" Repeated the beast again and again.

Just as Salas was about to lose consciousness, someone came running and pushed Félix away. The oxygen again fed his lungs. Once free, the old man felt the area of his Adam's apple and recovered. When he recovered his sense of sight, he saw the nurse handcuffing Félix behind his back. Then several nurses led the creature to his cell.

Rafael Salas didn't speak to anyone about what had happened; he didn't even thank the nurses for being saved. He went straight into his narrow room and pondered all afternoon. He knew he was scared to death.

He stayed awake for much of the night.

The morning was bright and pleasant in the city of Madrid when Alyssa entered the kitchen and took a can of soda from the fridge. She was already beginning to feel that the walls of the apartment were closing in on her, so she had to find a way to distract herself without having to go outside (she had forbidden herself from the moment she arrived at the house, for the police were searching in all the city for her). To kill the time until Jaime returned from his morning errands, she had made some series of abs using a cushion like tatami. After exercising and running all the television channels several times, she could not think of anything else to do but attack the fridge. Fortunately, Jaime entered the apartment carrying several bags full of food. He said hi loudly, and when he

joined her in the kitchen, he pulled a newspaper out of one of the bags and dropped it on the counter.

"Good news! It seems that they're already forgetting us." Alyssa took the newspaper and went through the pages quickly; she just read the headlines.

"I stopped being news," she murmured to herself, so happily surprised that she didn't remember to take a moment to realize that he, too, had ceased to be a novelty for journalistic fashions.

Ignoring her lack of regard, Jaime opened the refrigerator door and joined Alyssa with a bottle of beer. Then he extracted a can of stuffed olives from the shopping bags.

"Let's celebrate!" He exclaimed euphorically, and Alyssa imagined that he was exaggerating on purpose. She thanked him for his optimism with a sweet smile.

"You're still wondering what I did in Oxford, right?" Alyssa asked casually, already sitting on a chair in the living room, while she carried an olive to her mouth. She chewed it slowly as the two pairs of eyes probed each other.

Jaime had prepared a low table with two coasters, olives and a bowl of chips. The stereo played, at a very low volume, a Van Morrison record. After a few seconds in which only the warm voice of the singer from Northern Ireland was heard, Jaime responded with the same warmth and with very bright eyes.

"Not at all! In fact, what was going through my head was how you will manage to prove my innocence and give me back my job."

"Well, you need patience. Each thing is at its own time." Alyssa uttered the last sentence syllable to syllable as she gave her accomplice touches with her hand on his knee. "Come on eat the potato chips."

Each sentence she uttered was as if she were trying, on the one hand to be more intimate, and at the same time to extract information from the other. For Jaime, the conversations with Alyssa had become exciting games of strategy, and he was convinced that she had the same opinion.

They took the rest of the day to get used to living together as good roommates. After lunch, while he was scrubbing the dishes, Alyssa opened the cabinet where Jaime kept the DVDs and proposed loudly a movie session for dessert. He, as a good movie buff, accepted with delight.

About half a session into *The Fugitive*, both had seen it before but they agreed it would be a wildly ironic choice because of their personal situation. The landline rang it was María Vergara interested in her brother's mood. Unexpectedly, she began to speak with obvious coldness when she learned that Jaime had begun to share his apartment with a young girl.

"That was my sister," he informed her as soon as he hung up, prompting Alyssa to tell him about her family for the first time.

No luck. All she responded was a nod with her chin and a "come on, let's get back to the movie."

As the minutes passed, Jaime found her more enigmatic. Although his contact with her was normal, even quite agreeable under the circumstances, he had the feeling that she was showing a tiny percentage of her true life. Only the tip of the iceberg. He didn't even know what she was doing when she was not hiding from the police, or what she wanted to be in the future, for example. It was enough to ask her a question:

"Are you going to college?"

"Nope. I study on my own what I consider interesting."

Why doesn't that surprise me? Jaime thought.

"And what do you consider interesting?"

"Political science."

"Well, if you want advice, you're going to have to enroll in college to earn a living. That's how the world works," he said, he really didn't know where he wanted to go with this.

Am I trying to be her friend or her father?

"There are a lot of things I have yet to change for my world to work," Alyssa replied sharply more than she intended. Then she turned her attention to the screen and concluded the subject.

They finished watching the film in silence and then they were talking on the couch until nightfall. They talked about many things that had nothing to do with Alyssa's past, or with her studies, or with the Shapiro case or the Lennard mystery. Jaime realized that he was getting along better with an 18-year-old girl than with the people around him.

"I have to take a shower," Alyssa exclaimed suddenly, as if she were late somewhere. She gave her companion one last glance of complicity and rose in the direction of the bathroom.

"OK, meanwhile I'll make dinner."

Jaime cooked some baked sea bass with an onion vinaigrette and green bell pepper. As Alyssa showered and dried her hair, he prepared the living room table and partially opened the window curtains so that the lights of those who were still working in the buildings of the financial zone could be seen. She came out of the bathroom in flip-flops, wearing a white tank top and some pretty worn jeans shorts. He asked her jokingly if she wouldn't be cold with so little clothing, to which she simply shrugged. The dinner smelled wonderful, so Alyssa scarfed her sea bass without uttering a single word. Jaime, worried, was looking at an

ugly scar on her shoulder. When they both finished, the young woman thanked him for dinner and they toasted with white wine.

A couple of hours later, having been tinkering with Jaime's computer (always with his permission), Alyssa was getting ready for bed. When she slipped through the sheets of the sofa bed in the living room, she noticed that she was irritated. And her condition was due to Jaime. It had been many years since she had been in love with a man, if she had ever been. She had learned to distrust them, no matter how good a hunk they might present. Charley treated her acceptably for years. They slept a countless number of times, and until he committed suicide, he had never laid a hand on her (though it had been close). She owed him her having become a grown woman at such a tender age, but she certainly never loved that unscrupulous pig.

Jaime had the irritating male gesture of looking at her ass and legs before her face. Instead, he didn't react like the other men she had met. When Alyssa approached voluntarily with some excuse to be able to touch him, he looked away and walked away. Unheard of. He couldn't have been nicer to her since he'd agreed to shelter her. He behaved like a gentleman, offered himself to everything with a smile and always asked her opinion on any subject they were talking about.

The first thing she had done that morning when Jaime went jogging was to snoop around in his drawers and closets with the intention of finding some evidence, such as a photo or a letter, to prove that he was dating a girl. She even went unsuccessfully into his private files stored on the computer. The man looked like a loner. *Like me*. Then, when he returned, she had intentionally provoked him by confessing what she had been doing, and even asked about his sentimental life. Instead of an indignant scolding on his part, the question seemed to surprise him positively. He mumbled something ironic and went into the shower while shouting, "No woman can stand me, Aly!"

So she was irritated with him. Damn it, Jaime had treated her in two days better than anyone else in her life.

She continued lying there as she listened to Jaime brushing his teeth and as he left the bathroom. To aggravate her anger, he had just locked himself in his bedroom without even saying good night. The last thing she heard was the hollow punch made by the mattress when Jaime fell on top of it, two feet away from her on the other side of the wall. She rose uneasily, went to the window, and stared into the darkness where the offices were once lit. She stayed in that state a few minutes before making a decision.

Jaime Vergara was reading a novel by Stephen King when he heard a creak in the doorway. Glancing up from pure reflection, he saw Alyssa standing under

the doorframe. She was completely naked.

"What-what are you doing?" He asked, uneasy as if a rotten zombie had just entered his room.

He rummaged under the covers and covered himself to his neck, as if he were nude.

She shrugged her shoulders. Then she went to him, took the book from his hands and kissed him on the lips. Jaime swallowed hard as he pulled her away to look into her eyes, thirsty and submissive. He had an erection. As he did not complain, Alyssa climbed onto the bed and straddled him. She kissed him again and stroked his erection. Jaime was puzzled. He pulled her away from his body.

"Aly... this is not right. You're a child."

"A girl?" She said, suddenly looking offended. "Well your crotch doesn't think the same. I want to sleep with you and it's obvious that you want to sleep with me. What's the problem?"

"Well, we barely know each other, Aly. I don't know anything about your life and..." The words stuck in his mouth. "And you just got naked in my bed, for God's sake."

"Well, don't be a fool, and take advantage of the fact that you have me naked in your bed, all for you," she countered, this time deciding to tackle the ear area with her tongue.

Jaime pushed her arm away again, so hard this time that he pushed her out of bed onto the bedroom floor.

"I'm not one of those who fuck anyone at first," Jaime snapped, suddenly irritated, and was immediately struck by a terrible sense of guilt.

"Anyone?" Alyssa repeated from the position of a simple companion dog. She was on the floor, naked, humiliated "Very well." She sat up and went to the door, very dignified. "Good night."

Jaime received the "good night" as a poisoned dart directly to his heart.

In the next few seconds, which turned into a frankly embarrassing moment, Jaime watched as Alyssa disappeared from his sight leaving behind a painful slam. When at last he was alone in the dark, it took him more than two hours to sleep.

Neither of them had noticed an apparently insignificant detail that night, Alyssa had forgotten to turn off Jaime's computer, leaving open the software she had used. One of them was the chat application, whose webcam pointed to the center of the room, right where Jaime's bed was. By the time Alyssa got naked between her sheets, there was a user logged in to chat. Almost 500 kilometers away to the north, in his room, wallpapered with posters of football players, a

ten-year-old boy who adopted the pseudonym Jasper who had just witnessed everything.

When Jaime left his room with the first lights of the next morning, Alyssa still slept peacefully in the living room. He had an orange juice, trying to make as little noise as possible, showered in a hurry and went out the door with the intention of going to buy stamps and invest in a tenth lottery. To tell the truth, it was only a cheap excuse to avoid the irremediable moment of meeting up with Alyssa again (Jaime had not sent a letter in the mail for years, and rarely bet). And it was irremediable because, whether he liked it or not, she lived in his house and he couldn't get out of it, so that if he didn't want to flee like a coward, he didn't consider it as an option, he had no choice but to face her. To face her. An expression too hostile for the warmth he had taken to her.

All night long he had tried to forget the image of her without clothes and the way she looked at him with her particular docile gesture from the threshold of his room. On several occasions he drew in his mind the silhouette of the fragile body under the white tank top, walking impassively with the swagger so sexy that it caused the image of her walking in her black boots with heels, darker than an abyss itself. It was an image that caused desire. He had come to the conclusion that what really terrified him was that his carnal instinct would take control of his decisions the moment he faced her again. That he simply had no idea how he would react when they were back in the same room.

After almost two hours walking the streets of the neighborhood in which he tried to classify without success what his brain and heart told him, he decided to face the harsh reality: he had to go home and talk to Alyssa. Apologize.

He experienced a strange euphoria that grew as he approached his building. He went to the portal and went up the stairs two at a time.

"Aly!" He shouted from the hallway, realizing that Alyssa had already risen. The sofa bed in the living room had returned to its original shape and the curtains billowed with the autumnal breeze coming through the hollow of the window, Jaime went to the kitchen and then to the bedroom. The calm was absolute.

"Alyssa?" He insisted, now with a thread of concern in his voice.

"Where the hell are you?" He muttered as he looked around the house. It was as if the earth had swallowed Alyssa.

On the table in the living room he found a notebook paper that, in a blue pen and irregular calligraphy, read as follows:

Dear Jaime. I'm sorry to disappear as if by magic and without warning. I have to do something with urgency and it would be dangerous for you to accompany

me.

I cannot thank you for everything you've done for me these days. However, you deserve to know all my truth. Now I do not have time, and besides I do not want you to find out through a letter, but if you are still interested in me and in my history, it is in your hands to know it. Travel to the town of Ámber, in Cantabria, and ask for Óliver Morales. He lives in a beautiful house surrounded by a white fence next to the beach. He will give you answers.

Take care of yourself; I hope to see you again.

Love,

Aly

PS: I hate sea bass...

In Jaime's mind came three very definite thoughts and in a very specific order. The first thing he regretted immediately after reading the note was Alyssa's disappearance from his life. She had vanished *as if by magic*, as she herself had said. Suddenly, now completely open he felt alone in his own home, and experienced an uneasy sensation in his heart area.

The second feeling replaced that pain with anger and impotence. He realized that Alyssa had broken her part of the bargain. Not only had she disappeared without a trace, but also she hadn't moved a finger to help him in the Shapiro case, as she had promised. He felt like a complete fool.

For the third thought he needed to take a few seconds of reflection, because what had just happened inside his head required it. Subconsciously he had regretted, and with more force, the loss of Alyssa than her betrayal. And that was troubling. He knew that the Shapiro case, his loss of employment, and his more than possible condemnation had been relegated to the background, for, incredible, as it may seem, the feeling of loneliness after her departure had invaded him more than he had come to think.

Not knowing very well what was going to be his next step, he sat down on the couch. He missed her. He wanted to see her again, and he wanted to go back in time to have her back in his sheets.

Had she left him, hurt and embarrassed by what had happened the other night? It was most likely. He regretted referring to her as *anyone*, and using the force to throw her out of bed had been the last straw to break the camel's back.

Deeper repentance came over him, and then guilt. He had expelled her that was the only reality.

He shook his head to get rid of ideas that could only harm him, and read the note a second time.

Ámber.

Where had he heard that name before? Was it not Sara's town? A relentless spark burned in his brain. Sara! At that moment he remembered the psychiatrist's call the other afternoon informing him of the call on Skype. He had taken it for granted, and then... then came Alyssa and...

"Damn!" He shouted again and again in the air, as if he were the coach of a team that had just got the decisive goal in a final. "Shit, shit, shit!"

When he calmed down and tried to think, he realized that he had no way of getting in contact with Sara, except to travel to Oxford and look for her there. Impossible! On the other hand, he could travel to that northern town, find Óliver Morales, and discover the great secret of Alyssa, which was what his soul really wanted. If he left now, he could be there before sunset.

It took less than fifteen minutes to prepare a backpack with some essential hygiene and food items. He went down to the garage, where he started the Porsche, and he took the northern highway, ignoring the speed limits set by the law.

Chapter 15

"I'm going to ask you a question, Morgan, and I want you to be painfully honest."

"Okay, I'll try it."

"Do you think I'm grumpy?"

"Painfully grumpy."

"Very fast answer, it didn't take half a second to answer! The truth is that I should have my foot in my mouth from how grumpy I've been."

"What's the question?"

"My ex-wife always said that, she also felt that I didn't want her enough, that I was always in a bad mood. But what happened was that sometimes I pretended that I didn't want her just to find out what it feels like when I realized in the middle of the night that I didn't really want to live without her. I invented motives to be a grouch because I came to find the point of pleasure in the pain."

"Doctor, sorry to bother you, but look over there."

"What do you want me to look at?"

Sunday 12 and Monday 13 November 2006

Alyssa had never wanted so much to be swallowed by the earth. As soon as she saw in Jaime's eyes how terrible the idea of assaulting his bed had been, everything had precipitated a series of actions on the part of both of them that had resulted in an emotionally complicated scenario. During the seconds after the shameful spectacle and the slamming of the door, Alyssa stood petrified and silent by the bedroom door, perhaps in the hope that time would freeze and disappear. She replayed in her mind the words spoken and the gestures made since she entered the room until he threw her out of bed like a disobedient dog. *Had she sent it all to shit?* That was the second time in a few days that her eyes were wet.

"Damn it," she repeated in a very low voice, filled with restrained anger, "he thinks I'm a whore!"

She realized that she was still naked, so she put on her panties and her tank top while continuing to curse her stupidity.

Then she sank between the sheets of the sofa bed and felt an intense pain, the kind that sits deep in her chest, it invaded her. Throughout her existence, Alyssa had been raped, abused, humiliated, persecuted, and threatened, but this was the first time that lost love had taken hold of her. Laying naked on Jaime, skin on skin and facing his eyes, had been the most beautiful and exciting moment of her life. A moment that had ended with a defeat at the foot of the bed. She ended up sleeping with a dry tear print on her cheek, not knowing that this was going to be her last night in that house.

She opened her eyes, as if in slow motion, almost nine hours later. After the initial comforting sensation of waking up to so late in the morning and naturally, her stomach contracted when Jaime returned to her thoughts; the subconscious had only conceded a few seconds. The apartment was calm, but with a somewhat stale atmosphere, and the autumn sunlight came into the room composing an idyllic awakening.

She was afraid to meet Jaime in some corner of the house, she would have to give him a simple *good morning* (what would he look like?), so she sharpened her hearing. Except for the roar of the engines of the vehicles abroad, she didn't hear the slightest sound. She got up, folded and put away the sheets, and went into the kitchen, where no one was either. She shrugged and poured herself an orange juice, which she drank in one gulp. Then she went to the bedroom door (it was open), and confirmed that she was alone. The room was perfectly clean and tidy, but there was no sign of life.

Just as she was about to turn to go to the bathroom, she detected a singularity out of the corner of her eye. The blue light of a led glowed on the edge of

Jaime's laptop, which lay open on the desk as she remembered leaving it the other night. A bad feeling ran through her spinal cord. When she approached the device, she checked some things, and all were bad: the computer was on, the chat application was open and the webcam was activated. It was still filming, actually, in a corner of the monitor, a conversation that had not been closed.

User: Jasper.

Time of disconnection: 01:23

She suddenly paled. She had forgotten to close the chat the other night, with the corresponding conversation, and just before...

Shit!

The shame she experienced having been rejected in full-blown seduction and in the nude, had just been doubled. Not only had she been a capricious slut in front of the man she was beginning to love, but Oli, the only friend on the planet, had witnessed it all.

She dropped onto the comforter and put her hand to her mouth instinctively.

If Oli really felt for her the affection she imagined, he must be deeply pissed and embarrassed right now. And that was what she least wanted in a moment like that. She paused for a moment thinking about her young friend's possible state of mind, and came to the conclusion that the most appropriate word was *jealousy*. He seemed so sweet as he was crazy.

Practical agent Marcos Tena stopped the rental car in double file and continued walking up the street that crossed the avenue, two blocks ahead. He was incognito, and he didn't want to attract attention, so when he reached the doorway, he waited for someone to enter or leave the building so he could sneak into the lobby. To kill the time while he waited, he extracted a pack of chewing gum from his pocket and put a gum in his mouth. He also used to value his work alone since Barreneche gave him full responsibility.

He felt good about himself. Not satisfied, but basically ok. It wasn't that he was not keeping his boss's orders to the letter. Actually, there lay the problem: they were not orders whose fulfillment would cause anyone the slightest satisfaction. But in the end it was his job and, in fact, he was running like an experienced professional. He had spent the last two days working on his own. His job was to follow a trail, the trail of a missing and hidden young lady somewhere in Madrid. What used to be commonly called a *needle in a haystack*.

The first thing he had done was to return to Maximilian's bar the Sensations, where he was very badly received. Not only did Max not provide any extra detail about the fugitive, he was quick to knock him out of the bar between biting threats. Tena sulking, as he thought when he left the bar, that he should have

poured alcohol on him (an intimidating abuse of his badge, in short), because it was the only way to get a friendly response.

He did not really hope to get more information out of that source, so he wasted no more time and went straight to the next step, the airport. At noon on Sunday the 12th she was taking a plane bound for Madrid. He knew the date and time she had landed in Oxford, in addition to the flight and the airline. He assumed, on the other hand, that someone pursued by the police would not dare to take collective public transport. That limited everything to the choice of taxis. He spent more than two hours asking the many taxi drivers who were parked at the airport if they recognized the *girl in the picture*. He was about to give up when a curt man that drove a Toyota and enjoyed a good photographic memory recalled the destiny of his "most peculiar customer of the day," he said. That information led Tena to his next point: the Orense Street number 53. He rented a car at the airport and drove to that point of the city. He arrived at dusk.

But he didn't have the slightest idea of where she was hiding, assuming she was still there. He could have tried his luck by calling each one by one of all the apartment doors in the building, but that would have drawn too much attention, giving her a chance to escape. He didn't want to lose the surprise factor. He decided to pay for a room at a nearby hotel and continue the next day. He would think of something.

That night, while he was brushing his teeth before going to bed, Julian Barreneche called his cell phone.

"Tell me you got the whore."

"Not yet. But I'm very close."

"What does it mean that you are very close? Hell, we're not talking about Osama bin Laden's fuckin' shit."

"It means I'm very, very close. I'll call you tomorrow with good news."

"Tena, don't pull my leg..." (*click*)

Marcos had decided to cut the conversation by hanging up the phone. Then he turned it off. He finished brushing his teeth and went to bed with remains of adrenaline still running through his body.

The next morning he returned to door number 53, and as he had not thought of anything intelligent, he stared at the door like a disciple waiting for a miracle. Then, when he was about to give up his surprise factor in favor of asking on each floor, a young man entered the building holding two bags from the supermarket and a newspaper. Something told Tena that he should follow that guy, so he held the door at the moment in which it was about to close and slipped inwards with secrecy. He followed the man a prudent step away and tiptoed as he climbed the stairs. During the ascent he noticed that one of the bags contained

two pieces of sea bass. Not one, but two. When he arrived at the destination, he kept in memory the floor and the number where the bags had been put (2C), and returned to the lobby. He approached the mailbox area and checked his identity. Dr. Jaime Vergara. There were no more names on the boxes than his. With increasing excitement, he ran to the second floor and laid his ear to Door C. He sensed an unintelligible conversation between a man (the one Jaime Vergara) and a woman (she?). Marcos knew that this did not have to mean anything, because it could very well be a single man going out to buy fish to eat with his date, or maybe the female voice corresponded to his girlfriend, who did not live with him and therefore did not have a name on the mailbox. Or it could even be his sister, or a simple friend with whom he had left that morning. But, in any case, the options that it was her were now greater than a few minutes ago. He reflected on his next action. He understood that he had nothing to do there for the time being. He returned to the hotel and made a calm plan of attack. He did not turn on the phone all day.

About ten o'clock the next morning Marcos was chewing gum in front of lobby 53 when the same face from the previous day, that of Dr. Jaime Vergara, came out through the door. Tena took the opportunity to enter and climb back to the second floor. He stopped in front of Door C and pulled his revolver from the sheath that hung from the inside of his jacket. He removed the lock softly and held his breath. Never before had he wielded a weapon against someone of flesh and blood, and for that reason his limbs trembled. He spent a few minutes relaxing, letting the sweat of his hands dry around the hilt of the gun. To feel comfortable with it.

Was he sure of what he was about to do? What if the girl was innocent? In that case, he could get into a good judicial mess.

He felt a stomach cramp.

"Damn it, my career in the police corps is at stake," he mumbled under his breath. "I hate you, Barreneche!"

He braced himself, took a deep breath and slammed the door with all his strength.

"Police! Open the door immediately!" He called out.

Alyssa heard a dry thud on the other side of the house, followed by raw, unrelated voices that were being spat from a man from a distance.

She put herself on the alert.

She walked with great caution to the hall, where she heard the masculine voice again, this time much sharper, pronounced from the other side of the front door.

"Open the door, I will not say it again!"

It's not Jaime.

"Police!"

Dammit.

Trying not to creak the floor with her movements, she turned the peephole and looked through it. She saw a young man, perhaps too young to be a policeman. His hands held a revolver, and his body expression was so rigid that Alyssa could imagine his facial skin covered with a cold sweat. She wondered which of them would be more scared.

She analyzed the situation in a matter of milliseconds. She had no choice.

Knock.

She bit her lower lip hard, entrusted her lot to some God who wanted to hear it, and she thrust the door open.

Immediately she was confronted with a small dark barrel that seemed to her the threshold void of death. It was the first time she had been aimed at the face with the barrel of a gun. After the shock, an imperative snorting:

"You are detained! Stand against the wall and cross your hands behind your back, miss!"

Do not be intimidated, Alyssa, this is your moment, she said to herself in a self-motivating way.

She decided to disobey and, as only she knew how to act, went on the defense with everything she had:

"I did not kill Mike Lennard," she muttered, her voice broken and old. She raised her hands with her palms open and swallowed hard.

"Are you not Alyssa Grifero?" The policeman asked, without removing the barrel from her head. In fact, the first drops of sweat began to fall from his forehead.

"I am Alyssa Grifero, and I did not murder Mike Lennard." She raised her voice, which had changed until it sounded almost ceremonial. She looked behind the policeman toward the landing of the building, making sure that Jaime still didn't appear. Given the circumstances, she concluded that it was for the best.

"Miss, please," the policeman insisted as he stepped forward, "don't make it harder. We know about your return trip to Oxford on the day of the crime. You're going to accompany me to the police station, the easy way or the hard way."

Alyssa would have bet good money that that man had never shot a weapon against a human being in his life.

Against all logic, she took a step forward until her forehead was in contact with the tip of the revolver. It was freezing.

"I am Alyssa Grifero, and yes, on November the 9th I traveled to Oxford. I was at Mike Lennard's house and I saw a bullet in his skull, about the same

height as the way you're pointing at me now.”

The policeman's hands, and therefore the weapon, began to tremble against her head. Alyssa detected the doubt in his eyes.

You're about to get it, baby, She thought.

"You're lying," he said, his index finger still tense against the trigger.

"You know better than that," said Alyssa, who could feel the adrenaline running through her veins. At that moment she felt like a superhero. "And if you stop me now or shoot me, there will be more deaths." She paused to savor the moment. "And it would be your fault," she whispered.

"Then, according to you, who killed Lennard?" The agent asked. Under the tremor in his voice, anyone would have said that what he branded was actually a water gun.

"I'll tell you if you'll escort me to Oxford right now, before it's too late."

"To go with you to Oxford? Are you crazy..."

The young policeman gripped her shoulder and pushed her against the wall. With a quick movement, he put the gun on his hilt and gripped her wrists behind her back.

"You think I'm stupid?" He grunted, his mouth pressed to the back of her neck. From the fury in his voice, he seemed to want to say something like *this girl is not going to bullshit me, a cop*.

Alyssa, the fact that a man forced her and the handcuffs brought back memories that caused a great chill. Despite this, she struggled not to lose control, because deep down she knew that the verbal battle was winning.

"Listen to me, please," she said, with astonishing serenity, "if you take me to England and you grant me protection, I will take you to the person who murdered Mike Lennard. Together we will stop him, and you will be a hero. You will come out on the news."

Alyssa noticed that the pressure exerted by the policeman's hands was reduced.

Don Perfecto will let me go.

"And if it turns out that I lied and in the end I was the one who really shot that gun at his head, then you stop me. You have nothing to lose, in both scenarios you remain like the policeman who captured the criminal of the century in the *crime of Oxford*."

She could imagine the man's brain shifting at top gear behind her neck. She couldn't help but draw a slight, inappropriate smile.

Suddenly, the agent released her hands and ordered her to turn to him, so that he could see her face. He pointed again with his revolver, this time to her right leg.

"I hope it's not a trick, because I assure you, you're not going to escape in any way," he said tightly, as if he had just realized he was the victim of a stupid scam. "We're going to the airport right now. You will pass the security check under my protection, but I will not lose sight of you for a second. If you need to go to the restroom, you'll be handcuffed in less than a minute. Is that clear?"

Alyssa smiled, just as a teenager smiles to her parents who have given permission to go to the end-of-course party.

"Very clear, officer!" She exclaimed. "You're going to be the fucking hero of the country, I guarantee you."

The policeman grimaced.

"Come on, let's go. You have five minutes to collect what you consider essential. Then I'll handcuff you."

Then Alyssa thought of Jaime, and then of Oli, under the circumstances the two names would inevitably be in the background in the next few hours. She had to say goodbye to him, tell him everything. Apologize.

She went to the bathroom, always under the strict supervision of Don Perfecto, and locked herself in it. Of the five minutes granted, she dedicated only one to fill a bag with soap and underwear, and the other four to secretly write a note that she signed, kissed, and deposited on the dining room table. Then she gave her hands to the policeman and let him handcuff her. They left the apartment two minutes before Jaime returned. They left no trace other than the note on the table.

Chapter 16

"Look at that guy with the bruised arm. Who?"

"Forget it! Don't greet him! The less you get closer to him, the better it'll be for you."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes, he's wounded by being stubborn and as a bad patient."

"Have you treated him?"

"A while ago. Just before you started this conversation."

"But what did he do?"

"Better not want to know."

"At least tell me his name."

"His name is Félix. And he's very dangerous."

"Well, the ambulance is coming for him."

Sunday 12 and Monday 13 November 2006

It was just after four in the afternoon when Alfred Horner got up from his chair at the police station. He had spent the whole day reading reports on the events that had taken place during the last weeks in that fishing village in northern Spain called Ámber. He put on his sunglasses (even though the day was gray), and as he turned around St. Aldate's to walk to his car, he at first glimpsed a black Volkswagen parked about ten yards away, next to the stone wall which was the front facade of Church of Christ. He passed by its side without slowing his pace or looking away, and found that, indeed, it was the same license plate. The vehicle was unoccupied.

It was the third time he'd seen it in the last two days. He couldn't tell for how long the car had been around him, but for the fact that it caught his attention had been the result of chance. The first time he noticed it was the afternoon of the day before, a few minutes before he and Carroll watched the recording of the Ahmets in the video conference room. Then, as he looked out of the window without looking at anything concrete, he saw it parked by the police station. The Volkswagen would not have been etched into Horner's mind if it hadn't been for the license plate LA08 081. Lover of sports in general and of the NBA in particular, for the police that code led him immediately to the city of Los Angeles (LA), where Kobe Bryant, number 8 of the Lakers, had achieved the historic mark of 81 points in a match. It had happened last January, and Alfred had not missed such a feat. That would have been simply a funny curiosity if it was not because the next morning, that is, that morning, he saw the same car next to his house in Kidlington while having coffee and a slice of bread with jam for breakfast alone. On that occasion, the Volkswagen was parked on a street that led to the entrance of the cafeteria and less than fifty meters from his floor. He wondered if he was not becoming paranoid, but when he left the police station about four o'clock in the afternoon with his sunglasses on, the vehicle with a curious license plate crossed his path again. Too much chance.

On none of the three occasions did he see any occupants inside the car, but that was an issue he intended to resolve immediately. Still walking, and once he had left the Volkswagen behind; he dialed the car registration office on his mobile phone, identified himself as a policeman, and asked about the owner of the Volkswagen. According to the registration, the vehicle belonged to a rental company. After a sulking click, he hung up and immediately telephoned the car rental company. The rental car had been rented for a whole week by a thirty-one-year-old Henry Millward, address in Camden, London. He continued to pull some strings and discovered that Henry Millward had a bachelor's degree in computer science from the University of Oxford, although he now ran his own

bar in the British capital. Millward had an absurd résumé. In spite of finishing the race with an honors degree, soon after finishing his studies he dedicated himself to living life large. He traveled across Europe working, almost always as a bartender in clubs of dubious reputation. Milan, Copenhagen, Cascais, Seville, Ámber... (Horner stopped blinking when the last location was revealed). Another piece of the puzzle? He went on investigating. In 2004, Henry Millward was arrested for hacking the website of the Tax Agency, and in 2005 he almost went to prison for public disorderly conduct. He was quite a character.

Horner moistened his lips with his own saliva. He came to the basic conclusion that he was being subjected to some kind of surveillance. But why? Then he realized how easy it had come to him. The simple thing was to think that Millward was a terrible spy, which gave him something. Then he recalled that, if it was not due to the coincidence of enrollment, he would not have noticed LA08 081.

Was Henry Millward the man who had come into his apartment the other night, tearing the room apart and causing him some superficial wounds? The same one who had left that lapidary message on the side of his car? The thought turned to an icy sensation that gave him goose bumps, and gave way to a much more general question: *Was Henry Millward then who shot Mike Lennard?*

Horner did not see the black Volkswagen again all day. A much more real threat, however, was waiting for him at his Kidlington home.

Immediately after Horner left the police station, Thomas Carroll, camouflaged at a table behind the window at the sidewalk cafe opposite the Volkswagen, pulled out his SLR camera and fired a series of photographs at his discretion. He photographed a man who got up from the Christ of Church bus stop and followed the same route as Alfred until he got into his car.

The subject was brown, with thin hair that came to his shoulders. From the distance it was difficult to pinpoint his age, but Thomas sensed that he was someone in his mid-thirties. He wore jeans, leather jacket with raised lapels, and sunglasses. It was the vivid image of a regular at a bar.

The stranger had stared at Alfred's Alfa Romeo as if he were memorizing something (for example, the license plate?), until he started and turned the first corner. Then the guy turned around casually and walked to the Volkswagen.

Thomas lowered the SLR and sighed. That morning Alfred had explained the strange coincidence of the black vehicle. He had asked him to go around the police station in search of a Volkswagen with registration LA08 081 and, if he found it, to hide and take some photos. Thomas had wondered if his companion was going crazy, but now that he was checking the existence of the vehicle and the man who was watching his steps, he realized that Alfred was in real danger.

When he looked back at the subject, he realized that he was looking at him. During the moment the two pairs of eyes were staring from both sides of the glass, Carroll didn't know how to act. It was the subject who, understanding by the photo camera that he was being watched, moved first. His expression tightened into an ugly grimace, and then he ran off to his car, got into the driver's seat, and started the engine. Carroll, who had left his refreshment paid, loaded the DSLR around his neck and came out after him. By the time he left the cafe and started across the street, the Volkswagen was already on the move.

Dammit!

He got into his patrol car and sped up. At the end of the street he saw the guy turn right onto High Street. An avenue with many lanes to get lost easily and vanish, thought Thomas. Before reaching the Carfax tower to take High Street, Carroll had time to activate the alarm and call Horner by the hands free car phone.

"I've got your guy in range!" He said, as soon as his companion accepted the call. "He's up in the Covered Market and he's heading east in his car."

"You got that bastard?" Horner, who also spoke from the hands free car, phone sounded worried.

"I could have photographed him, but he caught me and ran. I'm in full chase."

"Agreed. Keep the distance so that he thinks you've lost sight of him and he'll relax. I'm going to head in your direction."

"There's a lot of traffic. Fuck, Alfred, what on earth have you gotten yourself into? This guy is bad."

For a few seconds there was only the siren of Thomas' patrol car.

"The subject is moving fast about two hundred meters ahead of me," Carroll announced.

"Thomas, listen to me," said Horner, "the man's name is Henry Millward. I have not been able to find out what he wants from me, but his past is scary. If you tell me your exact position, I'll join the hunt."

"Leave it Fred, go home."

Carroll made an illegal overtaking on High Street and honked at a couple of teenage pedestrians trying to cross the avenue with the red light.

"I'm on my way, Tom." Horner's male voice sounded metallic through the speaker.

At that moment, a truck left irresponsibly from a warehouse and Carroll had to brake suddenly and to make a jerking movement with the steering wheel so as not to finish stamped against the truck's bodywork. When he caught his breath

and headed back down the street, he glimpsed how the Volkswagen turned left past Queen's College, probably on Longwall Street.

"Fuck!" He exclaimed, as if he needed to shout to get rid of the truck's fright.

"Tom? You're good?" Horner heard himself say.

"Yes, I'm fine... but I'm losing him," he said. "Alfred, listen carefully: we have his name, his license plate and your photographs. I'm going to get this bastard, if it's not now it will be tomorrow, and when I do I'll check what he wants from you. You go home."

The patrol car raised a cloud of dust as it skidded around on Longwall Street. Thomas scanned the end of the street, but the black car had disappeared. He drove until the street changed its name, and then stopped. He turned off the alarm.

"Shit."

"What happened?" Horner wanted to know.

"I lost him."

"Tom, meet me now. We have to plan our next move."

"Fred, fuck, leave the moves for your chess match. I'll investigate all I can about Millward and I'll call to let you know. You go home and take a few days off. That's an order." Carroll now saw his companion as someone to be ordered.

"Tom, this is my business."

"Dude, don't be a prick. You're not John McClane and this is not *Die Hard*, okay? Go home and lock yourself there until this ends. Let me work for you for once in your life."

It was the first time Carroll had spoken to his companion with the authority of a man of his experience. It was probably due to the excitement of the chase. In any case, he had never felt so alive. So much like a cop.

"All right, I'll listen to you," Horner promised, in a surprisingly submissive manner. "But Tom, do me a favor."

"I'm all ears."

"Think along the lines about everything that happened in Ámber, that town in the north of Spain."

"A bully is harassing you and you're worried about a small town from abroad? You've lost your mind."

"I have a feeling that Ámber is the key to everything. Remember that all this started when our two suspects came from there."

"All right, I'll investigate a bit."

"Promise me, Tom."

"I will, Fred, don't worry. Now go home it's about fucking time."

Horner felt as if he'd just been hit by a Mack truck when he entered the doorway of his building with the intention of resting. He had not enjoyed a quality dream for days, and with every step he took in the direction that would lead him to solve the Lennard's case (and his own), he had the feeling of living in hell.

What he discovered in his mailbox was not going to help reassure him.

Next to a pair of fast food pamphlets, there was a CD wrapped in a transparent plastic sachet. On the face front, written in permanent marker, a disturbing message:

IF YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT IS WAITING FOR YOU, PLAY ME

Alfred felt a sudden urge to run away and not stop until he crossed the Scottish border. Instead, he entered his house with a harsh knot in his throat and went into his office. The laptop on the desk was slow starting enough to allow time for his breathing to accelerate. He finally inserted the compact disc into the slot and explored its interior. It consisted of a single video file that occupied a few megabytes. Still standing, Horner pushed play and held his breath.

The video lasted fifty-three seconds, which began with a full-screen encoded image accompanied by irritating noise. Horner, annoyed at the noise, frowned and he continued frowning. Within a few seconds, the encoded noise gave a radical shift to what looked like a home recording, as done with a cheap personal camera that was perched on some smooth surface. Silence. The resolution was low and the colors dark. The target focused on a closed room, so gloomy that its limits were not perceived... "Fuck!" A zombie head suddenly appeared from the right of the frame, in the foreground, and Horner's chest twisted. After the shock, he recognized the figure as a cheap Halloween mask, probably purchased in a souvenir shop for less than twenty pounds. Alfred snorted.

What the fuck...

The rubber zombie, illuminated by the light of the device's bulb, began to speak in a slow, uninflected neutral voice. It was a distorted voice, perfectly situated halfway between the masculine and the feminine.

Alfred Horner... what a surprise... I'll trust you with a secret, Alfred Horner. In this story, you are not the hunter. You are the hunted. And no matter what you do, how fast you think or act. The clues you follow or how good you are. You're going to pay for your sins.

Despite the menacing content of the words, the tone of voice was not moody. Neither was the mask, whose rubber curves remained immobile with speech. Two black pupils behind two holes that made eyes were the only human

distinction in the image. However it didn't provide Alfred with any clue as to the source of the message.

The more you pursue me, Alfred Horner, the closer I shall be to finding you. And when that happens, I'll kill you. This is not a deal. Neither is it a threat. It's going to happen, whatever you do. It's just an announcement of your death. Enjoy what you have left, Alfred Horner.

The recording ended abruptly. Silence.

Horner bit his lower lip and forced himself to remain calm. He sat down in his chair and played the tape three more times with maximum attention. When he finished, he would see it again from the beginning. Despite the mechanized tone of voice of his enemy, there was something in it that seemed familiar. During the fifty seconds the message had lasted, the author of the threat had repeated his name and surname four times, and in each of them, Alfred had had the feeling of losing a bet. The two girls whose image he mentally placed on the table, Sara Mora and the hooded girl in front of the kebabs' club, came back to his mind, and he looked for a reason why one of them had reasons to kill him. *Assuming the zombie in the video is the same one who murdered Lennard, that is, one of only two suspects, he mused softly, it means the voice was that of a woman. In that case, would it make sense for her to have so much desire to get me out of the way? Why bother recording a video and sending it to me? Okay, to scare me, but... just for being the investigator for Mike Lennard's death? No, he said at once. She must have some other reason to wish me dead so badly.* His thoughts then traveled to the night of the crime, when he questioned a frightened Sara Mora inside his car. *Did she look at that moment as if she were standing before her greatest enemy?* Of course, if she had, she had concealed it very well amid so many tears and anxiety attacks.

As hard as it was to accept it, Henry Millward had just overtaken the two young women as the prime suspect. He realized that on that day he had extended the list of potential suspects, and yet he hadn't gotten an extra clue. What a fucking mess!

He withdrew from his desk and walked away from the computer screen. There was something in the case that he could not quite put together, as if there was an elephant in the room and yet he couldn't see it. He crossed his arms and looked out the east-facing window, in principle without paying attention to the landscape. When he began to notice lovers kissing in the rain, at first it seemed a rather disturbing scene. Then he realized that he was remembering a university

party, a pool in which a womanizer tried to sexually abuse a teenager. A broken life, unconscious, dried mud. A while ago, it was his first case.

Nacho Conde. It was July and that rapist escaped alive.

What had he done with his existence since then? Had he become a better cop? Alfred had gaps in his memories; he had them since before entering the force. So trying to find out if someone had reason to look for him and kill him could literally make him crazy.

He tried to remember what the name of the hooded girl was, and discovered that he had forgotten, God knew why. *For the zombie who had just threatened to end his life? By Henry Millward and his rented Volkswagen? By the meaning of the outrageous message someone had drawn on the side of his Alfa Romeo? By Mike Lennard's carved torso the night of his death? Because of Mora's presence at the crime scene? By the love letters between Mora and that Diana that Lennard kept at home? By the attack he himself had suffered in his own house while he was inside?* The truth is that there were many things that could have removed from his memory the name of the suspect of the gray hoodie.

He sat up and poured himself a glass of whiskey. He was spinning all the puzzle pieces until he got drunk and got inside the sheets. He fell asleep at three o'clock in the morning with his own name hanging around his subconscious.

Nacho Conde.

The next day, during her last walk to the Connor house, Sara was determined in enjoying her new life. She felt deeply happy. She had just made a series of strategic decisions that would change and would certainly improve her closest existence. The first one was to stay at Diana's house, at least temporarily; then they would think about where to live. The second decision was a consequence of the first decision: that same day she would leave the Connor residence. She did not mind paying them the rent for the remainder of the month, but once she had found the love of her life, it made no sense to stay in that madhouse. She wanted to lose sight of those lunatics, starting with Rolly, the dog vacuum cleaner, and following the hanging spider webs in the shower.

She mentally visualized her near future and could not help but smile from ear to ear.

She continued through the north of the city under a leaden sky near dusk, and during the journey she concluded that, after all, her journey had been a success. She had found what she actually flew to England, and for some reason close to that hypnotic feeling of being in love, she did not think for a second about Mike Lennard, Agent Horner, Charley, or nosy Doctor Salas.

She crossed the corner of Victoria Road and thought it was the most depressing street she had ever seen. It was indeed a tremendous exaggeration,

but the sky overcast by the heavy clouds at the moment, coupled with the traumatic experiences that she had experienced during the few days that she had lived there, made sure that Victoria Road would occupy a prominent place in the list of places to which she would never return.

From the outside of the house there was no light in the interior, nor could she hear the usual bellows that Alice Connor used to devote to her dog. She shrugged. She planned to say goodbye, to Alice at least, but the world would not end if she took her things without warning. She would come back the next day to say goodbye.

She unlocked the door and headed for the stairs. She realized by the silent darkness that she was alone. When she reached her room, she packed her suitcase in record time. She took a quick glance to make sure nothing was left behind and she faced the stairs again, this time descending. She was scared to death when, before she completed the first step, she saw the silhouette of a man in the shadows next to the first step.

I'm not alone...

The figure, who seemed to be watching her, stepped forward. The left end of his face was visible from the dim light from the sunset coming through the window. With a restrained breath, Sara recognized a large, hairless man with disproportionate features. She identified the man in the house.

"Girl, I was expecting you," said Kurt Payne, the mysterious Buddhist forensic, in a surprisingly high voice. As if he were a giant with a whistle.

Chapter 17

“All things begin and end in people, we are capable of the best and the worst.”

“What do you mean?”

"That in a few minutes, the nurses will come in very angry and accuse me about what I have done to Félix. They think I'm a monster for attacking him, but my intention couldn't have been more honest."

"But what will happen to him?"

"God knows. We are all capable of the best and the worst, remember."

Monday, November 13, 2006

"Kurt! I didn't know you were at home. Were you... waiting for me? I've come to say goodbye."

Sara's words were meant to be natural, but since she had just been scared to death, instead they trembled in fear.

The blue and oval eyes of the coroner, like two pearls, stuck unperturbed in his face.

"You're in danger, girl," he announced with his own peculiar tone of voice. "Keep your eyes open."

Sara glanced sideways alternately, as if searching for a hidden camera on the landing. She didn't know whether to laugh at the joke or start shaking. The second thing happened.

"Listen, girl, I have to warn you that this policeman calling himself Alfred Horner will not stop until he catches you," Payne explained with mocking seriousness. "And when he does, he will be ruthless."

Sara was close to collapsing on hearing from the mouth of that weirdo that her nightmare was not over.

"Horner? The cop?"

"Yes. That arrogant bastard thinks he can always be so high and mighty. He treats people like cheap shit. Well, he can stick it up his ass."

"But I don't understand. Why are you helping me?" She said, making an effort to get information from the coroner hidden in the shadows.

"Because Alfred Horner is a bad person. I want to see him suffer, to pay for everything. He needs to pay!" He exclaimed, now without control. "Oh, girl, you are so young and beautiful."

Sara thought she saw a lustrous gleam in his eyes as he spoke. Then came the memory of Charley Rubial catching her helplessly in her department and forcing her against the bed, so that when Kurt stepped forward, she gave another step back, and when the Buddhist cornered her against the corner of the landing, she didn't hesitate to take her knife out of her purse. At any other time, one in which Sara could analyze the situation with the objectivity that used to characterize him, the movement of the forensic would have been interpreted as an innocent gesture of parental protection. Or maybe not. What simply happened, in short, was that Sara pointed at him with the edge of the knife.

"What the fuck, honey?" Payne spat, barely reacting to the sudden attack.

"Shut up, monster! Don't you dare touch me or I'll slit your neck!"

"Stop, Sara, stop!" The coroner continued, shouting, in a voice, if possible, sharper than usual.

It happened in less than a second. Just as Kurt advanced his hand, Sara made a quick move with her wrist and sliced a large part in his palm. The blood began to gush, and an aberrant howl invaded the upper floor of the house. Then an inner force pushed Sara to run downstairs, open the front door and escape from that crazy house as fast as her legs allowed her. She had left her suitcase by the door of her room, but that didn't matter anymore. She had to meet Diana and leave Oxford once and for all. She didn't stop hearing the Buddhist's cry until she turned the corner.

That Monday afternoon, as Sara fled in terror from Kurt Payne, her faculty colleague, Jaime Vergara, was passing through with his Porsche the territorial boundary of Ámber. Devoid of a map, he was forced to drive through the inner walks of the village, relying more on his instinct than on his capacity for guidance. He rejoiced glimpsing the sea after crossing a paved plaza, because it meant that the crossing was finally over. Now he had only to cross the coast in search of the little house with the white painted fence that Aly had indicated to him in his farewell letter, so that he parked the sports car in the first free space he found and prepared to continue on foot.

Jaime's worn shoe stepped for the first time on the ground in Ámber, and an odor of moss and salt water quickly permeated his nostrils. He knew that he was being the victim of a paradox: so many years of friendship with Sara, and the only time he walked the streets of her hometown was not to see her (as he had so often promised), but to look for a stranger, instead a girl he had just met that had intrigued him. Jaime chose to take the search for Óliver Morales as a surreal experience that he would surely remember for the rest of his life. To his left, the tide was agitated; enraged by what looked like a storm, and for a second he erased from his brain Madrid, the Shapiro case and everything related to his life in the capital. He inhaled as much air as he could and allowed the sea to guide him to the next episode of this adventure.

When he had been walking alone for ten minutes and fighting the rising blizzard, out of the corner of his eye he saw the first manifestation of a human person to his right; a very comforting one. On one side of the road, where it widened to connect to a wild road that reached the top of a hill in the distance, a woman cried without comfort, motionless, and she was planted on the grass as if she were one tree among others. Even her hair, dull red, mimicked the deciduous leaves of autumn. While Jaime noticed with very little discretion, he found that the woman held an old photograph between her consumed hands. Consumed, as was her fixed grimace, which Jaime could see as she turned on impulse. Caught in flagrante, she wiped her eyes with her fists and hurried to put the photograph in the pocket of her coat. Her cheeks were soaked, and the clear under her eyes

showed that her age was less than her wrinkled skin and her somber face made him believe it.

"Are you OK? Need any help?" Jaime asked, feeling the need to soothe the woman's pain. She seemed about to faint at any moment.

"Don't worry and go your way."

The woman was still talking in choked sobs. Whatever the cause of her regret, Jaime understood that it was something so serious, so he ignored the caustic tone with which his kindness had been answered and continued talking as if no one was crying.

"To tell you the truth, I wish I knew my way," he said, scratching his head. "I'm lost."

"Where are you going?" She asked with the same interest as if she had none.

Jaime hesitated. How could he explain it, even if he knew his fate?

"I'm looking for a house on the beach front, with a patio surrounded by a white fence." Jaime noticed that the woman frowned, as if his comment had suggested something. "I need to find Óliver Morales, owner of that house."

For the first time, the dismayed woman showed her beautiful teeth in a smile as sweet as her grief.

"What do you want to find him for?" She said.

"I think we have a friend in common, and I suspect that friend is in danger. I need him only to clarify some doubts about her."

The woman opened her eyes in a gesture of fascination. It was as if every word he said was news to her.

"What's that friend's name in common?"

"Alyssa Grifero."

She took a step back and Jaime watched as she swallowed. She cleared her throat before answering, for now she was the one to launch the unexpected announcement.

"You see, Óliver Morales is not the owner of the house that you say with the fence, which, by the way, is no longer white, but blue."

"Are you sure of that?"

"As sure as the house is mine, and Óliver Morales only lives there. He's my only son." Jaime paled suddenly. "Come on, don't look silly and come with me, it's about to rain. He's at home."

She took his arm in an endearing way, nothing to do with the harshness of her first answers, and Jaime understood that he had fallen into the hands of a good person. They continued the road to the east with great care not to be struck down by a gust of wind.

"By the way," she added, "nobody calls him Óliver. When you see him, call him Oli."

The woman stopped behind the last step, in front of a closed door.

"He's in here, in his room. He has only been out once since yesterday, I don't know what kind of bee stung him," she explained, who had presented herself as Verónica on the way. She knocked with her knuckles on her son's door.

A childish voice, however sharp, answered from the other end of the door:

"Come in."

Jaime and Verónica went into the little boy's bedroom, who they found sitting on the bed with his legs crossed. He held in his hands a comic book of *The Lord of the Rings*, and when he turned his gaze to the door and saw the figure of Jaime, he couldn't help showing surprise, anger and modesty with his expression. He only dedicated the newcomer half a second; then continued to devour his comic as if the man who had just entered his room had the same importance as a piece of lint.

"Son, this man wants to talk to you," Verónica said. "He assures me that he knows Alyssa."

Oli gave Jaime a look of disgust when his mother said his friend's name. Jaime smiled as if he hadn't noticed and sat on the edge of the bed, very close to the boy.

"Nice to meet you, Oli. You have a very nice room, you know?" Jaime, who had unconsciously adopted a strange childish voice, held out his hand. As the child didn't reciprocate his greeting, he dissimulated by roughing up his hair. Then he turned to the mother. "Excuse me, can we talk only him and I?"

Crossing her arms by the door, her response was blunt:

"I prefer not. I hope you understand, but we just met."

Jaime made a sympathetic nod. Then he confronted the child:

"Hi, I came to ask you about Alyssa. You know her, don't you?"

"Yes, although I think not as well as you do," replied Oli Morales, with such aggressiveness that he surprised both adults.

"Anyway, it seems like you know things about her that I need to know. Will you help me?"

Oli shrugged and tossed the comic book on the pillow.

Jaime interpreted the gesture as yes.

"Let's see, you know Alyssa traveled to Oxford a few days ago, right?"

"Yes."

"And you know why she did?"

Oli watched him suspiciously. Then he made a snort with his mouth and immediately, out of nowhere, the largest German shepherd Jaime had ever seen

climbed into bed. The dog huddled next to the boy without taking his eyes off the visitor.

"Are you a cop?" Asked the boy.

"No" Jaime's voice had broken, maybe because of the question, or maybe the presence of the animal. *Why are you so intimidated to talk to this child?* he wondered. "I'm a doctor. And also Alyssa's friend, so I'm trying to help her," he explained.

"Okay, I believe you," nodded the boy with growing superiority. Verónica, for her part, hid a malicious motherly smile. "Alyssa went to England to collect a prize."

"An inheritance," she corrected.

"An inheritance? Whose?" Jaime wanted to know.

"Charley's," the boy answered.

"Who's Charley?" Asked Jaime, pleased that he had finally lit the wick of interrogation.

"You don't know him," said Oli, who was now scratching the German shepherd's gut with rhythm. "The important thing is that Charley died, and since Alyssa was one of his two best friends, he gave her half of his inheritance."

"And the other half he left it to his other best friend?"

"Yes, the rest was for Mom."

Jaime looked at Verónica out of the corner of his eye, noticing that her whitish complexion was suddenly flushed. She was staring at the floor, as if she didn't want to explain her son's last answer.

"Okay, and then," Jaime continued the conversation with the child, "did she go to Oxford to collect the inheritance? Why?"

The doctor noticed that Oli was asking permission by looking at his mother to answer. She nodded, also in ceremonial silence.

"Charley's testament said that he had a brother living there, and that to collect the inheritance she had to go and meet him and ask him about a music box."

Jaime scratched his head as he pondered the content of this last reply. At last he was getting some interesting information! He got up and began to prowl the room in silence; he needed to sort out his ideas. *A music box... what can it mean?* Various football posters that reminded him of his own childhood covered the walls of the room. In fact, for some reason he felt comfortable in the house. Next to the door where Verónica was still standing, there was a small wooden desk that held a personal computer.

It was equipped with speakers, a printer and a webcam. And on the white wall, just above the monitor, a picture of a beautiful mountainous landscape that

he could not recognize. The foot of the image read: "JASPER NATIONAL PARK, CANADA".

So the version of the facts of the *Alyssa team*, he concluded for himself, was that she had traveled alone to Oxford to visit the brother of that certain Charley and thus receive her share of the inheritance, with the bad luck of which when she arrived, he had already been brutally murdered. Why then was all of Europe looking for her? Why didn't she explain it to him from the beginning, instead of risking his call to the police? There were still unfinished holes in the puzzle, and without which the assessment couldn't continue. Alyssa Grifero remained as mysterious as she was sensually addictive.

He turned to face mother and son again, and crossed his arms.

"What about your share of the estate?"

When Verónica was about to speak, Oli came forward:

"We didn't want to go anywhere, so we let Alyssa pick up our share.

"Well, you do trust that girl." Jaime spoke to the room in general.

"You are right! We trust her a lot, more than you do!"

It seemed strange to Jaime the level of tension that the conversation had just acquired, so much so that even the dog had gotten up on the bed. Had he said anything inappropriate?

"It's okay, it's okay." He turned to Verónica. "And what about your husband?"

The woman's reaction told Jaime that he had just asked an unfortunate question. Verónica shrugged and paled. Her eyes had begun to glow.

"We buried my husband fourteen days ago," she replied caustically, just as she had answered a while ago, by the causeway.

Jaime's stomach tightened, and then he remembered that Sara had told him about a family affair, the Morales family, in which one of its members had a brain tumor. Was it the family in whose house he was at that very moment? He would have sworn that Sara had told him that it was the woman who had the tumor, and not the man, but in the end, he might not be paying her too much attention. That was the kind of thing he regretted not paying attention about Sara.

He was tempted to question and dispel his doubts, but the mourning in Verónica's eyes told him that perhaps it was better to ignore it. Now he understood that this was why the woman cried in the midst of the blizzard before he appeared with his uncomfortable questions, and possibly the photo she wept was a portrait of her late husband. "I'm such an idiot!" He snapped.

He swallowed and apologized for the unfortunate remark. Then he looked at Oli and saw that his head was down, containing the weeping in silence. Hanging

around his neck shone a strange, cylindrical-looking metal key, catching Jaime's attention. How many keys had he seen with that shape? It was obvious that none. He was so absorbed in contemplating the object that Oli realized that it was being analyzed. The child took the key as if it were a normal object and put it by inside his shirt. Then he gave Jaime a look he could not decipher.

Jaime put his hands to his face and prepared to continue. He did not yet have all the answers through which he had crossed half a country, and the mood in the child's room had become uncomfortable. He sighed heavily and addressed the lady of the house:

"Can I see that will?"

The testament that Charley had written before he died occupied less than one file page. In order to gain the right to look at it, Jaime had been forced to explain to Verónica why Alyssa was the prime suspect in the murder of Charley's missing brother, and how the young woman had ended up in his flat. He added that he was a doctor in La Paz when Verónica asked him, but he omitted the part in which he had been suspended from office and denounced after the death of a multimillionaire businessman. She seemed not to be aware of the news, so he saw no need to smear his image. Finally, Verónica invited him to sit down on the sofa in the living room, and disappeared into the kitchen to return seconds later with a tray holding two cups of fresh coffee. Among them, the will danced as if it were a simple napkin. He sat down in the opposite armchair, and Oli stood by the bookcase, where a few months earlier he had discovered the meaning of the word tumor. He paid attention to every gesture or movement that Jaime made while reading the text of the inheritance.

Charley began his writing with a brief message of thanks to the only two people he had ever loved: Vero and Alyssa. Then it went directly to the point. With a neutral style, far from what a normal person would adopt to reveal a secret like the one about to be revealed, he explained in the letter that he had a twin brother living in England, whom he had not seen for decades. His name was Miguel Rubial (although he apparently adopted Lennard's surname), and he had a nice musical box that one day he had sent him by post. Although Lennard did not know, that the box hid Charley's most precious possessions (*the true inheritance*), and according to his will, the best part was that it couldn't be opened until after his death. Jaime read the contents of the last line several times:

What's inside the box will be split between the two sides equally: half for Vero, and the other half for Alyssa. And then, an additional amusing surprise.

The testament ended in that indefinite way. The deceased had not reserved a single word for his farewell. Jaime dropped the sheet on the table and took a good sip of coffee. The taste comforted him.

"I confess I don't understand anything at all," he said.

Verónica let out a short laugh.

"It would be strange if you had! There's a mess in all this."

"Yes, but..." Jaime leaned toward the hostess in an attempt to endow the conversation with more positive energy for example, "from what did the author of the will die?"

"Charley? He committed suicide."

"Good Lord," his voice lowered. "Why did he do it?"

"He was a bad person and he lost everything by deception and manipulation," Verónica said. "I guess it went too far."

Jaime was silent for a few seconds, as if searching for the meaning of the document now that he had this new information. Despite the naturalness with which both mother and son explained the future of the events that made Aly end up at Mike Lennard's house, the truth is that he now had more doubts than ever about her innocence. Anything could have happened the moment she knocked on Lennard's door! *Would he refuse to give her the wonderful music box and that's why she killed him? In that case, would he already have in his possession the content of the entire inheritance?* Jaime remembered that Alyssa had mentioned that Sara was in danger. *Had she used them both, hiding in his house, and at the same time diverted attention to Sara?* He rubbed his eyelids and returned to the real world. He needed more data.

"Forgive me for asking this, but how does a beautiful widow and mother, and an eighteen-year-old girl end up receiving the inheritance of such a horrible person?"

Jaime understood immediately that he had just asked an uncomfortable question, because the woman wanted to gain some time by taking a long drink of coffee. Her son glanced at her warily. Let's see what you are about to say, their eyes seemed to say.

"Charley was my stepbrother, and he was madly in love with me," she muttered after a few seconds of waiting. "As for Alyssa, I know little."

Jaime looked sideways at Oli. Something told him that the boy knew more than his mother about Aly. He looked away.

"She came to town a few years ago, when she was still a child," Verónica tried to remember. "She was alone and Charley adopted her. At that time we all thought that this was out of place, considering the poor life that my stepbrother

had, but if we consider the violation that the poor child had suffered, it can be said that he saved her life.”

Jaime swallowed and suddenly he felt pity. He realized that he was falling in love with a young woman with a life so different from his own, a life that he could not even remotely imagine.

"Were they sleeping together?" The conversation was beginning to imply a powerful emotional damage, but he couldn't stop now: something told him that he was about to reach the key piece in the puzzle that was the life of Alyssa Grifero.

"I can't answer that," she said with a shrug.

"Yes they did, I saw them myself!" Oli's voice had sounded like lightning. The boy ran off down the stairs. Then, from above, he added in tears, "and you too."

Jaime watched as the boy disappeared into the darkness of the landing. *What had he meant by that remark? Aly and he had not gone to bed, and even if they had, how could he know?* The young doctor had gathered inside a cocktail of sensations that led to something like fear, rage and anticipation, and he didn't know how to interpret his feelings. He decided to continue taking time from the owner of the house. When she was about to speak, however, something sparked before it went off in his head. *How could he have been so stupid?*

"Wait a moment! What did you say an instant ago?" Jaime's pupils trembled inside his eyelids.

"What do you mean?" Verónica asked in disbelief.

"You once said that Alyssa suffered a rape?"

"Yes she did. When she was a kid. Few people know. My stepbrother told me one afternoon when he came home drunk as a skunk. How important is that now?"

Jaime set the empty coffee cup on the table and let his back sink into the sofa cushions.

"Madam, I must imperiously ask you to tell me everything you know about Alyssa Grifero's past," he pleaded firmly.

Chapter 18

"Morgan, I particularly like you."

"Well, I appreciate it."

"I like you so much that I'm going to tell you my big secret."

"I'm all ears."

"Do you know what the World of Second Opportunities is?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not! Because it's my secret."

"Then tell me, what world is that?"

"The World of Second Opportunities! A place where you can travel whenever you want, and imagine an alternative life in which something that you never wanted to happen, disappears."

"For example?"

"Have you ever lost your cat? Or your dog? Well, suppose it's still alive. Wouldn't it be beautiful? Imagine that Violeta was still in love with me, and that Verónica still spoke to me. Imagine that Alfonso was still alive."

"Cheer up doctor, don't cry."

Monday, November 13, 2006

Shortly after noon, agent Thomas Carroll picked up the phone from his desk to make an international call. On the first ring tone a tired voice answered that spoke Castilian.

"José Miguel Callejo speaking. Yes, tell me."

The Anglo-Saxon policeman, making an effort to make his accent as comprehensible as possible, presented himself as a member of the Oxford brigade. Then he asked directly for Alyssa Grifero.

"What is the question now?" The judge's level of English surprised the policeman, who did not expect to be able to communicate with a veteran Spanish magistrate in such a fluid manner.

"My partner and I are investigating the murder of..."

"Yes, of Lennard, I know," interrupted the judge, who apparently was not going through one of his best days.

"Exactly. The fact is that Grifero is one of our top suspects, and we're aware that you're tracking her back there," Carroll explained.

"In our country..." Carroll seemed to perceive on the other side of the connection the typical sound that someone makes their mouth when it generates a grimace of displeasure. "You're referring to Spain."

"Exactly."

"How did you say your partner is called?"

"I didn't tell you, sir. His name is Alfred Horner."

"Well, the case is as follows: we haven't the faintest idea where the happy go lucky Alyssa Grifero is at the moment. We believe she is in the peninsula, but it's as if the earth had swallowed her."

"Nothing else?"

"I have two agents working full time on the case, but for now there is no news."

"I get it."

"I'm sorry I can not give you any more information, but we're working full speed to find her."

"Do me a favor, Sir, apparently if at the slightest hint of a clue that you find her, call me at this number. I am convinced that if we work together we will get the wolf in sheep's skin once and for all."

"The she-wolf you mean."

"Whatever."

When he hung up the receiver, Thomas felt as if he had burned another cartridge, one of the last ones left, missing the shot again. He watched the black clouds through the window and wondered what Alfred was doing at that

moment. Had he paid any attention to this suggestion on taking a couple of days off? He wasn't like his partner all antsy. He poured himself a tea with a trickle of warm milk and waited.

Rafael Salas waited crouched in the shadows of the corridor to which the hairy assistant had finished bandaging the hand of the boxer boy in the consulting room. Ever since Félix, the ape-like man, had attacked him the other afternoon, he had not been able to erase the incident from his mind. Not that he harbored any kind of grudge against him (after all he was just a poor lunatic), but he felt the need, as a doctor, to help him as much as possible. The problem was that the center did not provide medicines, but that was a subject that he intended to remedy. The old man had a plan.

He took a step back when he heard a violent blow inside the room, as if an anvil had struck a stone wall. Immediately afterwards, the boxer boy came out of the room with bloody bandages and throwing back hooks and punches in the air. The nurse was following him, shaking his head in a gesture of resignation. When they both disappeared behind the corner, Salas stuck his foot in the doorway before it closed again, and slipped into the room. After a quick glance, he borrowed a syringe and a glass jar holding a clear liquid. That would be enough. He hid the material in the pockets of his robe and walked down the corridor like a clumsy pickpocket.

When he reached Félix's cage, he counted to three before turning the handle on the metal gate. It was open, to his surprise. A shrill screech accompanied the movement until the piece completed an angle of ninety degrees. The door gave way.

What Salas saw then impacted him. He held his breath and managed to contain the shock. On the wall at the bottom of the cage, the impression between opacity, the monster was anchored to the stone by thick metal chains that supported his four extremities. Around him, in the shadows, he could see spots of urine and excrement. The smell of the room reminded him of a sewer, but multiplied. The prisoner maintained a docile attitude, however.

What the hell is this? The old doctor asked, dumbfounded. *Why would they keep this being in such unclean conditions?* He decided that he would speak very seriously later on with Grau. He took a couple of steps forward into the cage. Félix looked up and crossed his Martian eyes with his. They were submissive, like those of an abandoned dog who has become accustomed to being beaten.

"The incomplete protects the iron tube," he muttered.

"Hi, Félix." Rafael's voice had compassion. "The old cheat has come to help you."

"The incomplete hates the old senile cheater, don't you, Félix? Don't you hate him?"

The old man tugged the flap on his robe and knelt a meter from the chimpanzee man. He was grateful for the new stance, for his legs had begun to tremble. Her expression tightened.

"Who hates me, Félix?" He asked. "Do you hate me?"

The caged man responded with a sinister shriek that could be interpreted as a laugh.

"Félix doesn't hate the old senile cheater," he mumbled through gurgles. "The incomplete does!"

Doctor Salas put his hand on his forehead and tried to find the solution to the new riddle. Who was that incomplete who hated him so much? The answer came to him like a shooting star.

"Well of course!" He exclaimed euphorically. "Incomplete is Charley Rubial! The fucking ballsy amputee!"

The misshapen man screamed sharply as he nodded. He was smiling.

"And tell me, Félix, what do you know of the incomplete?" He wanted to know, now fiercely.

"Old friend," came the brief reply.

"Are you from Ámber?"

The patient nodded again, showing his amorphous teeth. Salas thought that all he needed was to growl like a monkey. He stroked the syringe with his hand, inside the pocket of his robe.

"That's why you knew me then." The old neurosurgeon was now talking in the air, self-absorbed. "Charley told you I was a cheater and a madman, right?"

"Incomplete very good with Félix," was all he detailed.

A very subtle sound came to Salas from the corridor. A few minutes ago he had been aware that he was being spied on. However, he didn't give any importance to it and continued with the game of riddles.

"Tell me, Félix, has it been a long time since you've seen the incomplete?"

"Since he hit the guy who spoke weird. The old senile cheater asks some very boring questions to Félix," he told him.

"Who's the weird guy?" Salas was so intrigued that he had absolutely forgotten everything else. He did not think to leave without obtaining information from that monster. "Why did the amputee hit him?"

"A thrashing close to death."

The old man snorted.

"Yes, Félix. Why did the incomplete man beat the man who spoke weirdly?"

"I don't know," said Félix, very dry. Then an innocent revelation: "maybe by his accent." And then, another: "Or because he lived on an island..." He finished the sentence in such a way that the person in the hallway spying on the conversation ran away immediately: "Police! The incomplete hated the cop who spoke weird!"

Rafael pursed his lips, ignorant of what Félix had decided to tell him about Charley. He didn't know any policemen with an accent to which the bastard amputee wanted to smash his face, although in truth, Charley never needed a reason to fuck up somebody's life.

A progression of steadily vanishing steps was heard from within, which meant that the spy had decided to leave his post behind the door. Salas, therefore, was once again alone with the chimpanzee. He stood up and took the syringe from his pocket, which he carefully filled with the transparent liquid he had borrowed a few minutes ago. The sick eyes of Félix stuck to the needle, and at that moment he began to howl. The chains clanged aggressively at the patient's helpless gait and the wall rumbled. The creature was terrified, but Salas, determined as he was, grabbed the syringe like a chisel, raised his hand over his shoulder to gain momentum, and stuck the needle hard. The instrument was embedded in the monster's triceps, and when the doctor pressed the syringe to inject the medication, a thread of blood began to sprout from the perforated arm. Félix turned his head and the old man saw in him the look of utter bewilderment.

A second passed until the patient again called for help with his irritating timbre. The roar was heard throughout the building, and was more like a wild animal than a human being.

"This will help you to improve, Félix," Rafael promised in a strange whisper that no one heard.

Very cool and calculating, knowing that the screams would attract a whole legion of doctors and nurses, Rafael Salas turned on his heel, threw the syringe to the ground, and left the hole. When he had already traveled enough meters not to perceive the smell of Félix, he heard a series of voices that came closer to his position. Then they stopped, and he did the same. He sharpened his ear and listened:

"Félix! Who cut you?" Said a voice.

"... cut..." replied the deformed man with his peculiar defect of aphonic.

"Have you cut yourself?"

"C... cut just... alone."

"It's very strange. You don't have access to knives or razors here, they are forbidden. And it's not possible that you did this wound with your hands or teeth."

"Hands or teeth..." echoed the ape-man.

Rafael shook his head, blinked repeatedly, and resumed his flight. He didn't stop until he went outside. In the garden under an oak, Saul Morgan was waiting for him to begin what was to end up being an interesting interview.

Rodolfo Grau paced the corridors of the psychiatric center with a halting breath. He didn't pay attention to the clamoring noise that was being focused in the zone of the cages for maximum security; he decided that later he would ask what happened. He went into his office and dialed a phone number as he loosened the collar of his shirt.

"José Miguel, today is your lucky day," he said as soon as he heard the other side of the communication.

"Grau?" Said the tired voice of Judge Callejo. "Do you have anything?"

"I have a lot," the director said bluntly, as if the words were crowding in his mouth anxious to be pronounced. "I left Félix's cell open and Salas has taken the bait. At last they had time to talk about their things."

"Mother of God!" Callejo spoke in whispers. "Any good?"

For the next quarter of an hour, Dr. Rodolfo Grau was describing to his new confidant, Judge José Miguel Callejo, the singular conversation between Rafael and Félix. He didn't omit any details of the riddles. When he finished, there was such a long silence that Grau thought the call had been cut off. The judge was the first to speak again:

"Answer a question: how did you know Salas was going to look for, find and have a conversation with Félix?"

The answer fell like the first thunder of a storm:

"I forbade it. There is no greater attraction than the forbidden, Callejo."

As soon as he finished the telephone conversation, and without actually getting off the handset, the judge checked the call history on his telephone and pressed the return key when the cursor stopped on the English police number.

"I want to talk to the police officer Thomas Carroll," he said.

"I'm Carroll." A pause. "Mr. Callejo, is that you?"

"Agent, I need you to put me through right now with your partner Alfred Horner." As he spoke, he thought he should also call Julian Barreneche to let him know the news of the case. He hated talking to that idiot, but he couldn't leave him out. The Anglo-Saxon voice of the Oxford cop removed the grotesque figure of Barreneche from his mind.

"Alfred is on leave, he took a few days off. Why? Something new?"

José Miguel Callejo pushed the receiver away from his face and struck a mad thump on the table with the palm of his hand. "Shit!" He mumbled.

"Sir?" Carroll's voice came robotic through the speaker.

"Agent Carroll, we need to find your partner," he said ruthlessly, trying to make his words sound like an order. "It's urgent."

Snowflake waited for Alfred's voicemail to cut off the call he made.

"Shit, he doesn't answer," he cursed under his breath.

The whole thing smelled rotten. *Why on earth had the last call from the judge come? It was obvious that something had happened in Spain that had precipitated the investigation, but what was so urgent, Fred? Did he have any relevant information that he was hiding?* In the depths of his being, Carroll knew that Alfred was absolutely capable of anything. Therefore, he assumed, it could be plausible that the police of a small town in Spain saw in him the key to solve the mystery that was driving them all crazy.

He dedicated to the world an expletive, took his jacket and left the police station.

A few minutes later he was in the Kidlington neighborhood ringing the doorbell to Alfred's house. The neighborhood was quiet, like most are in Oxford. There it was customary to ride a bicycle, so Thomas found a parking space right in the door, behind a red Mini Cooper. Horner lived in a small terraced house of a height that peeked after an unattended front garden. The curtains of the windows overlooking the road were drawn, and there was no trace of life inside. He insisted on calling a second time. No one answered.

Carroll issued his second expletive in the morning, this time with a hint of concern. After a few minutes of waiting, he returned to the car and started. As he circled the streets of Kidlington, he dialed Judge Callejo's international number on his cell phone.

"I can't find Horner," he said with a horrible foreboding. If Fred had decided to take any steps, he would have told him first. Had something happened to him?

"We can't afford to waste any more time, Officer," the judge said caustically. "I want you to travel to Torrelavega right now and meet me."

The offer, if it was, fell to Thomas like a jug of ice water.

"Have I understood you correctly? You want me to catch a plane now and meet you at your place of work?"

"You understood me, Agent. In fact, we are already taking too long. I am going to hang up. I'll wait for you in my office. Bye."

The Bluetooth of Snowflake's car began to emit tones periodically, which meant that the judge had hung up. Gently, he stopped the car at a gas station and stared at the dashboard, self-absorbed. Was he facing the most surreal situation of his career? He peered through the inside rearview mirror. He was paler than usual; his albino expression resembled that of an alien. He put the phone in his

pocket and swallowed. He resumed his drive and adjusted his mind as soon as he could. He dialed the address of the Heathrow airport.

The afternoon was beginning to fall when he got out of the taxi without luggage. The building of Torrelavega's courthouse gave the impression of being an old hostel that had just been reformed inside. Erected next to a central square, the reddish stone of the facade was blackened by half a century of rain and humidity. The interior was equally bland, for the contrary reason. The renovation had dyed the walls a nuclear white that almost glowed with the fluorescent lights of the ceiling. Carroll walked over to the security booth, where a big, orange-haired, large-mouthed man asked him to identify himself. A metal plaque on which *Toño* had been carved hung from his uniform at the level of his chest.

"I'm Thomas Carroll. I have an appointment with Judge José Miguel Callejo."

Someone exclaimed something on the other side of the safety latches before *Toño* could check Thomas's appointment.

"Agent Carroll! Incredible, authentic English punctuality!"

The emphatic reception came from a middle-aged man with leafy, pale furry hair whose boring physical description did not match his enthusiasm. Everything about him seemed artificial. He gestured to *Toño* and the redhead opened one of the locks.

"You are Judge Callejo, I suppose," said Carroll, as he was led through such bare corridors as his companion's suit.

"No, no, I'm Dr. Rodolfo Grau," he said. "Excuse my awkwardness for not introducing myself. José Miguel will be here soon."

They entered a conference room without windows. Carroll was a bit claustrophobic, and he hated the windowless spaces. What need was there to set up a meeting room on an underground floor?

Three table seats were reserved. There were jackets hanging on the backs of two of them, and Thomas guessed that the third place would be for him. He took off his jacket and placed it on the back of the chair he'd been assigned. Dr. Grau went straight to the coffeepot in the corner.

"Do you want coffee or tea while we wait?" He offered.

"A coffee, thank you."

"Wow this really is good! A Brit who drinks coffee," he teased. "Are you for football or tennis?"

"Football, I suppose."

"I knew it! I've always thought tea drinkers are more for playing tennis, don't you think?"

Carroll shrugged and looked away. He had no intention of wasting his time thinking about that stupidity.

"Excuse me, I assume you are a doctor?" Carroll's disorientation kept growing. What did a doctor do in a secret police investigation?

"I am, in fact, the director of Ámber's psychiatric center," the doctor said with a hint of arrogance in his eyes. "I am collaborating with the judge in this case."

But what exactly was the case? Thomas decided to be cautious and find out as he went.

The door opened and a serious man with glasses entered, diligent but cheerful. He was very cordial as Judge José Miguel Callejo. Then, the three men took their respective seats around the end of the table.

"You may wonder what you're doing here." The judge had started the meeting most importantly.

Truth be told, Thomas had been thinking round and round for most of the flight. The unexpected disappearance of Alfred bothered him. He wished he were at his side at that moment, defending the investigation and facing the two men in front of him. He felt alone and out of place in a strange city. He hadn't even had time to take a shower, for the taxi had left him directly at the door of the courthouse. He looked up and faced the two pairs of eyes. He had no idea how he was going to focus the conversation. He chose to respond by answering question by question and seeing where the meeting was taking him.

"I'm here for the Lennard case," he said, almost convinced.

"Not exactly," the judge contradicted him. Grau, on the other hand, watched him with the unmistakable smile of the owner of fireworks that are beginning to burn. All he had to do was rub his hands together.

Carroll drew a wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"I'll start at the beginning." He leaned his forearms on the table and touched his fingertips in the shape of a bell. "A few days ago, Dr. Rafael Salas, an old neurosurgeon of the region, entered the psychiatric center that is directed by the man who is sitting next to me." Rodolfo Grau nodded, as if the judge's reference had not been perfectly clear. "There he met Félix." The telephone in the meeting room began to ring, and Callejo stopped his speech to pay attention to the screen of the device.

"Okay, it's Julián Barreneche, the cop who carries some of my cases. I told him to join the meeting," he said, as the phone continued to ring. He pressed two keys and went to the speaker.

"Julian, you're on speaker." Dr. Grau, from the psychiatric center, and ICD agent Thomas Carroll are with me," he explained, his voice slightly high. "We

just started.”

"All right," said an arid voice from the device.

"As you said, Salas got to know Félix in the center," continued the judge. "To give you an idea, this Félix is like a mix between the monster Frankenstein and an abandoned dog. This is certainly the most serious patient Grau has right now." Carroll saw that the director of the center was nodding with a somewhat feigned rawness. "Well, as we have known, Félix maintained some kind of friendly relationship with Charley Rubial in the past."

Carroll held up his hand.

"Wait a second," he said. "Charley Rubial is Lennard's twin brother, right? He's the sentimental couple of Grifero, your main suspect. Am I wrong?"

Thomas knew, by the way the two men who shared a table with him, looked at each other, that they had thoroughly done their job.

"Yes, exactly," said Callejo, who seemed to not mind his interruptions as long as they gave light to his explanation. "We have known for days that Alyssa Grifero and Charley were more than friends, until he committed suicide. Since that fateful October 12th, Julian's team has been tracking the girl."

The arid voice of the speaker participated for the first time:

"Effectively, the kid who works for me has been looking for her all over the country for days."

"Any news of Tena, by the way?" He took advantage of the pause to catch up.

"None. That kid refuses my calls. I'm going to give him his due for incompetence, and then I'll open a file of dismissal."

The judge glanced at the phone and his jaw tightened. It was obvious that the man on the other side of the speaker was peeing out of the pot. Damn, Callejo took a deep breath a couple of times and continued with the story.

"Anyway, that's how we came to the day when Mike Lennard, Rubial's twin brother and hitherto unknown, is murdered in his bathroom several hundred miles away. It is at this point where you," and he pointed his finger at Carroll, "and your partner came on the scene."

There was a silence that Thomas took advantage of to address his fellows.

"Okay, I understand that I've been called because they need extra information about the murder that might help them in finding Grifero. Why not get to the point?"

José Miguel Callejo ignored the challenge and looked at Grau as if giving him the word.

"Easy, boy, we're at the end."

The doctor's tone sounded like a very subtle disrespect to Thomas. He was like the typical authoritarian schoolteacher who uses his power as part of his personal fun. In addition, the clock ticking on the wall exasperated him. Everything in the damn room did.

"As José Miguel said before, Dr. Rafael Salas had interesting conversations with our dear Félix." One out of two of Grau's words were sarcastic. "In particular, the deformed patient confessed to Salas a secret that dislocated us all." He leaned across the table and challenged Thomas with his eyes. "A few years ago Charley Rubial traveled to England with the sole aim of finding a certain policeman. When he got to him, he gave him such a beating that he almost killed him. It happened at night in the middle of Oxford."

Rodolfo Grau's eyes shone with triumph. He leaned back on his seat and let the British policeman connect the dots. It didn't take too long.

"Wait... are you inferring from all this that it was Alfred who received that aggression?" He exclaimed on the verge of confusion. "You will forgive me, but I see nothing more than a mere chance."

"We are deducing much more," the judge now spoke with authority. "Thomas, you are not here for the Lennard case, as I suggested earlier; you are here because your partner, Alfred Horner, is a murderer."

Thomas Carroll experienced a beginning of dizziness. Even so, he had the strength to jump out of his chair in a rage.

"You've lost your mind, you two!" He shouted, and pointed to both men with violence. "Fred as a murderer? Are you really telling me that you could kill someone for the simple fact that he is the twin brother of a guy who, according to you, assaulted him years ago?" As he screamed, he loosened the knot of the modern tie and tugged at it with fury. "You don't know Fred, damn it. He is an honest cop. A brilliant policeman! He would never lower himself for revenge."

When he had finished venting, he noticed that the two men were watching him calmly, confidently.

"What about Alyssa Grifero then?" Carroll tried to bring the conversation back to a point where his friend would not remain like the bad guy in the movie. "What about Sara Mora?"

"The young Sara was the last victim of Charley Rubial before he committed suicide," José Miguel Callejo said ruthlessly. "Apart from that, I know she enjoys a well deserved holiday in England."

Carroll had run out of resources.

"You know what?" He said indignantly, as if he were beginning to assume the truth. "It seems incredible to me that you have made me travel to this shit city to cast doubt on my friend's honor. I am leaving."

"I'm only asking for another minute, officer," Callejo said from his seat. "We're not done yet."

Without giving an option to the reply, the judge pressed a button on the telephone that connected to the intercom of the security checkpoint.

"Toño, make the guest pass."

Then, as they waited, he turned to Carroll again.

"Have not you wondered why Charley Rubial decided to travel to another country expressly to beat up a rookie cop?" He made the question sound like a trap.

The door to the meeting room opened before Thomas could ask for the answer, and a young man in his thirties appeared behind it with the guard. He wore casual clothes, but of a brand name, and a bearded three-day beard that told Carroll that he was not a man of low social status. He did not look like a cop, though. His gaze wandered the room for a second to the figure of each of those present. In his restless eyes, it was the first time he had stepped into a court.

"I present you to Dr. Jaime Vergara, a neurosurgeon from Madrid *who has nothing to do with Horner, Lennard or Rubial.*" Callejo tweaked the last words as setting the dictatorial rules of a game. "Jaime is simply a friend of Sara Mora who a couple of hours ago went to the police station to inform them that he had useful information about the case." He addressed the newcomer. "Please, Jaime, have a seat."

Carroll watched in amazement as the man, who had come out of nowhere, grabbed all the attention.

"Agent Carroll, you too. I beg you."

The judge's voice sounded pious on this occasion. Thomas obeyed.

The judge urged the newcomer to speak, who began as if he were the narrator of a story:

"This afternoon I visited the house of Charley Rubial's half-sister, Verónica Salas. I've been chatting with her and her ten-year-old son for a while."

Rodolfo Grau leaned close to Carroll's shoulder and whispered in his ear:

"Verónica is the daughter of Dr. Salas, whom we have talked about before."

Thomas nodded without interest, and continued to pay attention to the young doctor.

"The reason for my visit has been my growing attachment to Alyssa Grifero, the family's old friend and your main suspect." Carroll raised his eyebrows at that name.

"And how did you get the information you were looking for, Doctor?" Callejo asked, although something told Carroll that he already knew the answer.

“More than that. It turns out that Alyssa's past is more tragic than I ever imagined. One night in the summer of 2002, she was savagely raped during a college party on the Malaga coast. She was only a fourteen-year-old virgin.” Thomas swallowed, overwhelmed. “The bastard who forced her, with pardon, was a boy named Alfredo.” He paused for a moment. “Everyone knew him as Freddy.”

The doctor's tone had grown as much as his determination. He faced Carroll:

"With all due respect, Officer, all this time you've been chasing the victim while sharing a table with the real murderer. I have all of Verónica's testimony recorded."

Vergara pulled a Smartphone out of his jacket pocket and lifted it up at the very moment Thomas Carroll felt the ground open beneath his feet.

Chapter 19

“Doctor...”

"Yes, Morgan?"

"A few minutes ago you told me that a few angry nurses would surely come after you for what you did to Félix.”

“Ah...”

"Well, I see them. Only they're not nurses, but those from security. And they come armed.”

Monday, November 13, 2006

The digital alarm clock blinked 13:10. *What... what day is it? Monday. Yes, it must be Monday.*

Alfred Horner had slept for more than ten hours straight. He remembered drinking some whiskey shots and falling asleep on the couch with a jazz record playing in the stereo. No, it definitely hadn't been a good night. Now, however, he felt like new, his head clear of bad omens and energy running through his muscles again. *The gun?* He cocked his head to the dresser in the hall. *Well, it's there.*

He stretched his whole body. Then, still in his underwear, he prepared a fruit smoothie and a toast of seed bread that he bathed in honey. He had breakfast at one-thirty while listening to the radio. Back in the room, he performed five sets of twenty push-ups and as many abs. Finally, he took a cold shower and dressed in a T-shirt, Chinese pants and sandals. Horner had done all these mundane and routine activities without even thinking for a second about the threatening video he had received the other evening, nor Henry Millward, or anything that had disturbed him since Mike Lennard died. He'd even gotten used to watching the cracked plasma in the living room and the broken shelves.

Then he heard a car that stopped outside and it reminded him: Ania. Turning to the kitchen window to check, the cell phone rang on the study desk behind him.

THOMAS CALLING

He ignored the call and turned off the vibrator.

I'm on my day off, dammit.

He looked out the window again and saw a six-foot-tall blonde emerging from a red Mini Cooper. She walked like a model, dressed like a model and had the tits of a model. He smiled. Among all the things he had forgotten, one was that today was her day of visitation. He went to open it.

"Want something different?" Snapped the gorgeous woman from the door. She was holding leather handcuffs in her hands.

Ania rarely spoke, but when she did she used to do it with the aim of making Alfred hot. But at least it was customary to say hello. This time it was enough to pronounce three words with her sensual accent from the east to make him horny. He lunged at her and pushed her against the door, which slammed shut. He had no intention of wasting any time. As they kissed, Horner felt Ania's body beneath her coat. *Damn, she only comes in underwear.* Very hot, he undid her coat and then the bra. He stopped kissing her to lead her to the bedroom, where she pulled her panties off. She had a smacking hot body. The time in the room had slowed, and in less than a minute he had already handcuffed her to one of

the bars at the head of the bed. Sex with Ania and whiskey: the only effective antidepressants he knew.

She was screaming with pleasure. He loved it when she did that.

The doorbell rang throughout the house. No one listened.

Horner's vision blurred with desire. The telephone rang again. No one paid any attention to it.

"Don't stop, fuck, go on..."

Ania's body had hunched in an unnatural posture.

"You're hurting me," she moaned chained to the bed.

Something was wrong.

But Alfred couldn't stop. He tried to focus his eyes. Why were Ania's wrists bleeding? He looked into her eyes and saw panic in them. He felt strangely powerful.

The screams were now of real pain.

Friday, July 5, 2002

Four years before the events related to the Rubial brothers' death, Nacho and Alfredo were drinking Heineken beer. They were leaning on the windowsill of the kitchen in Nacho's parents' house, who would be out all week enjoying themselves at the pool of the mansion with a carefree air. They were in a complex of villas on the outskirts of Marbella, where they lived, in addition to Nacho and his family, the butler, the maid and also the cook.

The atmosphere was sultry, and the moon, almost full, shone especially bright. It was the first Friday after the exams of all the courses in law school. Nacho, taking advantage of the fact that his parents were gone, had decided to increase his popularity among the rest of the university students by celebrating a multitudinous party in the garden.

The two young beer drinkers studied in the same class, although they were not friends. Alfredo, to whom everyone called Freddy, had just turned twenty-four. Nacho was already twenty-five. The first one, who wore a black leather jacket, was the handsome student, the biker, and the hunk. The other had failed classes, and he wore a blue Armani jacket, which on its own aroused admiration. That casual encounter of alpha males in the window frame proved fateful for the youngest of them. Nacho Conde belonged to the class that in the faculty was known as a *flirt, a womanizer*. The reasons for the offensive discrimination were not without some weight. Since starting the course in his new class, Nacho had already broken up three couples and had conquered several more girls, so, after spending some good times with them in the backseat of his car, he would apply the, *if I've had you, I don't remember you*. For Freddy, who had always been considered the winner of the class, Nacho was a threat.

That night he fell into the trap of the womanizer to get into this delicate subject: Freddy's new girl. She was a fourteen-year-old girl who had simply developed her femininity before the other girls, and who, therefore, caused a furor among the most avid college students of adolescent love. In spite of her youth, she was already looking at men with such a practical style to seduce a man, and her pale skin had the soft touch of the girls her own age. It was an open secret: the girl had promise.

"The girl is hot, I congratulate you," Nacho said, looking toward the edge of the pool, where the girl, visibly affected by the effects of the rum, moved like a fish in the water between boys up to ten years older than she.

Freddy detected an obvious provocative tone in Nacho's voice, which he probably didn't even try to disguise.

"Quit that."

He knew very well where Nacho was headed with his speech. He gritted his teeth and said nothing more. He took another sip of beer.

"Come on, Freddy, are you kidding? Don't tell me you're jealous. We're good friends! Tell me, have you asked her to sleep with you?"

The provoked looked at Nacho for the first time with an expression that said clearly *don't mess with me*. He went on to explain that his girl was a virgin, and that she had asked him for some time before taking the big step. God, he felt ridiculous just thinking about it.

"Bah, you're gay," he said as if he didn't happen to be the host of the party, he kept the green bottle to his mouth. "If you continue to be an asshole and don't hurry, at any time you'll find out that she is fucking someone else."

"Fuck you," Freddy countered, very tense for having his manhood questioned.

The offended posed the empty bottle on the windowsill and without saying goodbye went into the hall, where he met up with his colleagues.

After a very long time, when he had consumed so many beers that he had lost count, Freddy decided to go out for a walk. He walked aimlessly around the garden, stumbling as the music reverberated loudly inside his head. Then he noticed something less than fifty meters away, and felt a little dizzy. Inside the pool and even with his clothes on, Nacho Conde was kissing passionately a young woman who smiled like a dizzy dummy. Under the water, some of her intimate parts were being stroked. Several guests, mostly women, attended the sultry show with disgust. Freddy, who feared the worst, bent his head to discern the face of the girl, and then his suspicions were confirmed. Anger rose from his feet and came out in an uncontrollable explosion.

The sight of his sweet little girl rubbing against the body of his greatest enemy had provoked in him as much rage as excitement.

He strode to the edge of the pool. He pushed back a young lady who was watching the spectacle from the front row on the side of the pool and reached for the teenager's armpit, who seemed to be on the edge of an ethyl coma. He pulled the soaked blouse and pulled the almost motionless body out of the pool. There was a circle about them both, perhaps waiting for Freddy to give first aid to the young woman, or they might have been anxious for him to pounce headlong on the disgusting jerk, still in the pool, mocking smugly, and start an exciting fight. Everyone would have wished one of these things to happen. Instead, he took the girl in his arms and took her away from the party.

Already outside the complex, under the eyes of a few curious people who had followed him, he settled her in the seat of his motorcycle, a black Kawasaki

Z 750, and sat behind her, making sure that he held her tightly between him and the handlebars. He left.

Something had crossed in the depths of his head. He was drunk and had also tried several marijuana joints during the party. But that's not what it was about. The image of her, his girl who had so often denied him, rubbing herself like a nymph against Nacho Conde in front of everyone, had caused a complete short-circuit in his brain. He couldn't reason, he was simply beside himself. He drove on a course to nowhere following a path that should lead somewhere. Her black hair fluttered in the wind and went into his nose and mouth, irritating him. He had only one thing in his mind: to hurt her. It had become a strange obsession.

The road was lost inside a forest, and some leafy trees closed their path. He stopped. He looked around, but he couldn't see anything, not even the stars. The deep darkness was only comparable to the absolute silence. Perfect for what he had planned to do.

While Freddy, disoriented at the sight, surveyed the ground, the weight of her, free of restraint, caused her to fall to the ground from the seat of the Kawasaki. The blow woke her up, though her alcohol level was so high she didn't seem to be aware of what was going to happen to her in the next few seconds. He dragged her to the base of a tree. He placed her face up like a lifeless log. Then he ripped off her still moist blouse with his teeth, and began to run his tongue over her torso.

The innocent babe with a lifeless smile could only call, "Freddy..." Apparently, she was still madly in love with him. It was when he took off her pants as if he were undressing a plastic doll, and then her panties, that's when she seemed to realize where she was and the danger she was in. The instinct for survival made her start to scream like crazy, but the biker knew they were several miles from civilization. No one was going to listen. Possessed by an evil never known in him, Freddy stopped her by covering her mouth with his hand. Then he had a better idea; he was going to need both hands. He grasped the fragile wrists and forced them so that they surrounded the trunk of the tree. He used his belt to immobilize them. The girl moaned as if her shoulder had been dislocated, she seemed on the verge of fainting. Then Freddy slipped her own blouse into her mouth and unzipped his trousers.

Once she was at his mercy, he raped her in the darkness for more than an hour. Only one thing competed with the muffled cries that the girl let slip through the damp cloth that covered her mouth: during the act, Freddy repeatedly whispered in her ear two words that would remain engraved in her brain forever: "you're mine..."

When it was done, at dawn, Freddy was still beside himself. Unaware that he left a fourteen-year-old naked, wounded and unconscious in the middle of nowhere, he climbed back onto the motorcycle and drove away. It was daytime when he got home and got into bed. He fell into a deep sleep and slept more than fifteen hours straight. Once awake, at dusk the next day, He remembered almost nothing of the previous night (and absolutely nothing of the abuse committed).

After that day, Freddy never saw the girl again, who was none other than Alyssa Grifero. He traveled to England to study English during the summer, and thus avoided crossing with his cheating ex-girlfriend. It was an unnecessary precaution, as the teenager didn't leave the house for weeks, and when she did, it was to leave the coast of Malaga and disappear from the map.

As they were about to conclude their holidays, Freddy learned from a friend in Spain that the girl had gotten pregnant that summer; there were rumors that she had been raped. She had apparently aborted. Freddy, still in England attending his classes, was astonished to hear this, and a terrible doubt assaulted him at once. Had he been the cause of the rape?

What the hell had happened that night? The truth was that he was so drunk that day, so out of his mind, that he remembered nothing. What if the child was his? What would become of the little girl now? He chose to reject everything. Most likely, the bastard Nacho Conde was dating her for a while and had overtaken her at some point.

The young man then decided to start a new life in Oxford, England, where he was bitten by the police bug, so he applied and he was approved. He changed his name and became agent Alfred Horner (orphaned from birth by his father, he used the family name of his host during that summer). He met a beautiful young woman named Donna, and did not think of Alyssa again, he literally erased her from his memory, until the night that, four years later, he met the stunning Ania handcuffed and open-legged, at his disposal.

Monday, November 13, 2006

Everything became crystalline. A door had opened in the depths of his subconscious. Nailed to the waist of that blond monument, he watched as the last piece of the puzzle flew past his eyes like a feather and settled gently into a hollow of the same shape. The complex puzzle had been completed. Now he knew with certainty who had liquidated Mike Lennard.

Just getting rid of Ania, Agent Horner got dressed and got the address for Diane Tallent in a few seconds from the police headquarters. He picked up his badge and the Hekler Koch Compact before going out the door.

Someone knocked on Diane Tallent's door. The British girl, who had just taken a hot shower, turned off the dryer, covered herself with a cotton sweater, and ran to open it. Vader's fluffy butt came to rest on the dais beside her feet when the figure of a man about her age, looking as if he'd had a bad day, she glimpsed him on the other side of the wood, displaying his bright face with an identification badge.

"Diane Tallent?" He asked roughly.

The one mentioned nodded with a frown as she stroked the tips of her hair, still wet.

"I'm police officer Alfred Horner," he said. "You are detained."

Oh, my God...

She had no choice but to struggle, because when she wanted to react, the woman's arms were already immobilized against the wall. A metallic cold gripped her wrists. She bellowed and kicked with all her strength in the hope that some neighbor would listen, but the wind was intense and there would probably be no one on the street at that moment. The last thing that kept her memory was that she was dragged into the back seat of a car. It all faded when the clang of something rigid hit the back of her neck.

It was 06:50 pm and it had started to rain.

Sara squeezed her fingers together as she ran and noticed a viscous liquid. The blood that had sprouted from the Buddhist's hand was clotting on her skin.

What am I going to do now?

She wanted to go to the police and tell them about her meeting with Kurt Payne. How he had cornered her on the landing, leaving her no choice but to use her knife in self-defense. Because it had been self-defense, right? Would they believe her? She had to be calm. After all, she had not killed anyone.

The wind was blowing hard against her face, making it difficult for her to run and bringing chaos to the situation.

On the other hand, she told herself, the police probably keep the letters that relate to Diana, and what's worse, to Lennard. Frankly, she was making merits

to earn a spot on the Wanted list at the police station, if such a thing existed.

Deja vu.

Just like last October 12, when she unveiled nosy Doctor Salas' deception, she was again running out of breath in the storm. On that occasion she had done it to try to save the life of Alfonso Morales. It was in vain. Now, however, she fled from fear. And just like that day, it seemed that her heart was going to explode. *Why do you always get into these messes, Sara?* The first drops of rain had already gotten rid of the dried blood on her hand, and as she decided whether or not to go to the police, she had already arrived at Diana's house.

Vader waited sitting by the fence at the entrance to the garden, and the door of the building was ajar.

Sara stepped quietly into the hall, completely silent. In the kitchen sink were two dirty dishes, a glass of wine, a frying pan, and some cutlery, all without scrubbing.

"Diana?" She exclaimed, but she got no answer but the echo of her own voice.

The bathroom door was open, and from the hallway you could see the straight curtain of the shower and a wet towel lying on the floor. Diana's hair irons were connected to the current. Sara frowned and pulled out the plug.

"Diana!" She repeated, this time with an annoying lump in her throat.

The last room she went through was the bedroom. The bed was made and smelled good, but there was no trace of her lover.

A mew from the front door caused Sara to shudder, and immediately afterwards Vader slipped into the room with his hair curled and his tail raised. He hid behind her legs.

"What's the matter, little fur ball?"

There was a loud slamming door. Someone had just entered the house, and Vader was trying to communicate that it was not his mistress.

Sara took a quick glance down the hallway through the gap between the frame and the door. She had to mentally count to three so that her body wouldn't react to the terror of seeing that arrogant policeman creeping towards her position. She was able to identify a weapon hanging from his right hand. He was going after her.

Shit, shit, shit!

To the utmost desperation, Vader let out a second meow, which eliminated any possibility of going unnoticed. She turned and analyzed the situation. She only had one choice. She ran to the window, opened it wide, and jumped onto the back lawn just as the leather boots of the male figure trod on the bedroom floor.

She nearly tripped twice before leaving the garden for the road. She ran with all her energy, and as she struggled to save her life, she let the tears flow, clouding her vision. She had the idea of avoiding the main avenues, so she continued to escape through the narrow alleys of the city center. The ground slid like oil-battered songs, and the streetlights shone ghostly shapes on the stone walls. Without knowing how, Sara had ended up in the middle of a horrible nightmare.

The passage from High Street to Catte Street, also known as Queen's Lane, is a narrow, winding stone road through which time seems to have run out. A must for New College students, during the day Catte Street is one of the most charming tourist attractions in the city. At night, dingy and lonely, it becomes the typical place where no one wants to walk alone. As Sara twisted the first two corners of the passage, she passed a boy riding a bicycle. She made a stop to plead for his help, but the cyclist didn't stop; he didn't even look at her. She twisted the last gap between spasms and glimpsed the Bridge of Sighs, which led to the open city. Hopefully, she picked up the pace at the moment a police car skidded violently and stopped under the bridge. The driver got out of the vehicle.

That unexpected twist in the chase made Sara wince in her heart first, and then she stumbled. She had tried to stop suddenly, but the wet stone was like an ice rink for such acrobatics. She landed face-first against a puddle. She held her breath and closed her eyes. The muscles in her body didn't respond, and she wasn't sure whether any bones had been broken. Her pursuer must have been close by now. The only thing that could be heard in the alley was the strong heel that the soles of his boots produced when he stepped on the damp ground. They were approaching slowly.

Sara Mora prepared to be arrested. The heel stopped at her side, and Sara, fully surrendered, and relaxed her body to make things easy for her captor. She had no intention of resisting any more. She expected a brief shaking and a strong pull to place her wrists behind her back. She had seen it in countless movies. Instead, she was flipped over face up. She looked into the face of the cop who had been chasing after Mike's death. Raindrops fell from her bangs to her eyes, blinding her. And the warm glow of the lanterns didn't allow her to focus on anything in particular. She did not see the butt of the pistol slam into her forehead.

Chapter 20

"Since I have a little time left, I think it's the moment of the last lesson, and it's one I've learned in the last few weeks."

"Okay, but hurry it up. The security guys are here."

"The last lesson is that the more you try not to love, Morgan, more people put their lives on your path for you to love."

"Well, I'll take it as the best compliment I can get out of your mouth."

"Dear Saul, it has been a real pleasure to talk to you."

"The pleasure has been all mine."

Monday, November 13, 2006

It is curious how the simple touch of the soft skin of a pregnant woman can give value to a whole life. Rafael made this reflection as he slid his hand down his daughter's belly. He dared not do more than just touch it. He was touched by the prospect of living with his second grandson.

Verónica looked up and met his eyes. Damn! He almost couldn't remember how beautiful they were. Had his daughter forgiven him? The future mother leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. Rafael did not want Verónica to see him crying with emotion, so he rubbed his eyes to hide his emotions.

When he opened them again, everything had vanished as if by magic. A very pure white color invaded his field of vision, and intense light struck him intermittently in his eyes. The next thing he noticed was that everything moved around him, even though his legs were immobile. His whole body was without movement. He suffered a sudden bump and nearly vomited. Verónica... Where was she?

The universe stopped again, and now the blinding light no longer blinked, but remained motionless in front of his pupils, indignant with him. Offended, he had to look sideways, and discovered an open door with a particularity: it was horizontal. It was then that he knew that he was lying on his back. A stretcher? He couldn't move because, he found, he was tied around his legs and hands by straps. And yet he felt such a comforting peace that was gradually invading him.

His world moved again, only that it was no longer the world, but the stretcher to which he had been tied. Where were they taking him? He tried to speak, but the words did not come out. It was obvious that they were punishing him for something. Had they gotten that drug on Félix? They couldn't do that! After all, he had always acted for the good of the creature. In addition, he was a much better qualified physician than all the payroll babes who cared for the sick. What did they know? He remembered seeing several nurses take Félix to the ward. The poor chimpanzee had his arm dangling, and blood dripped from his upper arm. On second thought, it was possible that he had crossed the line. Maybe he deserved a little punishment; maybe a symbolic hard ear pulls.

He continued to go through radiant, endless corridors when he came across Saul. His petite African-American friend raised his thumb as the stretcher passed him and winked at him, accompanying a singular smile that seemed to say, *everything is going to be all right*.

Saul Morgan disappeared from his field of vision as he had appeared, and then the stretcher stopped again. A metal door slid behind his feet. He was not going to move any more.

An exasperating pain ran through her body. Diana gritted her teeth as she brought her hand to the back of her neck, where an important bump had grown. She winced and fell to the floor. She had lost her balance, not because of the pain, which in itself was already high, but the floor was slippery without warning. *What happened to me? Where the hell am I?*

She was remembering little by little. The policeman's visit, the arrest, and then-an indescribable emptiness. She had a vague sense of being abducted rather than arrested. She tried to mentally draw the face of her captor, but it was impossible. Her head hurt too much.

She looked around. Almost everything was half-dark and smelled musty. She stood up despite the pain at the nape of her neck that accompanied her every movement, and began to feel the walls. She was enclosed in a small place, maybe in a storage room, as it lacked windows. The wall was old wood, though from time to time Diana touched metal surfaces, always halfway up.

She had to get out of there, that was clear. There was a door, but it was iron, and it was locked. *If only I could break the lock.* She searched around for a sharp object, and... thank God! In a corner of the room she found an object about five kilos in weight with a long edge and a wooden handle. *A small ax?* It would certainly work.

She went to the door and began to hit at the lock with a movement that ran from top to bottom. First, onslaught... and nothing. A second attempt a little louder... and the door remained intact. She tried another blow a third time, lucky, this time swinging the ax. Diana struck a blow so brutal that the ax bounced off the metal plate and hit the ground. The edge of the weapon had created a crack in the wood and... *what happens now?* A stream of water began to surge through the splinters, creating a puddle. Now Diana understood why the floor had slipped before: she was inside a ship. And it had begun to sink. She didn't have much time.

The existence of Rafael Salas had been a roller coaster. It had been governed by very extreme principles in which, you were with him, or you were against him. He had enjoyed living on the edge, always on a tightrope, and personally and professionally, that had taken its toll. He was not a violent man, at least of action, and despite having broken the professional code on a couple of occasions and having turned his marriage into a nightmare, he was going to be remembered by most as an out of the ordinary human being. Above all else, his son-in-law Alfonso, had admired him. As for his daughter Verónica, and Sara, although they had betrayed him by filing a complaint against him, he knew that at heart they loved him. And Oli, dammit... it had been a real pleasure to belong to this world just to feel the warm love of his little grandson.

He was beginning to lose track of time by the time he received a pleasant surprise: Oli had just approached the table and had stared at him with an annoyed expression. He apparently did not understand what was happening. And neither did he. He no longer knew what day it was or how long he had been lying on that table with wheels and shackles. When was the last time he had faced those blue eyes? He couldn't remember. He felt comforted when he heard his voice.

"Hello, Grandpa."

Rapid words came to Rafael, as if they were speaking from another room. He was certain that it was his grandson who spoke, because he saw his lips move. He wanted to answer, to engage in a new intelligent conversation with him, but he couldn't. He just watched. Oli had grown his hair, and it seemed that his mother had dressed him again in that horrible pink shirt. On him, he had a pendant attached to his neck with a curious shape: it was a metallic cylinder that the passage of time had covered with rust. For some reason Salas knew that Oli was sad.

"Thank you for helping me with Mom and Dad, Grandpa. Yes we did it."

Was Oli talking between sobs? Everything was getting so depressing.

"I love you, Grandpa."

Rafael Salas thought he lost consciousness, and when he awoke again, he was alone. In the next room someone was having a conversation. He distinguished two voices, one of a man and one of a woman. And a constant cry in the background. The man's torn voice was unmistakable: the stretched-out Rodolfo Grau. The woman's voice was that of his daughter Verónica, there was no doubt either. He guessed that Oli was crying.

"No alternative. This is necessary," said the male voice.

"But how bad is he?"

"When he entered the center he had mild symptoms of neurosis, probably due to all the stress he had suffered in recent months. He was still a brilliant doctor, and even managed to beat me in a verbal duel. For you to understand me, he didn't miss a beat." Rafael seemed to be a thousand years old as he listened to the director's bleak revelation from the stretcher. "But the old Doctor Salas, still believed he was a legend. He didn't understand why he was here or the gravity of his acts abroad. So we had no choice but to perform the psychological tests. We had to use sneaky tricks so he wouldn't suspect, and we even provided him with a medical coat so he could continue to believe his own lie."

"And then? What changed?"

"He met Félix. And then, Saul. Félix is the most seriously ill patient we have, and Rafael became obsessed with him. He came to steal drugs (or what he

thought was medicine), he snuck into his cell, and pricked him with a syringe. What was a remedy to him turned out to be a bestial attack. I don't know what would have happened if our nurses wouldn't have arrived on time."

"And what did he inject him with?"

"Serum. Simple serum. Imagine instead of giving him that, what if he had given him something stronger! Félix would be in a body bag right now."

Salas looked from his stretcher as if they were talking about someone else. He listened as his daughter burst into tears. It was a lament of grief and remorse.

"And who is Saul?"

"Saul Morgan. He is absolutely no one."

A silence.

"You mean to me that..."

"Nonexistent. Saul Morgan is not a doctor in this center because he is not directly a real person." Salas thought he would die hearing this. "He was a product invented by your father's imagination, perhaps to have someone to talk to. He was a friend to talk about his sins, someone with whom to vent. Saul was proof that Rafael Salas suffered from acute schizophrenia."

The voices weakened until they ceased to be perceived. Everything slowed around him, became blurry, and finally, black.

Chapter 21

Monday, November 13, 2006

It was an ambush. The policeman was waiting for me to return to Diana's house to chase after me, corner me and catch me. I was always his target. For some reason, that pig was obsessed with me.

Sara opened her eyes wishing it had all been a nightmare. Actually, she knew it was not like that, because the stench down there was making her feel faint. *Down there.* The space was so limited that Sara could touch the stonewall with both hands if she opened her arms in the shape of a cross. Over her head, several meters above, a dark circle spat drops of water. Yes, she was actually trapped in a dry pit. And soaked to the bone.

A red spot blurred the right margin of her field of vision. Her eye stung. Intuitively, she reached for the area and impregnated herself with blood. The substance came from her forehead, where a cut did not cease to flow blood. *Shit.* Perhaps because of the effect of the discovery, her temple began to throb intensely. The blood flowed without stopping, and immediately dyed her hand red. She had to close the wound or she would faint soon.

"Help!" She shouted from the hole, and the distress call reverberated on the walls for a few seconds. Any murmur that came out to the surface was camouflaged by the sound of the storm.

"Someone help me!"

Sara had the unfortunate occurrence that if a policeman wanted to keep someone locked up and kept secret, he would not hide her in a place where they could hear her screams.

A professional had kidnapped her, and there was nothing she could do to escape. What had become of Diana? Was she also locked up? Tortured? Dead...? The idea was invasive and unbearable, and the young neurosurgeon shivered as she weighed her thoughts. She dropped onto the damp ground and leaned her back against the stone. She let the rain clean the wound and devote all her energy to control the spasms of terror that had begun to dominate her body.

Police officer Thomas Carroll was committing a folly. After being informed in the office of Judge Callejo about the unexpected misdeeds of his companion, everything had rushed to a frenetic pace. The most urgent action was to find and arrest Alfred Horner, and, as there was no other course, all the headlights had focused on him to carry out the task.

During the flight back to Oxford, he began to assume the fact that he had spent days sharing the details of the investigation with the killer himself. Carroll was a non-drinker, but it was more than appropriate to order a vodka with ice in one of the bars at the terminal before embarking. The situation overflowed from all sides.

Beside him was his new and improvised partner, Dr. Jaime Vergara. It struck him that he didn't open his mouth for the entire flight. He wriggled around in the chair, staring blankly at him while punishing himself by biting his nails. Carroll had not yet decided whether he liked him or not. He looked like a good guy, but he was not a cop, and it was obvious that the situation affected him personally. That had been the reason why he had insisted on traveling with him and helping him hunt Horner. But would he be any help or a hindrance? Soon he would see.

Snowflake had risked gifting himself a solitary night to resolve the case. He didn't plan to telephone the police station to inform the captain. Of course, he hadn't worked for twenty-four hours a day with Alfred, gaining his trust and learning from him, so that at the last moment the captain would send a special patrol and he would be relegated to the background. He found himself in the story of his life. He was aware that he was disobeying the code, but it was clear that when he had to call his boss, it would be to report that he had captured Mike Lennard's killer, not before. It would be all a sensation that would lead to his first medal, or a file to expel him from the police force. And his only accomplice was a very young doctor who seemed to be about to suffer an anxiety attack. *Great.*

It was ten o'clock when the taxi dropped them off on a residential street in Kidlington. It was pouring rain in Oxford. A fitting environment for Thomas' mood. They passed a red Mini. *This car was already here a few hours ago*, he warned, as they crossed the front garden. Carroll was in the front with the barrel of his gun ready to fire, and Jaime, a couple of meters behind him. The poor boy didn't blink. The bell rang, but there was no answer. The policeman ordered Vergara to step aside and then shot the lock. He couldn't afford to act with intelligence, time was pressing. The bolt exploded and Horner's house was accessible.

The living room, which accessed directly from the front door, was a disaster. Carroll stood in the middle of the room and turned on himself to create a panoramic view that summarized the state of that disorder. The shelves had fallen from the wall, there were remnants of a vase on the parquet, and a very expensive TV model had been shattered. *Under what conditions does Fred live, for God's sake?* The leather sofa was intact, though stained with a few dried drops. The drops were probably whiskey, according to the four empty bottles of Four Roses that decorated the table. Beneath the table, scattered on the floor,

there were more than a dozen sheets of paper written by hand. He picked them all up in a bunch and looked at the first one with a frown. It was a handwritten letter dedicated to a certain Diana from... Sara? *That damn son of a bitch, these are hints about the case that he's been hiding from me!*

Now Thomas knew that he was playing at a disadvantage at all times. Not that Alfred was an exceptional detective, but that he had all the keys from the beginning. He was the key.

"Agent, you have to see this! Quick!"

It was Dr. Vergara's trembling voice. Where was he? The call came from the attached room, which turned out to be the bedroom. Thomas found Jaime lying on the bed and pressing his fingers against the arteries of an unconscious woman's neck. A Dantesque vision. She was young, about twenty, and naked and unconscious on the bed. She had been chained to the headboard, and her legs, slightly open, made it possible to see at first glance a small stream of coagulated blood coming out of the pubic area.

"Shit."

"Her pulse is very weak, but she's alive," the doctor announced, urging Carroll to call the emergency room.

Amazed by the unexpected diligence of his companion, the policeman obeyed.

"She was raped," Jaime went on, once making sure an ambulance was on the way. He moved with determination and his voice was firm. "If the attendants don't delay, she will survive."

"All right."

"What is that under your arm?" Jaime pointed his chin at the sheet of paper.

Carroll quickly handed them over to him as if he were freed from a crying child.

"Here, this will interest you," he spat.

The policeman left the bedroom (he left the girl in good hands and the doctor with several pages of reading material) and returned to the living room. He needed to find something to tell him the current whereabouts of his former companion. He chose to rummage through the rubble that had once been beautiful furniture, and it took less than a minute to distinguish a familiar object. On the floor, next to the skirting board and under a wooden plank, was a pen. "No, it wasn't just a pen," said Carroll when he removed the cap. The floor was slightly tilted and it had probably arrived there from the couch area. And it was not just any pen. It was the one Horner had written so brightly on the napkin the other morning in the cafe, and... *fuck... it had traces of dried blood on the tip. I had the pen in front of my nose and I didn't realize... I'm such an idiot!*

Gently, he tucked the object into a plastic bag and continued to search. His gaze focused on the cracked television, in the back, hidden among the cables, he spotted an Indian-looking box, ideal for a woman to keep a pair of earrings, for example. What Carroll found inside made him intensely tingly. A used bullet rested on a layer of foam, as if the box were a miniature coffin. It was then that he assumed the devastating truth.

They were right: Alfred murdered Mike Lennard.

The bullet and the pen were two important enough elements for Thomas to rebuild the crime scene without thinking too much: on November 7th, Alfred Horner met with his aggressor, Charley Rubial, somewhere in Oxford. Or at least that's what he thought, because it was actually his twin brother, Mike Lennard. He discovered his address at 219 Cowley Road, and went there to take revenge. Struggling, they ended up in the bathroom. It was a bitter struggle, of life or death, albeit unbalanced, for Horner was much more burly than the weakling of Lennard. At first he tried to strangle him with a rope, and that is why Lennard's corpse had a furrow on his neck. Surely he only had a pen to defend himself, so he used it to pull away with desperation. *Hence Fred would appear with those wounds on his forearm, of course.* In the end, Horner, much more experienced, managed to step back, creating a space of one meter from Lennard. Just enough to draw his gun and shoot him in the forehead. Once he finished with him, he took the pen and used it to write a message of vengeance on his chest. In perfect Castilian, of course! Horner is of Spanish origin. Then he picked up the bullet to remove the evidence, put the pen in the inside pocket of his jacket, and returned to his apartment. Once inside he had to get drunk to forget everything he had done, and in his passing state of madness, he directed his anger against the furniture.

Carroll's legs were shaking. The scene of the crime was clear, the question that was assaulting him was obvious: had Alfred been aware of his horrible crime during the whole investigation? He realized that either of the two possible responses was traumatic. An emotion overcame him and he felt nauseous. He ran to the bathroom and threw up until there was no more bile in his stomach. Cold sweat ran down his body. Suddenly, again, the voice of Jaime Vergara, who was beginning to sound inopportune and annoying:

"Agent, these letters are all written by my friend Sara."

The doctor was standing beneath the frame of the bathroom door, his face taciturn. Carroll looked up at him, he was kneeling on the floor with a doughy mouth and an irritated throat.

"We have to find Horner right away, or I'm afraid Sara will be next."

Find Horner, very simple...

Thomas had the hardest part. Find your old colleague and kill him. *But where to start?* Alfred had no friends, and the only person he'd gotten close to in the last month, besides the unfortunate girl still waiting for the ambulance, was himself. And if he didn't know where he was, who would know?

Think Tom, think... where to start?

He chose to rewind the investigation of the case from today until the night of the crime, reviewing every moment with Alfred, every dialogue. For example, when advised to take a few days off. When they discovered that someone had left a threatening message on the car, or when they interviewed that Muslim in the Ahmets. A spark. *Wait a minute!* The other day they had been chasing a Volkswagen all over town. A black car with which Alfred seemed obsessed. Carroll remembered the only person who surely knew the whereabouts of Horner, because he had been following all his movements: his name was Henry Millward and he was driving a black Volkswagen.

However, Millward's whereabouts was as unknown as Alfred's. The spark of his mind went out as quickly as it had come, and then, at that point of reflection and with the bitter taste of vomit still in his mouth, Thomas was engrossed in a framed photograph hanging from the wall. In it Alfred proudly posed by the river with a boat tied to the shore. The boat was gleaming, and Carroll assumed the photo was taken the day of his purchase. He knew that ship dock. On that deck he had enjoyed a few beers with Alfred soon after meeting. He really appreciated it more than his own home. Thomas' pupils contracted suddenly. If Horner was not in his house, that boat was the second most likely place he could be.

Marcos Tena flinched when, traveling on the intercity bus, Alyssa Grifero's mobile phone rang. The suspect had managed to convince him to take the first plane to London, and from there, a couple of buses to the Kidlington neighborhood, near Oxford. At first he had accepted her offer, and even had come to think that together they were going to stop the real murderer, and that he was going to become a hero and other bullshit. However, the reality was that since leaving Madrid, he had not stopped palpating his cell phone off on the inside of his pants. He imagined the bastard Barreneche calling him incessantly and listening to the voice mail again and again, until his balls swelled and he proceeded to open a dismissal file.

Grifero pulled her cell phone out of her jacket without even asking for permission, and both looked in unison at the identity of the caller. HENRY MILLWARD.

"That's him! He's my contact," she said in a subdued voice, but with a glint in her eyes that was euphoric.

Marcos Tena was a policeman with promising qualities, but had he more experience; he would not have let Alyssa answer without activating the speaker on the phone. He nodded and glanced toward the bus window. He was having a hard time breathing.

Quickly, Alyssa picked up the phone and held it to her ear with both hands cuffed. She barely let out a monosyllable from time to time, and while his interlocutor spoke through the handset, Tena and Grifero's gaze remained on the other side. The policeman was unable to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling that a very clever girl was manipulating him.

When the conversation was over and Alyssa hung up, Tena seemed to see a certain pallor on her face.

"Everything good?" He said.

"We have him!" She looked doubtful. "Henry says he's seen him get into his car with an unconscious woman."

"A woman? Holy God."

"Yes. He says he has followed him to a clearing out between the Perch restaurant and the A34 motorway. He assures... uh... saw him get out of the car with her and throw her into an abandoned well. It is not far away."

Tena put his hands on his forehead. It was too much pressure. Was a woman unconscious in a well? He didn't even know if he could trust that Henry Millward. Alyssa had assured him that he was a legal friend she had known for many years, and that he had become one of the few people she could trust. But, leaving Millward aside, *was Alyssa herself reliable?* Until a few hours ago she was a murderer he was looking to capture her and bring her to trial.

"Tell me at least the name of who we're looking for, dammit."

"I still can't, I swear. Trust me a few more minutes, that's all I ask."

The bus stopped at the next stop, opening its sliding doors. Alyssa looked at the doors, then at Tena. Again, she was forcing him to decide.

They got off the bus, and she started looking for a taxi right away. It was totally dark, but it was just starting to rain.

"Alyssa, wait a minute," he said, and took her arm. "Are we sure that the target is still there, in that well?"

From the way Alyssa looked down, Marcos knew she was weighing the answer well.

"At least two minutes ago she was," she said firmly.

Marcos squeezed her arm a little more, as if demanding attention.

"Okay I believe you."

She nodded in satisfaction, and for a moment, Tena thought they had formed a kind of alliance. They got into the first taxi that passed the street and Alyssa

pronounced the name of their new destination: The Perch.

Alyssa's knees had wobbled when she got the call from Henry. A few words were enough, and a glance that was a little taken to make Don Perfecto think that it was a good idea to answer the call. She still couldn't believe the good fortune she had had in running into such a magnanimous agent as Marcos Tena. It must have been some sort of signal.

She was frozen when she pressed the green button and waited for Henry's greeting. Outside, the blizzard was so intense that the cold reached the interior of the bus.

"Aly, it's Dorian. I know exactly where your man is."

"Okay."

"I infer from your neutral answer that you can't speak. It's ok. I have good news and bad news."

"Ok."

As Henry's Anglo-Saxon accent reached her ear through the earpiece, Alyssa stared at the policeman praying that he wasn't aware of anything.

"The good news is he's on the canal, in a garnet-colored boat right in front of the football fields. Where are you now?"

"Kidlington."

"Okay, it's not far from your current location. Besides, I saw him lock up a girl on the boat next to his. I don't know what you're looking for."

"Yes."

"Does that mean you want the bad news now?"

"Yes."

"Well... Before you go to the canal, your man has gone around the fields behind the Perch restaurant, just before the A34 motorway. There is an abandoned well there. You won't believe it, but he has thrown another girl to the bottom of the well."

"I get it."

Alyssa's neurons had set to work faster than they had ever done before. She had not yet finished listening to Henry, and the fugitive was already drawing up the plan of attack.

"We have to do something," the spy went on. "Do you want me to take care of the girl from the well so you can take care of him?" He offered himself.

"No."

"Aly, are you sure?"

"Of course."

"You're planning something, aren't you?"

"Yes. Thank you very much... Henry."

She hung up to face Marco Tena's eyes. She conceded a second to formulate a credible lie. She announced, with as neutral a gesture as possible, that the target was next to a lost well in the back of The Perch. She completely omitted all the part of the canal boats, where she actually expected her prey. The inexperienced police hesitated at first, but as soon as the bus stopped at the next stop, she took advantage of it to exert more pressure. She jumped down from the bus to the street, and, of course, he followed her like a lapdog.

Well, Don Perfecto had believed her after all.

Chapter 22

Monday, November 13, 2006

*Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeoning of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the Horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds and shall find me unafraid.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate,
I am the captain of my soul.^[1]*

At the bottom of the well, Sara recited verses between murmurs, and when the poem ended, it began again. It was the most effective way she had ever thought to keep her mind awake. The deep wound on her forehead had not closed, and she could no longer stand. Her back and buttocks were soaked, although she was more worried that she had stopped feeling her limbs because of the cold.

She didn't know where she was. She didn't know what time it was. She didn't know how long it would be until she fainted and passed away. The droplets now fell forcefully from the mouth of the well, which provided her with at least a small portion of drinking water. Judging by the whistling of the wind, the storm had picked up, and with every flash of lightning, the sky lit up for an instant as an electrical target. Lightning and thunder; those were going to be the last memories of her life. She shuddered as she opened her eyes. *Am I already dead?* A pain came over her and her body shook. *Shit, not yet.* She vomited bile for the third time since she woke up down there.

I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.

A new thunder broke her cry, but this time it had sounded different; it had not been triggered by the storm. It was drier, less apocalyptic. *What?* Something had happened up there, as if there had been, *Bingo...* A shot with a firearm. *Sara, you stupid fool, you've begun to become delirious*, she told herself. She listened and thought she heard a series of exclamations. And they seemed close!

"Help!" She yelled with all the strength left in her gut. It sounded like a roar in the midst of the storm.

When the taxi left Grifero and Tena in The Perch, the storm was almost unbearable. It had begun to rain in earnest, and the wind made the fine drops pierce horizontally, as if they were tiny darts. Alyssa had the feeling of having been covered with goose bumps since they landed in London. Besides, now her teeth were chattering with the cold. Or was it because of fear? *Hold on, baby, there's not much time left.*

They skirted the shrubs that bordered the garden of the restaurant on the outside, and accessed the back, from where one could see a desolate meadow. Tena walked in front of her, one hand at his waist, permanently in contact with the handle of his pistol, and his body tensed. Alyssa suddenly perceived a silhouette in the distance in the gloom. It was a stone structure, about a meter high and in the middle of nowhere. A well. She said nothing. She glanced at the policeman and waited for him to find out for himself. Now it was she who tightened her muscles. She was at the most delicate moment of her precious plan. She held her breath and prayed that Tena had not been one of the most accomplished police in the investigation.

"Look, there's something!" He exclaimed, and excitedly released the hilt of the pistol to point to the stone structure with his finger.

Now!

With the swiftness of a leopard that has sprung to run after a gazelle, Alyssa took advantage of the euphoria of the policeman to extend the handcuffed arms from her waist and snatch the weapon. By the time he realized it, she was already two feet away, pointing at one foot.

"What...?" The stupid face of the cop would have made Alyssa laugh if she was not playing for her life. "Stop, Alyssa!"

Alyssa fired, and the bullet struck a few inches from his boot. She had not missed the shot, for all she needed was a few tenths of confusion to turn around and run away. It is not easy for a frozen woman to win a cop in a race, but even less with her hands tied and a gun between them.

The two figures undertook a fierce race under the nocturnal storm.

"Stop, fuck!" He shouted. By his voice, he must have been about two meters behind her. Alyssa could not, nor wanted to, look back.

I will not last ten seconds before he catches me, she said, terrified. *I need a miracle.*

The shrubs that surrounded The Perch seemed to be endless, and the drops of water in her eyes did not allow her to focus clearly. She stumbled. Muddy cover, she helped herself with her fists to sit up and continued the flight. Her pursuer must have been almost touching her.

She had already prepared herself mentally for a violent attack when something horrible was heard in the distance; a message brought by the wind. Tena must have sensed it as well, for Alyssa could feel him standing behind her. She stopped thinking and kept running, driven by adrenaline.

“Someone help me...!” She heard it again in the gale whistling. It was a strangled and heartbreaking female cry. And it came from inside the well.

Would Marcos Tena leave a dying girl to her fate, so as to not let her prey escape?

Of course not, Don Perfecto. You are too honest, exclaimed Alyssa's soul exultantly. She left the cop behind, but didn't stop until, several meters later when she reached the canal. Her plan had worked, and now the best was left for last. Her euphoria grew when she knew that nothing would stop her from completing her revenge.

"Someone help me!"

Sara could not stop screaming. Not now. It didn't matter what, but it was important that they hear it, that they knew she was there. She writhed on the grimy floor by forcing her throat to yell so much, and as she watched the mouth of the well waiting for some divine sign, a flash of lightning dazzled her. She had to withdraw her gaze, blinded, and as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness again, she knew she had glimpsed something on the edge of the shaft. *Wait a moment.* She looked up again, and as if for a second touch, another flash of lightning broke out. Sara turned her heart around. The explosion of light had illuminated the silhouette of someone peeking into the well.

“Police!” A male voice took over the inside of the well. “I'll get you out of there! Are you OK?”

Sara's expression contracted in relief, and, exhausted, she dropped to the floor.

I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.

Without looking away from the boats, Grifero reached in her pocket to take a cigarette and put it to her mouth. Then she repeated the movement to take out a cigarette lighter and light the cigarette. She savored each draft as if it were the last. She was stationed behind the trunk of a tree, right on the edge of the canal. Her clothes were completely soaked and her bangs dripped. But she wasn't cold

any more. Apparently, the adrenaline rushing through her blood was balancing her body temperature.

The Thames River, winding along Oxford, widened and narrowed capriciously. In the narrower stretches of the city, some citizens had decided to transform their boats into houses. They had tied them up and adopted ducks as pets that, since forever and up to now, had traveled through these waters as owners and masters of the canal. The garnet ship to which Dorian had referred was about twenty yards from Alyssa on the opposite bank. It was a medium-sized craft, old-fashioned though freshly painted. Next to this, another boat much older; could almost be said to be abandoned. From her position, Alyssa noticed that all the doors and windows were covered with metal sheets. It was a floating cell. It struck her that this ship was sunken more than all the others.

That's where the hostage is, and I don't have much time.

She waited motionless in her position. Since she had settled there, about ten minutes ago, nothing had happened. White curtains covered the windows of the garnet craft, but no trace of any human activity was detected. She had no choice but to take the initiative.

Suddenly, around midnight, the light of the ship went on. Alyssa glimpsed a silhouette through the curtains; however, she could not make out its face. The shadow ran down one of the canvases and peered out the window. Through the torrential rain, now, Alyssa caught sight of a man with very sharp features, sharp bangs, and a tight, dark-colored sweater that made his muscles stand out. The man watched the storm with a distant glance as he held a wide crystal glass with one hand. The night was too dark to perceive his features clearly, but Alyssa felt her anger penetrate every pore of her skin.

Honey, I found you!

As the man stepped away from the window, Alyssa remained motionless for a few minutes. She looked up at the boat-cage. It had dropped a few more inches than the water level. She lit another cigarette and began to smoke it at a normal pace. She would give herself the time it would take for the cigarette to be consumed to make her decision. She did not take her eyes off the garnet boat in all that time. Sadly, she slipped into her memories. Specifically, those of Saturday, July 6, 2002.

Chapter 23

Saturday 6 July 2002

One early summer dawn of 2002, more than four years before she found herself watching the two ships anchored in the river, Alyssa Grifero woke up sensing a smell of alcohol and a taste of vomit. It was as if all the rum of the world was evaporating through the pores of her skin. She felt a tickle on her cheek, which was provoked by a daring sparrow that had come to peer, and she guessed that it was that which had awakened her.

She was suffering from an imprecise and unpleasant headache. She tried to swallow, but her mouth was too dry and doughy. She wanted to open her eyes, but the sun was just above her face, beyond what looked like the branches of some trees, and the beam of light offended her greatly. Turning over her own body to spit on the floor, she experienced intense pain in her muscles, especially in the vaginal area. The only sound was the sound of the wind waving the branches of the trees and the song of the daring sparrow. She closed her eyes.

I'm in a forest, she thought. What am I doing here?

The teenager felt extremely exhausted. At first it was difficult to concentrate, but then a series of images came to her memory with flashes. Panic swept over her as a flood of memories flooded into her mind in which she kicked violently to save her life. She didn't remember with precision what happened, but in her head she kept a diffused vision of a pool and her kisses with Nacho Conde. She had the vague feeling of having been involved with him and that caused some kind of fighting, but she couldn't guess why. Suddenly she remembered, in a way terrifyingly concise, how her boyfriend covered her mouth with a piece of cloth before undressing her and...

OMG.

She made an effort to sit up; She opened her eyes wide. It was as if she was suffering the biggest hangover of her life. In part, and only in part, it was. At first, until she managed to focus, she only saw that she was sitting on the undergrowth. Then her eyes went down to her hip and leg area, and she felt as if her heart stopped. Except for her feet, which were still wrapped in Hello Kitty's pink socks from the night before, her whole body was bare. Her legs, the waist... and the breasts. Suddenly she began to tremble. What the hell had happened to her? She glanced desperately around and located her clothes. The white blouse (the piece of cloth) was wet and partly stained with dry vomit. The jeans were a couple of yards away, as if someone had thrown them there, and inside she found

her panties. Both clothes were still wet. There was no doubt that she was wounded, for every movement of her legs was a real ordeal. She put two fingers to her vaginal surface and felt a stabbing pain that hit her stomach.

Alyssa knew then that she had been raped.

She did nothing but cry for the next forty minutes. Her fragile physical appearance was a faithful reflection of her soul: naked and stained. After a while wishing to die, she finally moved. She wiped her tears and decided to concentrate on the present. The first thing was dressing. The rubbing of the clothes against her skin irritated her, and even though the sun was already heating strongly, she was still frozen.

She started to walk in any direction. She clenched her teeth and concentrated on her breathing. Every step she took meant torture for her crotch. There was barely enough energy left to stand, but there was something in her head that kept turning, an idea that didn't leave her alone and that kept her from thinking about anything else. *Freddy*... What had initially been fear progressively became the strongest hate feeling she would ever feel. She had no intention of ever meeting him again, and for some reason she didn't even think about denouncing him, but she swore to herself that if they ever saw each other again in the future, she would not let him escape.

After several hours of tears and tears, she left the forest and ran into a road. She assumed it would take her to Estepona, where her house was, so she followed it. She didn't want anyone to see her in that state, so she did it in parallel, walking several yards away from the road. The closer she got to her house, the stronger the million-dollar question formulated in her head: what was she going to tell her family?

After some detours aimed at avoiding civilization, she finally arrived at her home. Luckily it was empty, which gave her some time to clean herself just to hide her unfortunate condition. When she undressed in the bathroom and peered into the mirror, she realized that she would no longer be a fourteen-year-old girl. Embarrassed, she covered her breasts and crotch with her hands and let out a choked sob. Then she stepped into the shower and let the hot water stream camouflage her tears.

Monday, November 13, 2006

Alyssa threw the spent cigarette filter to the floor and crushed it with the sole of her shoe. Then she took the gun that she had stolen from Marcos Tena and checked that the lock was unlocked. She gripped the cylinder head firmly and began to approach maneuvering to get on the boat with her index finger on the trigger. She skirted the canal until she found a wooden walkway far enough away not to be seen from the boat. She crossed it and ran the distance between the catwalk and her target. Due to the storm, there were no neighbors walking along the river's edge at that time. Beside the garnet ship there was parked an Alfa Romeo that had a threatening message painted on the body. Alyssa smiled when she recognized it.

After a moment's hesitation, she ran to the ship in the midnight darkness and leaned her back against the wall. She heard faint music coming from the inside. It was classical jazz.

Alyssa did not like the situation. She had lived the last four years of her existence accompanied by a constant trauma because of the man who was now in that ship. During that time, while trying to forget him, she had fantasized about the moment he would appear in her life again. And when that happened, in the alley adjoining the house of Mike Lennard, she promised not to let the opportunity pass. This time she was not going to make a mistake. However, he was a well-trained, nurtured and rested policeman, and surely armed. She, for her part, was frozen and her wrists joined by uncomfortable handcuffs.

In addition, she had to take into account the hostage that was sinking with the other ship.

She would have preferred to kill Freddy by surprise, for example with a sniper rifle. For the life of her, she didn't want to have to face him or talk to him. For better or for worse, that night would end everything. She thought of Jaime and Oli. And in Charley.

Alyssa bit her bottom lip as the rain continued to fall on her hair and shoulders. She had to get in the boat by surprise and shoot at him first-hand as the opportunity presented itself. She could also wait for him to leave the ship, and then shoot him from the flank without possibility of error. That choice would surely mean waiting all night, which might mean that she might die frozen, or that some curious neighbor could come near there first thing in the morning, spoiling the attack. And, sure, it would mean the sinking of the next ship with the hostage inside. What alternative did she have?

It was decided. She raised the pistol until she had the cannon visor in front of her eyes and stood in front of the boat door. It was when she lowered the crank when she stopped in her tracks and frowned. The door was slightly open.

A cold chill ran down the back of her neck. Something didn't fit.

She stepped forward and entered. The boat was swaying from the wind. To the right, embedded in the prow, she saw a kitchen looking as if it had not been used in a long time. A glass of whiskey sat on the counter with an ice melting inside. The ship stretched along like a tiny miniature mobile home. An unmade bed lay on the stern, and in the shadows cushions and old sheets were visible above. The rest was nothing more than a small dressing room, a door that had to give access to the toilet, and multipurpose furniture that held, among many other things, an old radio that played jazz. However, there was no trace of Freddy.

Alyssa stood still, listening. She glanced through the curtains and watched the rain fall on the water of the river. Then she heard the ground creak behind her and she turned like a frightened cat. Just as she was trying to raise her pistol to shoot, one muscular hand closed around her neck while another hit her arm at the level of her wrist. Alyssa's pistol slammed to the other end of the boat.

The water level had already reached more than half the height of the boat. Although Diana had dragged a heavy piece of furniture over the crevice of the floor, it was impossible to prevent water from penetrating through the wood. According to her calculations, it had been about fifteen minutes since she had caused the crack with the ax, which meant that in less than ten minutes the water would have reached her nostrils. In other words, she was sentenced.

The water in the canal was so cold that she could no longer feel her legs. Her last and desperate move had been to climb onto the piece of furniture that made a stopper, in order to gain height. Once there, she closed her eyes and thought of the only two things that made her really happy: her Brunet, and herself playing a beautiful adage with her violin. Diana Tallent was waiting for death.

Alyssa's eyes had begun to cloud with Freddy's hand choking her windpipe. She kicked his shins as hard as she could, until he slapped her with the back of his hand that catapulted her into an old chair in front of the radio area. The impact made the blood pound in her head. She decided to sit still on the couch; resisting would only make things worse.

She looked up and stared at his face. She hadn't seen him like that in four years, but it was as if fifteen had passed. She remembered him as an attractive boy, with soft yet masculine features. Now, horrible dark circles underlined the pallor of his face. The bright blue eyes of old were gray now, soulless, and the smile of that seductive biker had turned into a crooked and unpleasant grimace. Although for the last four years she had hated him with all her soul, she always remembered him as a very captivating man. Now he was simply emaciated.

"Hi, Freddy," Alyssa said in an expressionless tone, but deep down she found it hard to hold back her tears.

Alfred Horner watched his victim with the same absent gesture.

"Hello, Aly," he said in a harsh voice. "We meet again."

Alyssa noticed that the ship's door was still open, and she started to rise.

"Don't move from the chair," Horner commanded. Then he pulled a pistol from the back of his belt and aimed it at her handcuffs with disgust. "Wow, it looks like someone has done the dirty work for me!"

A cold smile widened on his face like a worm that stretches then shrinks quickly.

He wanted to tease her, to have fun with her. Otherwise, Alyssa deduced, he would have killed her. She tried to relax, to think more coldly. She was in the worst possible conditions, so all she could do was wait and force a mistake. Would the police arrive before the next ship sunk? Before he killed her? She could not count on it, for Henry probably walked away and wouldn't participate in anything else. In such circumstances, however, relying on her old friend's instinct was her only alternative.

"Fuck, how well you've developed!" Horner commented, drawing circles with the tip of the barrel around Alyssa's chest. "I hope you remember some of the details when I fucked you."

Alyssa stared at him.

"But I still have time to repeat it." Horner was speaking just as naturally as if he were considering a beer in some corner bar. "What do you say?"

Without stopping to point, the police officer went to the nearest window and looked outside, specifically at the other ship. From where she was, she could not see the boat, but she saw no change in his gesture. One of two: Freddy had not realized that it had begun to sink, or that was just what he wanted to happen. Alyssa wondered if the man was distracted enough to allow a jump from the couch to his neck. Probably not. Would she have another opportunity later? When Horner ran back the curtain and returned to his initial place, Alyssa addressed him:

"I'm going to kill you!"

He laughed, and she said nothing else. She looked at the tip of the pistol in the hope that he would divert attention for a moment.

"It was very clever to send me that menacing video, honey," Horner said, and took two steps toward the couch. "That zombie costume was very successful. I admit that you managed to spook me a little, although the fact that you painted my car... damn, that wasn't funny at all."

That's it, get mad and throw yourself at me. Make a mistake.

"Tell me, were you really there when I killed that man on Cowley Road?"

Alyssa didn't answer.

"Damn, how small the world is," he said, with increasing euphoria. "And I suppose you were the bitch that was eating a kebab in front of the house, right?" With each swaying of the ship, Horner shifted awkwardly back and forth, and Alyssa judged whether she could reach him in one of his movements. "I read in the papers that you're a drug and sex-addict. I can't say I'm surprised."

Alyssa's eyes gleamed as black as oil.

"What were you doing at Oxford that night?"

She continued in silence. She thought anything she said would hurt her.

The flood that was falling outside resounded inside the ship with a metallic hue that made it difficult to understand the murmur with which Horner expressed himself.

"Tell me something I've been wondering for days," Alyssa dared to say at last, for there were things that still didn't make sense. "Why were you investigating for days a murder that you committed yourself?"

"Good question!" He exclaimed, as if the prey had reached the point of the exact conversation he was expecting. "The answer is that the superficial part of my complex brain didn't keep a single memory of that night."

Alyssa raised her eyebrows like a cartoon.

"Are you saying you don't remember killing Lennard?"

The subtle madness that dominated Horner's eyes disappeared, and was replaced by a gray haze.

"I didn't even know his name... Come on, I'll explain," he said with the laziness of someone who has to go down to walk the dog in the snowstorm. "Three years ago I was assaulted and beaten at night while walking through Headington. It was a fucking nightmare. That guy broke my bones, but I'm sure his goal was to kill me. He disappeared like a ghost, and I didn't hear from him until the other day. I felt him like a flash. I was enjoying my day off downtown, when I saw him. A young woman accompanied him, I recognized him immediately. My path had crossed again with that bastard. I felt a whirlwind of fury so identical to the one I experienced four years ago, when I lost my temper and I did what I did to you, which I imagined what was *now* was *then*, and who I had seen was not my aggressor, but Nacho Conde; and that I was not at the Bodleian bookstore, but in a luxurious villa in Marbella where a university party was being held, and that the man was not accompanied by a young woman, but by my fourteen-year-old girlfriend."

Alyssa's heart sank like an anvil in her chest, as she understood Freddy's words. The man he had really wanted to kill was not Lennard, but someone identical to him. Everything made sense now. *Charley! What did you do...?* Apparently, a few years ago, very angry that his pretty girl had been raped,

Charley had looked for Freddy and left his face like used tin foil. So, when Freddy saw Lennard, he must have actually believed that it was Charley, his true assailant, and took his revenge.

Alyssa had found the connection, and it was one she didn't expect. If the tragic events in Marbella had a different ending, Mike Lennard would still be alive.

"That feeling of rage lasted very little," continued Horner, "just the time it took to locate that son of a bitch's house and shoot him in the forehead. Then I got drunk, and the next day I didn't remember anything I had done, so I kept chasing the killer of that poor guy, (I mean myself) until it came back to me."

The uncomfortable intervals between each phrase were strangely accompanied by the murmur of rain and the monotonous piano playing jazz through the radio.

"I was in bed with Ania this time. I wanted to fuck her, of course. It was not going to be difficult, because she was handcuffed and was completely helpless." He bit his lower lip as he relived the hot moment. "No! I told myself; who was handcuffed and drunk up to her eyebrows was my college sweetheart, that is, you," he said, and turned his wide eyes to where Alyssa was, as if he had just discovered that she was sitting there. "Suddenly I knew it all! That thought of causing indiscriminate harm by avenging the pain caused by others was already gone, and I was feeling the same as then."

Alyssa nodded apologetically.

"I understood that if I raped her, Ania might get pregnant and be forever unhappy, just as you were. They didn't tell me that it was me who got you pregnant, but now I'm sure it was. Just as I'm sure it was I who killed Lennard!"

The storm brought a heavy sway that forced Horner away from the chair and he stood next to the window.

"My sickly nature defended myself from the horror of knowing that I had raped and impregnated my fourteen-year-old girlfriend. My conscience refused to accept the evidence, but the subconscious knew it." He frowned and concentrated on that word. "The *subconscious*."

"But how could you possibly have been ignorant until today, and suddenly the truth burst inside your head like a bomb?" Asked Alyssa, who, despite her interest in the neuronal performance of her captor, kept her eye on the revolver.

"I suppose the secret that I kept in my interior was like a tree that extends its roots underground and can't grow up outside because something prevents it," he replied. "These four years I tried to forget, not to think about that night, but those roots kept pushing to appear in the visible area. Perhaps, when I saw on the street the person I believed to be my aggressor and I managed to avenge myself,

I was about to discover the truth, and then my anguish arose as a defense. A threat (to believe that someone had come into my house and was threatening me with death with graffiti and recordings) replaced another still greater threat: to know that I had raped and killed innocent people.”

Horner looked like he had entered an alternate universe, where soups ate people with spoons.

"My conscience had grown accustomed to hiding such actions, damn it, I didn't want to know! And I allied myself with an accomplice, my fucking fear, to keep the deception. I don't know how scientific my explanation is, but I only know that I have discovered that the sensation of pleasure that revenge brings is the only thing that makes me feel alive." At the end of the sentence, he lifted the revolver to Alyssa's throat. "It's obvious that I am a damn neurotic. We have to learn to accept ourselves as we are, honey."

"I understand," she said, feigning a sobriety that was beginning to end, for now she was clear that she was not only in the hands of a rapist, but also of a madman. Horner was acting as if he were with her like a cat watching over a mouse that has no chance of escaping.

"What are we waiting for?" Alyssa asked.

"To finish the record." Horner pointed at the radio. "I never leave an unfinished jazz record. Then, when the last song has sounded, I'll kill you." She looked puzzled, as if she were looking at a three-headed monster. "Then, once the woman of the ship next door has drowned, I will disappear."

Alyssa felt the pulsations grow more intense in the temple area.

"By the way, how did you find me?" The policeman wanted to know.

She shrugged. The handcuffs clinked around her wrists because of her shaking.

"It was thanks to the Volkswagen guy, right? Spying was a very bad idea, honey."

Shit, he knows.

"Henry knows where we are, you asshole!" Alyssa spat. Even before finishing the sentence she wondered if she had not made the fatal mistake. In that case, every second from that moment could be her last. "He is about to arrive, and you can bet that he will finish you off."

The worm's smile spread again, and this time it didn't stop.

"Of course yes!" Horner reacted with an amused tone that bristled Alyssa's skin. "In fact, he has already come. Say hello, he's on the bed."

What?

Still aiming, Horner slid to the side with the poker player's face when he knows he has a full deck. He slid enough to free the line of sight between her

and the bed.

When Alyssa narrowed her eyes and looked closely, she knew that what was on the mattress were not cushions and worn sheets, but a lifeless body. Henry *Dorian* Millward was on his back and his sweater was covered with blood at his chest.

A sound more like a wild animal than an eighteen-year-old girl came from Alyssa's stomach, an explosion of rage.

"Surprise, Aly." Alyssa felt that when he said her name, what he was actually saying was *fuck you*. At that moment, she seriously judged if it compensated to receive a bullet so as to put her hands around the throat of that bastard.

A calm came over her.

Outside, the street remained completely quiet. There was no indication that any policeman, or citizen, had noticed the contiguous ship sinking, or that, if anyone had, they would have realized what it meant. You could hear nothing but the torrent of rain striking the asphalt and the flow of the river, and, occasionally, some thunder. All of this meant saving her life would probably depend on what she could do to him in the next few minutes.

That's when she realized what she had to do. It was crazy and a huge risk. Even suicide if it didn't work. But it had to work.

"You're an asshole," she said simply.

There was a moment of misunderstanding in which Horner seemed to assimilate what he had just heard, such as the sound of a brick under the sea.

"What did you say?"

The fact that she was still alive convinced Alyssa that she was on the right track, even though she was not sure which way it was.

"You're a piece of shit for a human being, honey." She uttered this last word with a sharp retort. "You take advantage of your police rank to kidnap two innocent girls, kill two other men in cold blood, and lure me to your dirty ship to torture me, but in fact you yourself have recognized that you have no fucking idea who you are or what it is you do. You haven't even checked me, I could be pretending and actually have the handcuffs open. I could even have a gun inside my pants."

The cannon's direction lingered slowly on Alyssa's forehead as a roulette spinning on a wheel that stops. Never, even when that same man raped her four years ago, had she felt so close to death.

Come on, a little closer..

"You can't even go to the bathroom without being sure you took a crap or you blew your nose. See how pathetic you are that you've been chasing after yourself and it took you over a week to figure it out."

Incomprehensibly for the policeman, the girl burst into laughter.

Alyssa sensed a slight movement in the skin of Horner's forearm, which meant that his finger was tightening on the trigger. While praying that the bullet she was to receive wouldn't be mortal, she threw her last poisonous dagger:

"Deep down you're so tormented that you raped a poor girl, you don't dare touch her again, now that you have her at your disposal." She was tempted to wink at him, but she thought that would be a mistake. "Come on, fuck me again if you've got the balls!"

As Horner's finger curved over the trigger, two shadows moved behind the curtains. Horner had already altered the direction of his revolver when a man appeared through the doorway. A dry roar enveloped the wooden cabin.

Alfred Horner peered with horror at his latest victim through the smoke that ejected the cannon. It was the last thing he expected.

Oh, no...

His arm muscles locked, and the pistol danced around his fingers.

The bullet had struck the heart of a man staring lifelessly through clear eyes. They seemed to shout *why?*

Thomas Carroll's pale body fell to the floor like a sack of sand. Behind him came another man Horner didn't recognize. He looked confused, blocked. Alfred raised his weapon and inserted his forefinger into the trigger. Just as he was exerting pressure, he felt something out of the corner of his eye that something was leaping toward him from the right. He twisted his body and fired.

Chapter 24

Monday, November 13, 2006

Alyssa Grifero lunged at him and landed on the ground with Horner's back and head on her chest. The revolver unloaded a new bullet under Alyssa's body, and occupied the space around her with hot air. The bullet grazed her belly and shot out into the chair where she had been sitting. Grifero moved her body just enough to run her arms over the policeman's head, and moved back into the past. She visualized herself being dragged to a tree, helpless, and then she felt stripped of her pants and panties as if she were living at that moment.

But now, she was not helpless and she was no longer a child. She squeezed with all her strength. The handcuff's chain was embedded in Horner's throat while inside her head, four years before, he raped her. Tears of pain streamed down her cheeks, and her mouth began to spit from the effort. She kicked helplessly in the same way she did in the woods in the vicinity of Marbella.

Alyssa still held on for several seconds after Horner's heart stopped beating. At that time, the radio stopped playing the jazz record.

The muscles in her limbs began to suffer heavy spasms when Alyssa stopped pressing pressure on Freddy's throat. She had lost control of her body. It was as if another person inhabited her, an eighteen-year-old killer. Contrary to what she had thought during all this time, she was not relieved to have taken revenge on her violator. The feeling of having taken a person's life was not pleasant.

With Horner's hot body still lying on hers, it was hard for her to breathe, and her hands danced uncontrollably before her eyes. She had a strong anxiety attack. Then she looked up and saw through her tears the shadow of a man who seemed to her, despite the shock somehow familiar. Unbelieving eyes had stared at her like an alien. Panicked, Alyssa took the pistol from Horner's hands and aimed at the man, who was approaching her. She could not let them catch her, she had to survive.

She tried to point to his forehead, but the spasms were strong and hardly controllable. Besides, she'd never fired a gun.

Before she even laid her finger on the trigger, her sight cleared, and with it, her reasoning. The hands stopped exerting force and the pistol slipped and fell to the ground. Her whole body relaxed, and then she had the feeling she had always thought to have when she saw a guardian angel.

Jaime looked horrified by the macabre stage he was in. When he bent down to take her in his arms, Alyssa suddenly received all his warmth. The tremors

ceased, and also the terrible thought of believing herself a murderer. She wanted to caress his lips, to kiss him.

She would never remember the sensation she felt when Jaime kissed her, for by now she had lost consciousness.

Friday, November 17, 2006

In one of the rooms that housed Oxford's Churchill Hospital the television was projecting an unusual image: in the Spanish city of Torrelavega, a young police officer was being honored live for his bravery during a rescue operation outside Oxford. The announcer explained how a peninsula agent named Marcos Tena had risked his life to help a young woman who had been found alive in a dry well.

When the woman went on to the next news, Sara turned off the television with the remote control and settled under the sheets. She looked up at the ceiling of the room and snorted contentedly. If it hadn't been for that boy's miraculous appearance in extremis, now she would be dead. She brought her good hand to her temple, where a large bandage covered the upper half of her skull. At least it no longer hurt. The bad hand, however, did. It turned out that the impact on the floor of the well had broken several bones around her wrist, so that it had to be rebuilt to a large extent. It now had a cast, and an intravenous analgesic partially alleviated the unbearable pain of the first day.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw through the window that someone was moving down the street, and she reacted as if she had seen a cat with wings. Jaime? He was the last person she expected to find in an Oxford hospital. Did he come to see her? How did he find out?

He walked quickly. He was talking on the cell phone, and with his other hand he held a bunch of flowers. He looked pleased. A few seconds later, his image was lost when he entered the building.

Sara raised her eyebrows and assessed the situation. Jaime had not come to her call when she had needed him, and she could have avoided some problems. Yet he remained her only friend. She was glad to realize she still wanted to see him, and she felt special.

If Jaime was her only friend, Diana was the love of her life; now she knew for certain. She shivered when she remembered the horrible sight of her coming to the room on a stretcher in the early hours of Sunday. She was unconscious and pale. At first she had thought she was dead, but then realized that no corpse would be taken to a hospital room. The nurses soon explained in a very simple English that her partner (couple, how nice that sounded) suffered from hypothermia and had swallowed a lot of water, but was already out of danger. Apparently, they had saved her from drowning at the last moment. The first thing she asked for when she awoke, they said, was to see her Brunet.

She was, therefore, moved to the same room as her, and there she went. Sara watched the rhythm of her breathing as she slept peacefully in the next bed. The

bruises on her face were almost gone, and the color of her lips were turning warm again.

Why them? Neither of them had done anything to provoke that mad policeman's wrath. Were they two more victims of a sick society? In the quiet and almost ceremonial atmosphere that had been imposed in the room, Sara inadvertently traveled to the World of Second Opportunities. She realized that if she had not been at 219 Cowley Road on the precise night that Lennard was killed, she would not be in that bed with her hand torn to pieces. But it went further: if she had never traveled to Oxford to start a new life with Diana, she would never have gone through that damn street. Besides, it was very likely that she would have continued her quiet neurosurgeon's life in Ámber if Charley Rubial had not attacked her at home that Sunday afternoon. Therefore, the conclusion was this: if Dr. Salas had not meddled his nose into the medical results of his son-in-law, nothing that happened next would have taken place.

Would she have been happier in that alternative world where that old pig never altered the results? Sara let out a gasp of happiness, as she knew the answer so clearly. She focused again on Diana's serene breath and thanked the butterfly for fluttering its wings on that early summer day.

A pounding of knuckles sounded behind the door. Sara wiped away the tear before shouting, "come in!" and welcoming her old friend. She had many things to tell him.

Jaime Vergara smiled kindly at the young, freckled clerk when she handed him a bunch of assorted flowers. He paid, crossed to the other sidewalk, and walked toward Churchill Hospital. At that moment, the mobile phone vibrated in the pocket of his pants. He had a strange feeling, as if by being in another country it was impossible for someone to contact him. He pulled the device out of his pocket and noticed that he had a new message. The sender was his boss in La Paz, Dr. Fuenmayor and the content of the message caused Jaime to stop in the middle of the street with his brow furrowed.

I guess you've heard. Come and see me in the office as soon as you can.

Knowing what? Something about him had happened in Spain, it was obvious. Would the trial have gone ahead for the Shapiro case? Jaime was still staring at the contents of the message as the phone began to vibrate in his hand and to emit the classic and strident incoming call sound. It was his sister. *What the hell was going on?*

He picked up.

"Mary, what's wrong?"

"Where are you? Don't tell me you haven't heard!"

His sister shouted excitedly over the phone, and Jaime couldn't distinguish whether she did it as if they had won the lottery, or rather as if some relative had died.

"Take it easy, Mary," he said quietly, trying to make something clear. "I'm in England, I'll tell you later what happened."

"In England? Are you crazy? Come home right now!"

"But what happened?"

Jaime was confused. He was beginning to fear the worst.

"They just said on TV that they arrested Ernesto Shapiro, a deadbeat son for the murder of his father!"

"What are you saying?" he said, and he resumed his march toward the hospital.

"Apparently, a hacker accessed his computer. Police have received a series of evidence and anonymous papers showing that the Shapiro marriage conspired to murder his father. The plan involved including you to the point of making you look guilty. They had played it well, little brother."

What a fucking bastard!

"Great, María, you relax. This afternoon, I'll fly to Madrid and we'll see each other. Then we can learn all the details," he said. "In addition, my boss also wants to see me, I suppose to talk about the same thing."

"Yes? Damn, this is too much!"

"I'll leave you for now, little sister, I have a matter to settle before I return. As soon as I get off the plane I'll give you a ring. Thanks and goodbye."

Jaime sighed as soon as he hung up the phone, and he automatically got goose bumps. An anonymous person had sent evidence to the police? He knew perfectly who was behind everything. In the end, Aly had kept her word.

Resplendent, Jaime arrived at the hospital and asked for the room where Sara Mora rested. He couldn't take it any more, so, from the elevator, he wrote a short message to Alyssa through his cell phone. When he pushed the send button, he noticed that his hands were shaking, and he mentally reprimanded his childish attitude.

He reached Sara's room, and before knocking, he glanced at the flowers. Would she forgive him for not coming to her aid when she had needed him? He hoped so. Friends do that. *"Friends..."* That was definitely the word. He knocked on the door and prepared for Sara to tell him the whole story from start to finish. It promised to be fascinating.

From the day of the death of Dorian, Carroll and Horner, Alyssa Grifero was disconnected from the world. After Jaime and Tena testified in favor for her and

against Horner, Marcos Tena himself had freed her from the handcuffs, and she had been free and without any charges. Oxford police had asked her to remain available until all the Lennard-Horner trials had been held. She spent the first few days of freedom washing clothes and resting in a luxury hotel with which she had been rewarded.

She also went to Dorian's funeral and was attentive to the television when they spoke of *the Spanish hero who had saved a young woman from dying in a pit*. She was surprised to be touched when she saw Tena receive his first medal.

Well, Don Perfecto. I'm glad for you.

It was as if she was enjoying her last hours as Alyssa Grifero, at least as she was known by everyone, and she had decided to start a new life.

A beep from her cell phone startled her, to her immense irritation, while enjoying a bubble bath in the hotel room. She covered herself with a towel and walked barefoot until she picked up the phone and discovered the message:

From 'JAIME'

*You did it. I don't know how, but you did. Let me reward you. I want to see you...
I miss you.*

She was thoughtful. Never before in her life had anyone become interested in her that way, and less anyone so... special. Jaime wanted to see her; and then, what? Would they lock up in her suite to make love for a whole week? Were they just friends? In fact, she missed him too. She wanted him to want her for being who she was. Not to judge her without knowing her, she wanted to be special to someone. That someone was Jaime, she had decided without knowing it the afternoon that she appeared in his flat without warning, like a wild and dangerous fugitive.

Alyssa Grifero felt exceptionally well.

That was when she made a decision. She would travel to Madrid and she would meet again with Jaime. They would talk for a long time about their future and, if everything went well, they would make love, buy a cat and eat breakfast every day by the window that overlooked that busy avenue.

Any other option was inconceivable.

But, before abandoning England, she had to do one last thing. The reason she had traveled to Oxford at first had been the legacy that Charley had left both her and Verónica Salas. Due to mourning for the loss of her husband and pregnancy, Verónica had asked her to go on behalf of both to meet Miguel Rubial, aka. Lennard, and ask him about the mysterious music box that was supposed to

contain the inheritance. That had been the simple plan from the beginning, and Oli, who called himself Jasper in the Internet world, was going to accompany her from a distance. But Alfred Horner crossed her path that precise night, and everything became hell.

Now nothing prevented her from opening the music box, collecting her share of the inheritance, and starting a new life with Jaime.

She put on some red pants and a white T-shirt she had bought at GAP, as well as her black leather jacket, and left the hotel. It was a sunny, splendid day. It was nothing compared to the storm on that night of hell.

She walked the streets of the city feeling like a heroine. It was as if the streets, the buildings, and the lampposts... they revered her. In less than a week she had killed a rapist and murderer, had collaborated in caging the corrupt Ernesto Shapiro, and had conquered the best man in the land. Along the way, in addition, she had helped many good people to get out of their corresponding predicaments. It was not bad for the omnipresent Alyssa Grifero.

The house that was Mike Lennard's home at 219 Cowley Road housed an unusual calm from the street, as if it also needed a quiet time after all the hustle and bustle, murders, examinations, and so on. It still had the security tape on its perimeter, but it would not be difficult for Alyssa to cross it and go into the building, the bathroom window overlooking the alley was slightly open.

She had never been inside, so she couldn't compare it to what it was, but the atmosphere of the house seemed dull, sad. She wasted no time in morose glances at the bathroom, and with increasing nervousness ascended to the upper floor. The wood complained like an old, abandoned house, and Alyssa found it hard to believe that until some days ago here lived a normal person.

Lennard's bedroom contained nothing out of the ordinary, nor was it a charming musical box that looked like a safe that adorned the dresser under the window. The few rays of sunlight streaming through the curtains illuminated the box directly, as if guiding the visitor toward her final reward.

Alyssa approached cautiously, aware that she might be facing one of the most defining moments of her life, and lifted the lid gently. An irritating melody began to ring as Alyssa watched the collection of watches Lennard kept in the music box.

It's just a cover. It has to have a false bottom.

To her great satisfaction, the section of the watches could be raised, and under it, another level was hidden, where Lennard kept all kinds of old wires, plugs and memories that were worthless. It was like a tailor's box.

Alyssa stirred those things in her hands, as her nervousness grew more accentuated. She didn't understand anything. Where was it? Had that asshole

Charley been pulling her leg? No, he wouldn't do that. That is to say, it was possible that yes he could, she didn't doubt it, but it was unthinkable that he could do such a macabre joke to his sweet Verónica.

So where the hell was her inheritance?

Wait, I've touched something.

The box contained a third level below that of the watches and that of the junk. However, it was directly inaccessible. What Alyssa had felt with her fingers was a metal lock. But.... she didn't have a key! What opened the lucky box? Desperate, she rummaged through the drawers in the room, the closets, and between the sheets. She found nothing but dust and lint. Then she realized that it was not a normal lock. The key that would open the third level of the musical box should be larger than any conventional key. It must have a cylindrical, hollow structure.

Where had she seen such an object? She was sure that description was familiar.

Then she got it, and the pain was immediate and detestable. A part of her wanted to burn the box, tear it to pieces. She wanted to take Charley's body and crush his skull against the damn music box. But that was stupid. Thoughts swirled in her mind, and at last she calmed down.

"Now I'm fucked," she said aloud. Then she smiled, and the laughter gave way to a thunderous laugh.

She loaded the box, left the house and headed to the airport, past the hotel to pick up her things. She devoted her entire flight to studying a proper way to apologize to Oli. Explain that what he saw through the webcam was a complete mistake, and that the fact that Jaime and she were more than friends was not going to change anything in their friendship. But above all, and this had to happen at all costs, she had to convince him that they needed the cylindrical key that he always had hanging around his neck to collect Charley Rubial's inheritance.

Rafael Salas awoke in the middle of a new white light that offended his eyes. An army of doctors came and went around the stretcher as if in an imprecise and futuristic sequence in slow motion. He rolled his eyes and allowed his mind to wander through his subconscious.

A series of visions materialized, now very clearly, one behind the other. The first was the bloody body of a girl on the ground, next to a tractor. Pain and crying. This image was followed by a much more tender one: a newborn baby with wide-awake eyes came into his arms. Someone had told him his name was Óliver, but it seemed more likeable to call him Oli, as a nickname. Then a dying Alfonso running to embrace Verónica overflowing with love. Many had vilified

him for exchanging the diagnosis of the tumor, but for him, that lie had been his greatest contribution to the world. The beautiful image gave way to the figure of Saul Morgan saying goodbye to him. His only friend.

A disembodied voice echoed suddenly, lapidary, in the depths of his brain: *the incomplete protects the secret with the iron tube*, Félix's riddles. The last vision had taken place in the same room a while ago. Oli was saying goodbye to him and had an object around his neck... a kind of metallic cylinder... oh, no... **THE RUBBER TUBE!**

Now he understood everything. The incompleteness to which Félix referred to in his riddles was none other than Charley. Of course it was the amputee! And the secret that protected the cylindrical key, the damn iron tube, was...

My God, I have to tell Oli.

He opened his eyes again, returning suddenly to the real world. He tried to free himself, but he couldn't move a millimeter; the straps were tight. Neither could he speak or shout, for some sort of mechanism that had been anchored between his teeth covered his mouth. Rafael felt the cold of two metallic tongs on his temples, and suddenly he was afraid.

No, not now! Something terrible was about to happen. *What are they doing to me? I need to warn Oli of the danger that he is in!*

A powerful electrical shock pierced his brain from side to side, and then everything went out.

Amelia... my child...

Thanks

The more I write, the more I understand how necessary those grains of sand are for the more selfless people. Publishing a novel is not easy, and for that I can assure you that *The Butterfly Effect* would not be the shadow of what it is if it had not been...

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^[1] *Invictus*, by William Ernest Henley (1875).