

Don't forget about your past, because it never forgets about you.

JUST DESERTS

ANIELA SPRING



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All characters are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is utterly coincidental.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I'm extremely delighted to present to you my novella.

English is not my first language, therefore from this place I'd like to apologise for all errors and mistakes. I'm not a professional writer either and I don't even strive to become one. I write because I've found it fascinating and it gives me great pleasure to share my thoughts with you. The whole story is entirely based on my own imagination and only coincidentally might be related to factual events.

I'm genuinely glad you're here and I hope you'll find this story alluring.

“The past is never where you think you left it.”

Katherine Anne Porter

PROLOGUE

Twenty years earlier...

Pablo Perez, a Portuguese thirty five years old man, together with his wife and twelve years old son Jack, arrives in America in search of ‘american dream’. They don’t have much with them, only a few bags and money they managed to save or were given by the closest family. They opt for a small apartment in a suburb of town and carry on a humble life. Pablo takes any job he is offered, although his mind is absolutely absorbed with his passion, automobiles. His wife beside cleaning jobs, gives private Spanish lessons, their son attends a public school just round the corner. One fortunate day Pablo strolls down the neighborhood and sees the note, ‘An excellent mechanic needed, asap.’ He walks into the garage instantly where he is asked to present his skills. The job is offered to him straight away. Pablo finally does what he loves. Nonetheless after some time he makes up his mind to start his own firm. He needs more money than he possesses therefore goes to the bank and applies for a loan. Unfortunately Pabloe’s request is declined.

One evening after work one of his coworkers approaches Pablo and suggests partnership. George is older than Pablo, smart and cunning. The offer he presents to Pablo is not totally legal, but it gives him an opportunity to be his own boss and build his own brand. After hesitating for a short while and talking it over with his wife, Pablo eventually gives in and gets into business with George.

Present -day...

1.

‘Kate, have you seen my car keys? Are you up?’ Helen, being in a rush, was trying to find the car keys to her old Volkswagen.

After their mother passed away last year Kate moved in and shared a place with her older sister. Kate was five years younger. Divorced, with no kids or a good profession. There was a time when she had had a dream to be a singer but after getting married she became just a housewife. Moreover, Craig, her ex-husband, never believed in her talent, so she stopped believing in herself too. Everything she had every confidence in was the fact that she had to cook well and clean the house even better.

‘Kate! Come on, I’m already late! You used my car last night. Where the hell did you put them?’ Helen was about to fly off the handle.

Helen worked in a local clinic. She was a geriatrician. She had a soft heart for the elderly. When she was just ten years old she had already known she would be a doctor one day. She wasn't sure about the specialisation until her grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer disease and needed frequent support. She realised then that geriatric is her future career. She was the smarter sister who passed all exams with flying colours. Kate, on the other hand, was, as their dad used to say, ‘a helpless little star’. The only thing she was doing better than Helen was singing. After winning a school singing contest she concluded *'If God hasn't bestowed me with a brain to be a lawyer or surgeon I'm going to make use of one talent he has offered to me.'* She worked the whole summer to save money to buy her first guitar.

‘Okay, okay. Just stop yelling.’ Kate, half asleep, finally opened the door a crack.

‘Where are the keys?’ Helen asked more calmly.

‘Here.’ Kate shifted her hand with the car keys towards Helen, ‘Bye!’ Then shut her bedroom's door and went back to sleep.

She didn't work, didn't even try to find a job. Everything she was doing was partying

and spending all the money she was getting from alimony paid which her ex-husband had been ordered to pay. He was kind of a bastard who had not only cheated on her, but also had been abusing her mentally and physically. If she had not met him the other night in the night club where she was giving a live performance, most probably she would have been a famous musician.

Helen grabbed her handbag and left the house in a hurry. Her car was parked on the drive. She got in and started the engine which stopped instantly. She attempted to start it again, but unsuccessfully.

‘Oh no! Not now! Please!’ She cried out, ‘Come on, come on, good car, good old B. Please, please...’ She made a few more efforts then gave up eventually. She got out of the car, locked it and dashed towards a bus stop.

‘We gotta talk Kate, this is too much!’ She muttered under her breath while waiting for a bus.

2.

Even though he took a couple of painkillers and slept long hours, Jack woke up with a terrible headache. He had expected it not to be just a regular headache which would just vanish after good sleep. He had been suffering from migraine since he

was six years old. After Jack's grandfather had died in a road accident saving his life, he experienced a strong emotional breakdown. He had never got over it which affected his own health.

It was 7.48 a.m. when his phone rang. It was an unknown number.

'Hello? Is that Jack Perez, please?' A soft female voice asked.

Jack was a son of Portuguese immigrants.. His mother was a teacher and his father was an auto mechanic. He built his own garage which offered vehicle repairs and services. Jack was always around his father and learnt a lot from him. After his father retired, he inherited it, expanded, and became a well known service man in the town.

'Yes, this is him. How can I help you?' Jack responded.

'Thank God!' The female voice grasps with a relive. 'I've got your phone number from the website. I tried the other one, but it didn't get through. I know your private number most probably is only for your regular clients, whom, I'm not, or it's just in case of emergency, in fact this is an emergency...'

'Ma'am, slow down, please.' Jack interrupted the torrent of words. 'The other phone didn't respond because nobody was there in the garage. Have you read the working hours information?'

'It's almost 8.00 a.m. People are going to work, their cars might cause trouble and they may need your help, so you should have your service already opened..'

'Listen Lady..' Jack cut in on her speech again, 'Firstly if you have a problem with the working hours of MY OWN BUSINESS, I'd advise you to try another one, secondly you haven't introduced yourself, not mentioned the reason you're calling, and lastly I'm the one who decides what I should do or shouldn't. Comprender?'

'Yes, yes, I'm sorry. I'm Helen, but this isn't the most important fact right now. My car is the issue and my brainless sister. She destroyed her own life and now she has decided to do the same with my sweet car..' Helen was pouring out her sorrow.

'Look, Helen, I'm not a psychologist and I cannot help you with the mess in your

private life, but I can look into your car. What do you drive?" Jack wanted to sound more polite that time.

"Yeah, I'm sorry to even bother you." Helen apologised for being too frank and carried out, "It's a Volkswagen Beetle. It's old, but until my sister started using it I hadn't had any problem with it."

"Well, I can have a look later today, but I can't promise anything. As you've mentioned, it's old, maybe it's not worth even fixing it, maybe its time has arrived and you would have to look for a new one. Just saying." Jack expressed his own professional opinion.

"New???" Helen expressed strongly, "You haven't even tried to check what's the matter and you're suggesting to buy another car?! Do you think I can afford a new one? I work hard and many times ask myself what for? I can't even go on a holiday like my neighbours, who visit different countries each summer, or my sister who just gets money from her ex-husband, eats my food, lives in my house and doesn't even pay rent..."

Jack couldn't listen to her any longer and simply hung up on Helen. His headache seemed to be even stronger. *"I hope she won't call me back."* he thought *"What a miserable woman, my God."*

He looked at the clock on a wall and it was already 8.05 a.m. He walked towards his bathroom when the phone rang again. It was the same number, hence he didn't bother and without hesitation entered the bathroom. While he was taking a shower the phone rang one more time then died away.

3.

The bus stop was five metres away from the clinic. Helen jumped out of the bus and rushed into the building in a hurry.

‘Helen??’ The receptionist just managed to call her name while Helen was hastily passing her desk. She didn't pay much attention and ran towards her office. She didn't even notice that there were no patients waiting for her in the corridor. She entered the consulting room, grabbed her medical gown, placed the stethoscope on the desk and was ready to examine her first case. Then someone knocked on the door.

‘Yes, come on in, please.’ She responded.

The door opened. It wasn't any of her patients though, but the receptionist.

‘Oh, it's you Gina. Where are my patients?’ Helen asked worryingly.

It was almost 9.00 a.m. and there was nobody there waiting for a consultation.

‘Helen, is everything alright? I'm sorry for being honest, but you don't look well.’

The receptionist looked at her and realised that Helen wasn't in a good condition indeed. What's more her makeup was overdone and remiss, her hair was loose and her clothes sloppy. It was unusual for her to look that way.

‘Gina, I'm great! Please, could you check on Mr Hoop, most probably he has forgotten about his visit. He was supposed to be here at 9 sharp, it's 9.10 and he's not here. Or, Mrs Juliane O'connor, she is always at 9 o'clock even though her visit is scheduled at a later hour. She just loves chatting with everyone. They must have forgotten. The next one is Mr...’

‘Helen, they haven't forgotten. It's you.’ Gina interrupted and beamed a bit.

Helen sat down on the desk chair, opened her eyes widely and looked at the wall calendar. Then looked at Gina and stood up to approach the wall, next turned towards Gina and looked at her with a great disbelief.

‘It's Saturday!’ Gina confirmed and they both broke into laughter.

They were sitting for a short while and giggling when Helen realised why the auto mechanic was closed and why the owner was still at home. She felt foolish and embarrassed.

‘I've done something stupid, Gina.’ She admitted all of a sudden.

‘What else stupid could you do?’ Gina asked, still laughing.

‘I called that guy, Jack, you know the auto mechanic, and rebuked him for not having his garage opened at 8 a.m.’ She buried her face in hands, then lifted her head and added ‘It's all because of my silly sister, everything it's her fault. I can't live with her any more, Gina, but she has no place to go. What should I do? What to do Gina?’ She exclaimed.

Gina looked at Helen and spotted tears in her eyes. She knew that Helen loved her sister but she kept losing grip more often. She became neurotic and depressed, she even stopped paying attention to the way she looked, which for Helen was unacceptable. All she cared about was Kate and her problems.

‘Helen, honey, you need to talk to Kate. You need to put your foot down and inform her that you won't sponsor her life any more. It's been over a year since your mum passed away and it's been three years since she got divorced. She should have saved money and started a new life. It's time Helen. It might be tough for you, but think about yourself, you've changed, sweetheart. Give her some time, a couple of months, but also give her an ultimatum when that time passes she must move out, no matter what. It's for your own well being, and it's also for her, to move on and do something with her own life. She might even get back to singing, you don't know. If she knows that she has no choice she will find a way, trust me.’ Gina expressed her own opinion and hoped that Helen would accept her advice.

It wasn't easy for Helen to face the truth, but Gina was right. Kate was a grown woman and it was high time that she looked after herself.

‘Yes, I must do as you're saying, but first I need to call Perez and apologise for

being a clown this morning. The problem is he won't answer the phone if he sees my number again." She laughed.

Gina looked at her with confusion in her eyes.

"You know, I called him earlier today," Helen carried on, "and instead of talking about the car I talked about my sister and my own silly problems, and he cut me off. Well, then I called again, but he didn't pick it up. Gosh!" She ended and laid her body on the desk.

Gina just tried to hold her upper lip and not to burst out with laughter when Helen suddenly lifted her head and added,

"I will pay him a visit."

4.

It was one of those days when everyone's car broke down. However there were still many other cars at the service which needed to be completed yesterday. Even though it was Saturday people kept calling the service as on any other weekday.

Jack arrived at the garage a bit later than usual. His headache slightly reduced but didn't go for good. It would come back as soon as the handful of painkillers, which Jack had taken before leaving the house, stopped working. He didn't need to be there first to open the business, he used to do it, but not any more. Andy, his right hand man and his best friend at the same time, was the one who would come first and leave the working place last.

"Good morning, boss!" Andy, with a big smile, greeted Jack as soon as he spotted him entering the building.

"Morning mate! How're things?" Jack responded asking immediately about the

schedule. "How many new customers are there for today?"

"Well, you won't be content. There are five more, beside the other four that we've started." Andy responded pointing at the cars.

Jack scratched his head and without a single word moved toward his office. Then turned round to Andy and asked, "Is there any old Volkswagen among those new issues?"

Andy thought for a while then said,

"Err, I'm not pretty sure, but as far as I'm concerned there wasn't any Volkswagen. Why? Should we have a Volkswagen in the garage?"

Jack smiled and breathed deeply, then declared,

"One crazy lady called me in the morning and before saying what's the matter with her car she complained about her sister, who apparently destroyed her old B." They both began laughing, then Jack added, "she also rebuked me for not having the place open early enough!" They burst into even stronger laughter and couldn't stop deducing what kind of mad person she was.

"Did she at least introduce herself? You know, just in case she arrives at the garage." Andy asked.

"Her name was Hannah. No, Helen...yes, Helen. So you know, if Helen is here, RUN!" Jack responded and they laughed again.

Still giggling, Jack went to his office and Andy returned to his own work. There were a couple of messages left for him on his voice machine. Among them one from Helen.

"Good morning Mr Perez. I'm sorry to bother you so early in the morning, but I'm really in an urgent need. My car has just broken down and I'm on my way to work actually. Please, if you could find an hour to check it, I'd highly appreciate it. Thank you. Bye."

There was just another one recorded after the first one.

"I'm sorry it's me again. I'd like to add that you can call me at any time. Looking forward to hearing from you. Bye."

Jack beamed and for the first time Helen didn't seem to be insane. He even thought that her voice sounded very smooth and pleasant for an ear.

He listened to the other messages but couldn't stop thinking about Helen and the fact that he had terminated her call. *'It was quite rude of me, but on the other hand she shouldn't have kept talking about her family drama, I'm a complete stranger. Maybe she just needed to talk to someone? Hmm. I should call her and apologise.'*

Sorting out all his clients Jack grabbed the phone and dialled Helen's number. After a short signal a female voice responded,

'Hello?'

'Yes, hello. Is this Helen?' Jack hesitantly asked.

'Yes, speaking. Whom am I talking to?'

There was a short period of silence when Jack finally introduced himself.

'It's Jack Perez. The jerk you called in the morning.'

'Haha, do not flatter yourself.' Helen laughed then added 'I'm sorry, I wasn't nice to you either. In fact, I'd like to also apologise. I thought that you might not answer my phone call again, that's why I've arrived at your service. Unfortunately, one of your employees, one second please,' Helen lowered the phone and shifted towards the guy she had talked to before her phone rang. 'What's your name, sir?' She asked.

'Andy.' The man answered.

Then she lifted her hand up again and carried out the conversation with Jack. 'His name is Andy. He told me that you couldn't come today.'

'Oh, Andy... Yeah, yeah. Yes, that's right. I had to..' Jack pretended that he wasn't there when all of sudden one of his regular customers entered the garage.

'Jack!' A fifty odd old gentleman with some extra kilos and a moustache started calling Jack's name just at the entrance.

'Damn! I'm an idiot!' Jack thought.

'Mr Peraz, I'm sorry there's a guy who is looking for you.' Helen, still on a call with

Jack, became slightly confused. ‘‘Would you like to talk to him? I may pass him my phone if you want.’’

‘‘Hey, Andy! Is Jack in his office?’’ The client asked.

Andy looked at Helen then in the direction of Jack's office, then at the client and for the

first time he didn't know what to say.

‘‘Errr, actually...’’

‘‘Mr Perez, the situation which is taking place right now here is a bit baffling. I don't know much about cars and mechanics, but this guy Andy has been acting up.’’

Jack jumped off the chair and decided to hide behind the desk. Hearing what actually was going on in the garage he wanted to escape through the window if only there was any in his office. Not longer than after a few seconds the restless client appeared at his door.

‘‘Jack, dude, there you are. Are you hiding? Who are you hiding from, Jack?’’

Jack dropped the phone and crawled from behind the desk. At the same time Helen entered his office too.

‘‘What's this supposed to mean?’’ She asked with a confusion in her voice, ‘‘Have you been sitting here the whole time?’’

Jack felt like a fool.

‘‘I'm sorry. I just... Look, I have to deal with my client right now. Please, forgive me, but I need to ask you to leave. I'll call you later. I'm really sorry.’’

Helen, without a single word, turned on the heel and left to be back just after few seconds to throw in Jack's direction the doughnats she had brought for him, and yelled, ‘‘Disfrutar!’’ then, left.

The client stood aside and was watching the whole scene with enjoyment when eventually expressed,

‘‘Jack, you must have strongly pissed that pretty lady off, mate. What have you done to her?’’

Jack only sighed and added,

"It's been one crazy morning, Martin, believe me."

5.

A house is a building where people spend half of their lives, the other half at another building, which is known as work. Home is the place people long to come back as soon as they leave it, provided the home is warm. Home cannot be cold. Home must be warm, the warmth must be created by love. It doesn't matter if there is a fireplace in a living room. It will never provide the same comfort and affection as love.

"The Kents" was written on the blue wooden front doors of a detached house. An old beech tree, as tall as the house, which was planted by grandfather Kent, stood in the middle of the drive. There was no gate or fence surrounding the house, only one metre high brick wall in front of the building. The wall was damaged by local vandals and never repaired despite promises.

"It's time the tree was cut down." Kate suggested while getting out of the car.

"Don't you dare!" Helen immediately responded with an alarm in her voice.

Helen was lucky to have good friends who could lend her a car for a day or two. The old Volkswagen was still in a miserable condition and there was no perspective to bring it back to life.

She parked aside the tree and after locking the car she embraced the tree and breathed deeply. "This is the best therapy, Kate."

Kate looked at her and snorted, "You're a freak."

They unlocked the door and entered the house. It was invaded by darkness and a gloomy feeling. All curtains were put down and only single rays of sunshine were trying to break through tiny slits. It had been a couple of weeks or maybe even months since they visited the house last time.

"Oh, Helen..." Kate expressed regretfully, "this house is so dead."

"I know Kate, I know."

They dropped their bags and at once started opening all the curtains and windows. They opened the garden doors too and let the fresh air come in. Kate entered the kitchen and Helen walked upstairs with her bag when suddenly heard Kate's piercing scream. She ran back down the stairs to the kitchen to see Kate crouching on a table.

"What's the matter? Why are you on the table?"

"There is a rat in the cupboard!" Kate with a shaking hand pointed towards a cupboard under the sink.

"Don't panic, we must get rid of it. We need a rubbish bag. Go and bring one from the storage room." Helen was trying to find a solution for an unexpected visitor.

"I won't leave this place until this monster is dead."

"Firstly, we are not going to kill it, secondly, if you afraid to go, I can do it, but you have to hold the door shut to not let it out." Helen gave another option

"Okay, I'd better go for that bag." Kate agreed and very carefully jumped off the table and dashed towards the garage. Helen didn't even notice her absence because she was back on the table faster than a flashlight.

"Alright, now I'll need your help." Helen announced again.

"I've helped you already! I won't come any closer to that cupboard."

"Look, I won't catch it without you. Get off that table and come here."

"Oh, my God! Helen, I'm gonna die!"

"You won't die, silly. Believe me the rat is more frightened than you are." Helen

said then added, ‘Listen, I’ll keep the bag and you’ll open the door. We’ll do it in three, okay?’

‘Okay.’ Kate expressed heavy breathing.

‘Ready?’ Helen looked at Kate who was sweating as in the middle of the hottest day in the Caribbean. She just nodded.

‘One, two..’ Helen started counting when Kate suddenly interrupted.

‘Wait! Wait!’ She started panicking, ‘I won’t do it! Oh My God! I’m so scared, Helen. You know, I was always scared of mice, rats, snakes, spiders, everything. This is stronger than me, I can’t do it!’ and started crying.

‘Kate, look at me.’ Helen began comforting sister, ‘No Kate, you’re stronger than this. Now is the moment you can overcome your fear, Kate. Don’t be a pussy! On three!’ She looked at Kate who wiped her tears.

‘On three, sis..’

‘One, two, THREE!’

Kate opened the door and Helen managed to catch the animal.

‘We did it!’ Kate exclaimed and started dancing and running around the table.

Helen held the bag, but the ‘monster’ which was in it didn’t sound like a rat. She decided to look inside and started laughing.

‘Why are you laughing? What’s so funny?’ Kate asked.

‘Come and look at your rat.’

‘Nooo, no way!’

Kate escaped to the other room and Helen chased her with the bag.

‘Leave me alone, are you crazy?!’ Kate shouted while trying to hide somewhere. Then she ran to the backyard and stopped at the terrace. ‘Helen, stop, please, let it go.’

Helen lowered the bag and one small grey cat emerged from it.

‘There is your rat!’

They both burst into laughter.

6.

The evening was moderately warm. It was still May but you could feel that summer was coming with big steps. Sitting in the garden and sipping wine both, Kate and Helen, could finally talk. The light was switched on almost in each room of the house. They played old jazz and lit fire in a fireplace. The house was awakened again.

‘I’ve been missing this place more often recently, you know?’ Kate expressed.

Helen lowered her glass and looked at her sister who kept staring at stars.

‘I’ve missed it too, sis.’ She responded, then added, ‘But we can not keep it like that. We need to decide what to do with it.’

Kate turned her head in Helen’s direction and frowned,

‘I don’t want to sell it.’

‘Kate, we can’t afford to keep it. It will need some renovation soon.. Where shall we get money from to do it?’ Helen tried to think rationally.

Kate stood up and walked down the backyard without a single word. It wasn’t easy for her to cut the cord which still connected her with that house. Helen had her satisfying life, job, her own place to live, money, but Kate had nothing. Only that place gave her hope. Only there she felt like nothing else mattered. Only there she was happy again.

Helen stayed on the deck chair wrapped in a blanket. She let Kate be on her own.

‘I’ll go to work. I’ll save money from Craig. I’ll start singing again.’ Kate said when she came back and sat on her chair. ‘I know you don’t believe in me, such as Craig

didn't, I know that you think that I'm useless, but I can do it, Helen," added with tears in her eyes.

Helen sat straight up on her chair. She was rather surprised with everything she heard.

'Kate, I've never stopped believing in you. You did. You stopped believing in yourself.' Helen responded and carried on, 'I know you can do it, but this is a big house and it...'

'Please, do not sell it Helen, please..' Kate interrupted with a shaking voice.

Helen looked at her sister and perceived a kind of act of desperation. She didn't understand the real reason Kate was holding onto the house so strongly. She also loved that place but she pushed her emotions aside. Nevertheless, she felt that if she sold it Kate's heart might break, so she just whispered.

'Okay, we won't sell it.'

Kate started crying heavily. Helen jumped off her chair and sat next to her sister, embraced her with her arms and held her tight close to her own body.

'Thank you.' Kate muttered.

At the same time Helen's phone rang. She looked at it and recognized the same number she had used earlier in the morning. It was Jack Perez. She chose to ignore it.

'Answer it.' Said Kate.

'No, it's not important.'

After a while the phone rang again. The same caller. Helen moved back to her own deck chair but didn't answer the phone.

'It might be important if the person keeps trying to reach you.' Kate expressed with a grimace.

Helen turned the volume off and decided to tell her sister who the caller was and why she didn't want to talk to him. She told her about the embarrassing situation in his garage, the morning call, and the car. Then she told her about her work and

conversation with Gina, skipping the ultimatum she was going to give Kate.

At the end Kate knew very well who Jack Perez was.

“This is so funny.” Kate laughed.

“You think it's funny, huh?”

“First you went there to apologise, now he is calling to say sorry to you. Isn't it a bit ridiculous?” Kate responded, still laughing.

Helen wasn't laughing at all. She was like a stone.

“Stop it! What shall I do?”

Kate relaxed on her deck chair and grabbed her glass of wine. Took a sip and shifted on the right side to look into her sister's eyes and asked,

“Is he handsome?”

“Whaaaaat?” Helen responded and burst into laughter.

“Simple question. Is Perez handsome? Don't tell me that you didn't pay attention to that, because I know you did.” Kate was teasing Helen.

Helen tried to do everything not to answer that question but her sister wasn't giving up.

“Okay, okay. Yes, he is.” Helen eventually admitted and drank her wine.

Kate started laughing and grabbed her own phone.

“Let me check his website. There should be his photo somewhere.”

“Not used to searching, there isn't any. Only cars.” Helen pointed out.

Kate raised her eyes on her sister and burst into laughter. They were still chatting and joking when Helen's phone rang again. Despite the fact that it was pretty late, Jack gave another try. Helen was galvanised when she saw the same caller's ID once again. She wanted to ignore it one more time, but Kate started encouraging her,

“Pick it up, come on, just pick it up!”

“No, no, I won't do it!”

While Helen was hesitating Kate seized her phone and pressed the answer key, then instantly passed it to her sister. Helen just sent a body language message to Kate

that she was going to kill her.

"Hello? Hello?" A strong male voice on the other side kept asking.

"Yes, hi." Hellen finally managed to cough up some words.

"I'm sorry, but.... Am I interrupting you right now? I know it's quite late, but I couldn't sleep. Actually, I wasn't sleeping. Damn, can we talk for a second, please?"

Jack was trying to express himself but his words were not making any sense.

"Yes, we can." Helen responded briefly.

"I have to apologise for the last morning and later the situation in the garage. I'm sorry. I feel like an...idiot." Jack said and after a short pause added, "I just would like to do something for you and everything that I've been thinking about is to take you out. Helen, would you like to go out for dinner with an idiot?"

Helen laughed and looked at Kate who was sitting and waiting patiently for the grand finale.

"Yes, I would. I'll let you know when I'm free." She responded and added,

"Goodnight for now, Mr Perez."

"Goodnight, Miss Helen."

She ended the call and looked at Kate.

"I'm going out for dinner with a handsome idiot," and both started laughing.

The evening was getting cooler, thus the sisters decided to shift into the house.

When they entered the building they detected that the cat was back in, sleeping peacefully nearby the fireplace. They decided to keep it and call him Watson.

7.

Life is tough. It's even tougher when you're a single father of a six year old boy.

Jack's wife died when Tim was just one year old. When he was born she suffered from Postpartum Depression which ended tragically for her. Jack and his dad, Pablo Perez, who lived with his son, were responsible for bringing up the little boy.

"Tim, honey, tonight grandpa will stay with you, alright boy?" Jack initiated a conversation with his son, which he had known wouldn't end with a simple '*okay, dad*'.

"And you?" as Jack had expected Tim responded with a question. He always would answer with a question or ask another one.

Jack had never lied to his own son, he had never lied to his own dad, either. But for the first time he wasn't sure if telling the truth to any of them would be a good idea.

"I have to meet one of my clients." It was what he said.

He lied, but only partly. Helen was one of his clients, though. She was just a client whom Jack oppressed and needed to have a clear conscience. He had never fixed her car, either and she didn't ask him to do it any more. She only once said that old B. was dead. It might have meant that she had sold it or it was taken to scrap.

"Why do you need to meet him in the evening?" The little boy kept asking.

"Because he is always very busy during the day." Jack answered his son's curious question without correcting "the client's" gender. Then added, "Grandpa will come in a bit. I told him to warm the dinner I made earlier. It's lasagne, I know how you love it." He grabbed his son and held him tight pressing to his chest. "I love you so much, son."

"I love you too, dad. But please do not stay too long with that man. I want to play

with you a bit before I go to bed.” Tim replied in a mumble.

“I won't stay long.” Jack loosened his arms and let Tim free.

It was the first time since his wife's death Jack invited another woman out. To forget about Sarah and move on, it was the most challenging task Jack had been coping with. He didn't want to forget about her completely, he just needed to let it go and free himself from the past. He knew that he would never stop loving her but he also knew

that it was high time he broke that chain which he had been carrying with him since her death. His son was his priority and his whole world and everything he was concerned about was the fact that a new woman would distract him and catch his attention, which his son needed constantly. He was worried he would neglect Tim but he also sensed that it was time he met someone new and went on with his life.

The evening was slightly cool, however not too cold as for the beginning of June. Jack felt extremely nervous when he arrived at the restaurant he had booked a table for him and Helen a couple days ago. Two weeks later she finally responded to his invitation explaining that she was very busy with the amount of patients wishing to be qualified for summer nursing homes.

Jack was drinking a glass of water when Helen arrived. When she entered the building the light bleached or maybe it was just Jack's impression. There was something unusual about her. Something fresh and natural. She was wearing a light blue dress and dark purple coat. Her hair was loose. It was dark brown, shoulder length. She carried a small mocha colour bag and was wearing the same colour heels. When she spotted Jack he stood up and she just nodded. She took her coat off and left it in a cloakroom, then walked towards the table. While she was walking her dress was moving with her hips,

harmonising with each step she took. When she eventually reached the table she shifted a strand of her hair back and lifted her hand in Jack's direction.

“Hello, Mr Perez.”

Jack grabbed her hand, looked in her big hazelnut eyes, and responded after a while,

“Helen, it's a pleasure to finally meet you.”

8.

Jack couldn't take his eyes off her while she was talking about her life, job, and even her, not any more insane, sister. There was something about Helen that Jack had never experienced before. Something that created tranquillity which he had desired for a very long time. It might have been the fact that since his wife had passed away he wasn't out with another woman.

“So, maybe now, for a change, you can tell me a bit about yourself.” Helen suggested. She kept talking for over twenty minutes without an interruption.

Jack smiled and said, “There's not much to talk about.”

“Oh, come on, Mr Perez. Your life can not be so boring.” Helen responded and added with a curiosity in her voice, “What do you do when you are not in your garage? You must have a distraction, a hobby, anything. What is it?”

Jack grabbed his glass of white wine, which they had ordered earlier, took a sip, then while lowering the glass looked in Helen's eyes and stated,

“I take care of my son.”

He put the glass down and didn't say a word again. Waited for Helen's reaction. She stayed also quiet for a while when eventually asked,

‘What's his name?’

Jack raised his eyes at her and responded,

‘Tim. His name is Tim.’ Then added again, ‘We, I mean my wife and I, wanted to call him Time, but it would be pretty annoying for him when he grows up, and others would wonder why they'd have to call him in such a way. Tim was a gift for us, as time is a precious gift. Thus, we opt for Tim as the most related to what we had wanted.’

Helen almost choked when she heard the ‘wife’ word. She didn't expect Jack to be a married man with a son. Jack noticed it and the fact that her mood rapidly changed. She became rather indifferent, hence immediately added,

‘My wife died when Tim was still a toddler.’

‘Oh, I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have asked you about your private life. It's none of my business. I'm sorry.’ Helen tried to apologise but Jack did his best to justify her, saying she couldn't have known about his tragedy.

The evening was getting late but they kept chatting.

‘It's a bit late.’ Helen noticed.

It was ten in the evening. They spent three hours together. Jack completely forgot that he had promised to be back before Tim would go to bed.

‘Oh, boy!’ He suddenly expressed and almost jumped from his chair, ‘Tim, won't talk to me tomorrow.’

Helen looked at him confused, not being aware of what he was talking about and asked, ‘Why?’

‘My son asked me to be back home before he goes to bed.’

Helen beamed at him and added, ‘Well, you're in trouble, then.’

They both laughed.

After paying the bill they left the place and decided to take a stroll down the street. The evening was perfectly warm for a walk. The stars were shining on a cobalt blue sky. When they eventually reached Helen's house, they stopped in front of the front

door and faced each other.

“I had a really great time, thank you.” Helen said first.

“Yeah, me too.” Jack expressed and added, “To be honest, that day in the morning when you called about your Volkswagen and later when you came to my garage I thought that you must have been out of your mind. I'm deeply sorry.”

Helen smiled, but Jack carried on, “Today, I know that you're a remarkable lady whom I'd love to meet again.”

Helen lowered her eyes, then raised them and looked at Jack saying,

“It would be my pleasure to see you again, Mr Perez.”

They both were standing looking in each other's eyes, feeling the tension. While Jack was bending towards Helen she slightly shifted backwards and turned round facing the door.

“It's pretty late Jack, goodnight. I'll call you.” Helen expressed while pulling her house keys rapidly out from her bag.

Jack felt embarrassed. Turned on his heel and while marching ahead muttered,

“Goodnight, Helen. Call me.” Then vanished.

9.

“He tried to kiss me.” Helen entered the house and spotted Kate sitting in a living room. The TV was on but she wasn't watching it. Watson, hearing Helen's voice, jumped instantly off the couch and ran to her. She lifted him up and carrying the cat in her arms walked into the room.

“Perez???” Kate stretched her body and reacted with a slight disbelief.

“Yes.” Helen mumbled, “but I turned my back.” She added and flopped into the

armchair.

‘It means you had a great time, sis.’

‘Yes, the evening was indeed nice.’ Helen confirmed, then said, ‘he’s got a little son, but his wife is dead.’

‘Oh, what a pity. I mean not for you, because if she was still alive he wouldn’t be single and you wouldn’t go on a date’ Kate said, smirking.

Helen didn’t reply to that silly remark. She knew her sister wasn’t always acute with everything she was saying. She just lifted her body up from the armchair and took off the coat.

‘Will you meet him again?’ Kate asked out of curiosity while Helen was passing by. Helen thought for a while when suddenly her phone buzzed. It was a text message from Jack Perez.

‘Helen, I’d like to thank you for a lovely evening.

I’d like to apologise for ... I hope I didn’t offend you.

Hope to see you again. Good night. Jack.’

Her face glowed and eyes shined brightly with flashes of light. Kate noticed that and asked, ‘What is he saying?’

‘How do you know the message is from him?’ Helen responded with a smile.

‘I can see, I’m not blind.’

‘None of your business.’ Helen responded with a beam on her face then added,

‘How was your evening?’

‘Oh, yeah. Listen, I went to that new place round the corner.’

‘Which place?’ Helen wondered.

‘I’ve told you about it. It’s called ‘Drag -on’, it’s a karaoke pub.’ Kate enlightened sister.

‘Ah, yes. I remember. And? Did you sing karaoke?’ Helen asked, smiling.

‘Of course, I did. And they loved me. But the thing is, I went there to ask about the job.’

‘Did you get any?’ Helen asked.

‘Kind of.’ Kate responded vaguely.

Helen hung her coat into the wardrobe and took off her shoes, then walking towards the kitchen said, ‘Come to the kitchen! I need to have something to eat. So tell me, what do you mean by kind of?’

Kate followed her, so did Walter.

‘Before singing I talked to the owner and we discussed for a while, and he said he'd give me just a few days behind the bar. Well, I agreed to that, then he offered me a drink and asked if I'd like to sing a song. I told him that I used to sing but it was a long time ago, but he kept persuading me, so I eventually gave in..’ Kate was carrying on while suddenly Helen interrupted and asked,

‘Have you eaten that last piece of smoked Salmon?’

‘Are you even listening to what I'm saying?’ Kate grew irritated.

‘Of course, I am. You and the guy from the bar had a drink and he told you to sing a song. You see, I'm all ears. So, you sang, and?’ Helen tried to manifest her full attention. She didn't ask again about the salmon or any other missing food.

‘I sang, and I did it well.’ Kate admitted with a sense of pride in her voice, then added, ‘Then the owner told me that he doesn't want me behind the bar but on the stage.’

Helen stopped doing what she was doing. Closed the fridge, approached her sister and said, ‘Are you going to sing live in that place?’

Kate wasn't sure if Helen was content or rather disappointed, so responded with an initial hesitance.

‘I know you want me to find a proper job but actually what the proper job is. I know you think that the story may repeat itself, but it will not. I'm older and smarter. Helen, I love singing such as you love helping people.’

Kate looked at her sister, having a sympathetic expression in her eyes. Helen held her hand and said, ‘Kate, I'm glad. I can't wait to see you on that stage and hear

you singing again.’

‘Oh, I feel so relieved right now. I was so anxious to tell you about it, but I was even more frightened of your reaction.’

‘When is your first performance?’ Helen asked.

‘Bruno, the owner, told me that he'd like me to start next Saturday. When I told him that I also play the guitar he offered to lend me his own.’ Kate responded with a soft voice.

‘Oh that's great. I'll be there sitting at the front table. By the way, how old is that Bruno guy?’

‘He's old enough to be our father.’ Kate replayed with a smile and smacked her sister in the arm, then added with a smirk, ‘You can invite Mr Perez, sis.’

‘You bet.’

They both laughed hard.

10.

When Jack arrived home he spotted his dad in front of their house talking to some mysterious men. There were two of them. Dressed in black suits and holding their hands in trousers' pockets. One of them was taller than the other one and much younger. The older one stood closer to Pablo Perez and looked like he was whispering something to his ear.

‘Not now.’ Pablo muttered looking into the older guy's eyes, then expressed his joy shifting towards oncoming Jack. ‘Son, there you are.’

The older man stepped back and took his hands out of his pockets.

‘Dad.’ Jack approached his father who looked noticeably distressed.

‘Is everything alright?’ Jack asked worryingly.

‘Yes, son. The gentlemen were about to leave, actually.’ Pablo emphasised and lifted his hand up in the direction of the older guy.

The man just looked at Pablo and read his facial expression. He grabbed his hand, shook it and uttered, ‘Yes, it's time to go.’

Then embraced Pablo with his other arm, pulled him closer to his own body and whispered to his ear, ‘Just remember what I’ve told you.’

The other guy didn't say anything, just saluted Jack and jumped into the car. The older man released Pablo from his clutch, looked in Jack's direction and said,

‘Good night, Perez junior, whatever your name is.’

Jack didn't reveal his name only responded shortly,

‘Good night.’

The man got in the car and they drove away. Jack instantly approached his father asking tons of questions. Pablo just walked towards the house wrapped in his thoughts without paying much attention to what Jack was saying. When they entered the building Pablo finally spoke,

‘I'm very tired, son. I'd better go to bed now.’

Jack looked at him with disbelief. Everything that he had said before it didn't mean a thing. He knew that his dad needed rest but he wasn't ready to stay up the whole night with an unsolved enigma.

‘No dad, you won't go to sleep unless you tell me what the hell is going on with you and those shady dudes.’ Jack uttered with a tension in his voice.

Pablo lifted his eyes up and beamed.

‘Shady dudes?’ He echoed his son.

‘Why are you smiling? And please do not tell me the story of an old friend, because that guy didn't look like he could be your friend.’ Jack expressed his irritation, next added ‘I'll be back in a second and we'll talk. I just want to check on Tim.’

'He's been sleeping. Don't worry. I read him his favourite story and he fell asleep instantly. I remember when you were his age and I used to read you bed stories. It seems as if it was just yesterday...' Pablo went pensive.

'Dad, don't play dumb with me. Please, tell me who those men were.' Jack's voice softened. He placed his arm on his dad's shoulder and leaned towards him 'Are you in trouble, dad?'

Pablo looked at his son, placed one hand on his, and said,

'I guess, I am.'

Jack felt like his blood pressure rose. He felt dizzy and sober at the same time. He felt sick. He felt like someone hit him with a bat in the head. He needed a short while to digest the news then stated,

'I'm going to take us some drinks. We'll sit in the living room and you'll tell me everything.'

Pablo didn't quibble over that, just walked into the living room and slammed into the couch, whereas Jack left for the kitchen. When he was there alone he sat on the stool, buried his face in hands and got lost in his thoughts. After a short while he stood up and grabbed two beers from the fridge and joined his dad sitting in the living room. It was already pretty late but the night for both of them was still young.

'Here you go, dad.' Said Jack, offering Pablo one of the beers. Then sat into the armchair.

'So, dad, where do you know those people from?' Jack asked while opening the bottle.

Pablo took a deep breath and started,

'It was a long time ago. I might say I was your age, or a bit younger. We arrived in the US and life was tough and it was hard to make ends meet. We both worked, your mother and I, but it wasn't enough. One day I thought that I could use my talent and do what I know best..'

“To fix cars” Jack interrupted.

“Yes..” Pablo admitted and carried on, “So I thought I'd go to the bank and ask for a loan. Unfortunately, due to a very low income and being an immigrant, I was sent away with nothing. But, I found a better job. The job I loved. It was a mechanics one. I worked hard, but I relished it. There I met George, the older man whom you saw in front of the house. The other one is his nephew. I hadn't heard about him back then. I met him just tonight.” Pablo made a short interval to take a sip of a drink, then went back to his story “George knew people. He was selling cars to white-collar workers, bankers, lawyers and so on. The only thing about those cars was the fact that they were stolen. He would bring a car to a garage at night and change it to the point that it was unrecognisable. He was a genius in this and he was paid cosmic money for that, although he still offered lower prices than on the market. One day, I told him about my idea, to be an owner of a garage, you know. It was my mistake, but later life was good, the business was flourishing. You went to a better school, we bought this house. Now you're the boss..”

“Dad, what happened then? Why is George back?” Jack leaned towards his father and demanded the truth.

Pablo took another sip and carried on,

“George offered me money for my business, with a small favour in return.”

“You were going to let him pimp the cars there.” Jack jumped the gun.

His dad just nodded and added,

“If I only had known I wouldn't have accepted his money.”

There was a sense of discomfort in the room and agitation. The silence was unbearable.

“What does he want now? You had a deal, he gave you money, you gave him a place to revamp the cars. What the hell does he want, dad?” Jack sounded irate.

“It wasn't totally as it seemed to be. Yes, we had a deal, but when the business started thriving he asked me to pay him back the money, but he would keep doing

his things still in my place. I disagreed with that and said that I'd pay him back, but I needed some time. I also asked him to find another place as soon as I paid off my debts. Well, he wasn't contented about it and one night he arrived at the garage to destroy it and my clients' cars. I called the police in the morning, because I didn't know who might have done it. I suspected that it could have been him, but I didn't say anything to the police. In fact, he arrived at work as usual and pretended to be as shocked as everyone else. Long story short, the police carried out an investigation which led them to him. They received a search warrant to search his house and found a number of fake documents, fabricated parts for cars, and some stolen fractions from my own garage. He was arrested and locked-up. I've never heard from him or about him since then. Until now.'

Jack realised that George came back to get not only money from old Perez, but also compensation for his lost years.

'Don't be worried, dad. I'm here for you. We'll wait for his move.' Jack tried to comfort his dad, however deep down he knew that it was fighting a losing battle.

'Go to bed now, we'll think about it in the morning.'

Pablo Perez lifted his body and without turning his back towards Jack expressed while leaving the room, 'I'm sorry, son.'

11.

'Do you think that mom and dad would be proud of us?' Kate stuttered.

'I hope so.' Helen responded then added 'Can you just lift it a bit more, I can't reach the bottom line.'

‘I'm doing my best. If you want we can switch positions.’ Kate responded with a grimace on her face, ‘and you'd better hurry, I may not grasp it for long.’

The family house looked fresh. It had been refurbished. Its walls were painted with bright colours, the dark old curtains were removed and replaced with the new once of yellow-green shade. The bedrooms were redecorated and beds were placed in each one. There were five of them upstairs and two small downstairs with a large living room which was renovated and some adjustments had been done. The new dining room could accommodate five tables and another three were allocated on the terrace which faced the garden.

‘I can't believe tomorrow is that day!’ Kate expressed with joy in her voice.

Helen looked at her sister and responded with a smile,

‘Kate, tomorrow's always tomorrow, that's why it's called tomorrow neither today nor yesterday.’ They both bursted into laughter.

The opening party for their new investment was planned for the following day. Helen had agreed not to sell the house but they also agreed that it wouldn't be left behind and forgotten just to deteriorate. With a small bank credit and money which Helen saved they had decided to get down to a new venture. A modest guest house.

‘I'm glad we're doing this together.’ Kate expressed, ‘I wouldn't manage without you.’

Helen just beamed.

‘Is Jack coming?’ Kate asked after a short interval.

Jack and Helen had been hanging out on a regular basis. Although she felt that he was giving her comfort and cheerfulness, there was something that bothered her. It wasn't his age as she admitted, Jack was five years to her junior, or anything related to his relatives or friends. There was something that she couldn't understand, or simply he wasn't telling her about. For the last couple of days he seemed to be distinct and faster than ever grew into tension. One night he even left the *'Drag-on'* in the middle of Kate's performance without a word, and didn't get back. He

apologised to both of them the next day.

‘He might come. I invited him, three of them.’ Helen responded and looked ahead to the garden then she turned towards her sister,

‘What if he doesn't love me? He's never says so.’

‘Oh, Helen, he does. Love's not about words.’ Kate assured her sister and added,

‘I didn't want to say anything, because it was going to be a surprise.’

‘What surprise?’ Helen seemed to be confused.

‘I've been seeing someone too. It's nothing serious, but I like him.’ Kate blushed.

Helen didn't hide her amazement. Her younger sister used to go out with some random chaps but never talked about them. What's more, she never invited any of them to the house. That one had to be someone special to her if she had not only decided to invite him to the party but most importantly to introduce him to her older sister.

‘Kate, this is fascinating news. I'm so happy for you. I'm looking forward to meeting him.’ Helen grabbed her sister and embraced her strongly, still looking ahead at the

garden. She didn't feel calm, though.

The sun was going down, but the evening was still very warm. It was a beautiful day to start something new, something prosperous.

12.

George didn't trouble Pablo night and day as he had thought. He only visited him twice after the first call. Once arrived with his nephew again. They always chatted in front of the house.

'Listen Perez,' George carried on, 'I don't have much time. I waited long enough in jail to get what I lost. I give you only one more week and then I'll stop acting like your old buddy. Are you getting me?'

Pablo just nodded. George called the other man who was chatting with a passing girl whom he had stopped on the pavement.

'Hey Romeo, let's go!'

Jack woke up that morning ahead of time. He couldn't sleep for a couple of nights. His mind was in turmoil. For the first time in his adult life everything he felt was an extreme uncertainty about tomorrow. Now, was all he had and all he could do with it. His migraine started hitting again, however it was the smallest problem he could think about. Having stayed in bed for another ten minutes and staring at the ceiling he got up and went to take a shower. His phone rang then. It rang again, and again. He heard it, but he didn't bother. He got out of the shower without even checking the missed calls. It wasn't important. Nothing was more important than getting rid of George.

'Jack, mate I called in the morning.' Andy approached Jack as soon as he arrived at the garage. Jack realised then he hadn't checked the caller.

'Sorry, I was in the shower, then I completely forgot, what's the matter?'

Andy, speaking, followed Jack to his office.

'There is an issue with the yellow Honda...'

While walking around the office, from one wall to the other, Andy was trying to

explain the problem, however Jack seemed to be somewhere else with his thoughts. Andy noticed it, leaned towards his friend and snapped his fingers just in front of Jack's nose.

‘Yo, bro! Where are you?’

Jack cringed back.

‘What's wrong, man?’ Andy added.

Jack bent forward, placed his elbows on the desk and buried his face in his hands.

After a short while looked at Andy and eventually uttered,

‘Life is a bitch, Andy.’

Andy moved back and plopped down on the chair facing Jack. There was a bewildered look on his face. He was totally baffled by the unexplained issue.

‘What's going on man? Can I help anyhow?’ He kept his voice down.

Jack and Andy had been good friends since college. They lived together, they hung out together, they even once dated the same girl. They were dating her unconsciously to the point when they figured out that it was the same girl. None of them wanted to give up, so they kept seeing her until she dumped them both. When Jack took over the business after his dad, he offered a job to Andy, who accepted it right away. They went through a lot together.

‘Look man, it's about my dad,’ Jack started ‘and his old partner. I guess, I may call him this way.’

13.

The '*Drag-on*' was a local pub where people could pop in after a long day at work. Smoking cigars and drinking beers, they chatted with strangers about horrible bosses, nagging wives, naughty children, demanding lovers and so on. In the background of all of this a beautiful woman's voice and sound of the guitar were heard.

Kate became a star of this place. People loved her, she loved them back. She didn't serve drinks any more as she had been asked at the very beginning, she only gave live performances almost every night. She started believing in herself, her self esteem boosted and she became a confident woman once again.

'You have a beautiful voice.' Someone mentioned behind her back as she was sitting at the bar drinking water.

She never drank alcohol as she was singing. She knew it would not work in her favour, and it wasn't professional. She wanted to be professional.

'Oh, thank you.' She responded while turning around to have a look at the gentleman standing behind.

He was a good looking man, neat and clean, in his thirties.

'I'm Rob.' The guy lifted his hand towards Kate who grabbed it and acknowledged him,

'Nice to meet you, Rob. I'm Kate.'

In a second Rob was sitting next to her at the bar. He lit a cigarette and offered her a drink, but being an artist at work, she refused it. Kate took notice of his unique silver lighter. It was an old fashioned one, with a rooster ornament on the side.

After a short while Kate had to go back to a stage and perform a few songs to take another break. He was sitting there and staring at her constantly. She just dropped

a couple of looks at him, but each time she did, she beamed. He waited for her to take another break, then he waited for her to take her home.

“Do you think that you could teach me how to play the guitar?” He asked while they were walking home.

She smiled and responded with a question,

“Do you really want to learn to play or you're just trying to find a way to see me again?”

He laughed and replied, “You got me!”

The night wasn't cold so they decided to go for a stroll. Rob smoked a few times, and each time he was lighting his cigarettes Kate couldn't take her eyes off the lighter.

“I've never seen such a stylish lighter. Does the rooster mean anything? It looks really majestic.” Kate asked shyly.

“Yes, it has a significant meaning for me.” Rob responded and added, “I have it from my dad, who had it from his dad. I'm really amazed that it still works. I carry it with me rather as a lucky charm.”

He looked at Kate and smiled. She did the same. There was an awkward pause of silence, when Kate out of blue expressed,

“I have a cat.” She thought there was nothing much more stupid she could pronounce at that very moment but she had to say something to interrupt that stillness, which might have led to something much more embarrassing.

“Oh, really? That's nice!” Rob reacted to Kate's utterance and carried on, “What's his name?”

“Watson. I found him with my sister in our parents' old house. I initially had thought it was a rat, but fortunately it appeared to be a cat, which lives with us until now.”

“Oh, how lovely.” Rob responded with a smile.

It was getting pretty late and the temperature also dropped a bit, therefore they

decided that it was time they said goodnight.

‘It was a really pleasant evening. Thank you.’ Kate expressed her gratification while she was entering a taxi.

‘Yes, I feel the same, Kate. I hope we can repeat it very soon.’ Rob admitted his own enjoyment too.

‘We may. Goodnight, Rob.’ said Kate and closed the car's door.

‘Goodnight, Kate.’

14.

Life brings something new each day and whenever we like it or not we must accept it.

‘The Kents’ house was refurbished and it was ready to welcome its first visitors. There had already been a few reservations made in advance even though there was no official opening ceremony. Gina had promoted the place in the clinic as the serenity for happier days. Two elderly couples made their first reservations instantly. She also ensured that their photos would be placed in a special place on the living room wall just to honour them as the earliest guests.

‘Oh my God, I'm so stressed.’

Helen walking and checking everything for the fifth time was trying to control her nerves. The main room was decorated mostly with yellow flowers, the garden area was filled with chairs and small tables. There were six waiters dressed in purple shirts and yellow bow ties. Their shoes also had yellow laces.

‘Everything is perfectly prepared, honey. You just need to chill out.’ Jack was

trying to calm Helen down.

“Yes, I know that I'm exaggerating and overreacting, but I want this evening to be special. You know, I promised this to my parents. This is the only chance to keep this house.” She expressed, then added, “I need to dash to the kitchen to make sure they are ready.”

Jack held her arm and stopped her in a half way, “You were there two minutes ago. They're ready. Let me grab you something to drink, it will help.”

Winking at her, Jack shifted to get a glass of white wine which Helen drank in a blink of an eye.

“Wow girl, you're thirsty.” Jack said with a big smile.

“It's just because I'm stressed.”

Among other guests, arrived a couple of Helen's patients, a few of them were her good friends. She had never thought about the age difference because it wasn't essential. When you feel you understand and enjoy each other's company, age is the least factor. Chatting with them, Helen noticed Kate at the front door. Her new boyfriend was just next to her holding her arm.

“Oh, here comes the sister.” She expressed and excused her company and approached the comers.

“I'm sorry for being late, Helen. I couldn't leave earlier.” Kate apologised for not being with her sister when the party started. There was also another party in

“Drag-on” and she had to stay at work.

“Oh, no problem. Jack has been here with me all the time.”

“Yes, I thought so. Where is he actually?”

“Somewhere around. Well, you may like to introduce me to your friend.”

“Oh yes, sorry. This is Robert.”

“Nice to finally meet you, I'm Helen.” Helen lifted her hand in the man's direction.

“Nice to meet you too, Helen.” Robert responded, shaking her hand

Having entered the living room they spotted Jack in the garden talking to one of

the guests.

‘Oh there he is.’ Kate expressed.

‘Let me bring him over here.’ Saying this Helen walked outside the house and walked up to Jack.

‘May I interrupt this conversation, please?’

‘By all means, love.’ Jack replied, smiling.

‘If you don't mind I would love to introduce you to Kate's boyfriend.’

‘Of course I don't mind.’

Jack excused the gentleman he was talking to and holding Helen's hand entered the house. Having noticed the man standing next to Kate he pulled back.

‘What's wrong?’ Helen asked, feeling that he retreated. ‘Jack, are you okay?’

He looked as if he saw a ghost.

‘I, I... I have completely forgotten to call my dad and ask about Tim. You know he had a fever while I was leaving the house, that's why they couldn't come with me. I should have called him. Let me go and I'll be just in no time.’ Kissing Helen's cheek Jack hurried up the stairs. He locked himself in the room and contemplated,

‘What is he doing here? It can't be him. But it is. What the hell is going on? What to do? I may go down and pretend that I don't know him. I may go and punch him in his pretty face and destroy this party, then Helen would hate me for the rest of my life. I can't do it. I must go back and smile like a dummy. I have to, for Helen.’

Leaving the bedroom Jack heard Helen's voice announcing Kate's singing. Having walked down to the garden he stopped at the patio facing the stage.

‘This girl can sing.’

Robert erected next to him, ‘I would never expect to meet you here, Perez .’

‘I don't know what your sick plan is, but I want only one thing, don't ruin this evening for them.’

‘Ruin? Jack, do you think that I came here to crush this beautiful event? Oh Jack, Jack, Jack. To this moment I didn't know that you would be here. What a

coincidence, don't you think?"

Jack for the first time turned his head towards Robert. His face exploded with fury.

"Do not even try to hurt any of them. Are you getting me?"

Robert just smiled, then taking the silver lighter with a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket left Jack alone.

15.

Having cleaned the house and expressing her gratitude for all the help Jack offered, Helen went to the bathroom. While she was in a shower Jack grabbed his phone with the intention of making a call.

"There's no use calling, he might be sleeping already. I shouldn't trouble him either."

Thinking for a short while he gave up.

At the very moment Helen came out of the shower wearing the most sultry lingerie Jack had ever seen. For them the night wasn't over.

When Helen woke up Jack wasn't in bed. She turned over and spotted him standing at the window and looking ahead as if he was trying to figure out something important. Helen lifted her naked body up covered only by the silk duvet and asked, "How long have you been standing there?"

Jack slightly moved his body and glanced at her, then smiled. Helen smiled back

and shifted her hand in his direction. Having grabbed it Jack sat just next to her.

“What's going on, love?” Helen asked.

Just looking at her Jack kept stroking her slim body. Then leaned towards her face and kissed her passionately to the point that it became too tough and uncomfortable for her. Helen pushed him away as she didn't like it.

“Stop it!” She yelled.

Jack realised it was too much and he had gone too far. He jumped off the bed and held his head with both arms and started apologising.

“Oh my God, I'm so sorry, I didn't want to hurt you. I... I... shit! Say something, please, that you understand and...Helen.” He raised in front of her waiting for a single word. There was no use, because Helen was motionless and as deaf as a post to Jack's words.

“Helen, there's something you should know and I need to tell you about.”

Jack knew sooner or later he would have to tell her about his problems and about Robert and his mad uncle. He felt it wasn't the most perfect moment, but he had to do it eventually.

“Helen, you need to listen to me now carefully.” Having said that, Jack sat at the edge of the bed. Helen lifted her eyes and looked at him.

“Why are you so mysteriously serious?”

“Because this is a very serious situation.”

At the same time Jack's phone buzzed. He peeped at it. It was Andy.

“Damn, not now. “ He whispered under his breath.

“It might be urgent. You should answer it.” Helen suggested.

“What I'm about to say it's much more crucial.”

The phone kept ringing though.

“You'd better pick it up.” She encouraged him again.

Jack did as Helen said and excused her.

‘Mate, I can't talk now. What's the matter?’

‘Sorry boss to trouble you, but I'd rather you came to the garage.’ Andy declared with his unstable voice.

‘Just tell me man, what the hell is going on there.’ Jack responded with some irritation in his tone.

‘Let me send you a photo.’ Hardly Andy had ended his call when an image was delivered to Jack's phone.

‘You must be kidding me!’ Jack muttered.

He jumped off the bed as if he sat on a fire and began getting dressed as quickly as he could. Helen wrapped in the duvet sat in the middle of the bed and watching him with a confusion in her eyes asked,

‘Could you finally tell me what's happening here? You were about to talk about some significant story and now you're in a hurry like someone would be chasing you. Where are you going, anyway?’

Jack trying to put his shoe on, bent on his knees and with half of his body leaned on the bed said,

‘Look at me Helen,’ expressed, grabbing her hand, ‘I love you, and all I do is to protect you. Wait for me, I won't be long.’

He kissed her hand, stood up and before leaving the room looked at her one more time.

‘Watch your back, please.’

‘Always.’ Jack replied, smiled and left the room.

16.

The car was parked just round the corner but in such a location that nobody was able to spot it. Lighting the cigarette the older man expressed,

‘So how was the party?’

The younger one stroke his chin and beamed with pleasure, ‘It was unpredictable.’

‘Unpredictable?’ With a slight concern the older echoed then added, ‘what was there to predict?’

The younger man turned his head towards his interlocutor and said,

‘You won't believe it.’

The other one rose even more bewildered, ‘Believe in what?’

At the very moment he identified a male figure at some distance.

‘There he is.’

‘Speaking about the devil.’ Added the other one lowering his position. ‘I met him last night at the party.’

George looked at Robert with great disbelief.

‘Say what?’

Nonetheless after a short spell of time he got back watching Jack who was walking from one place to another, waving his hands in the air, shaking his head and screaming.

‘I was as startled as you're right now.’ Rob carried on, ‘You know they say, the world it's just a small place. I assume it really is.’

His uncle glanced at him and with a gesture of one of his hands communicated that he was waiting for more details, so Rob continued,

‘It turned out that we both, I mean I and Perez jr. are dating sisters.’

‘No way!’ George exclaimed with such a high voice that just after it he placed his both hands on his mouth and looked around anxiously to check that he wasn't

heard outside of the car.

“When he saw me there he looked as if he saw a ghost.” Rob added then both men burst into laughter.

“I guess, nephew, It's time I met your girlfriend.” Uncle George brought it up and started the engine.

17 .

Andy had been waiting for him in front of the building when Jack, still wearing the same suit from the previous night, arrived at the garage in a hurry.

“Hey mate.” The guy approached his boss as soon as he got out of the car.

Jack walked closer to the main door and read

'I WANT MY MONEY!'

“Do you have any idea who might have done it?” asked Andy.

“I guess I do and I'm also concerned this is just the beginning.”

Jack crouched down, grabbed his head with both hands and began mumbling something under his breath. Andy came closer and placed his arm on one of Jack's shoulders. “Don't you think the police should be informed?”

Jack jumped up as if he had just been galvanised by a taser.

'No! Police mustn't know about it!'

Screaming and walking along the building little did he know that he was being watched.

'If the police are involved my dad is in a deep hole.' Jack continued.

The man put his both hands in pockets, looked up at the sky and murmured, 'We're already there, anyway.'

Jack felt like his eyes appeared to be more wet than usual. He hardly ever cried. It was his wife's funeral when he cried the last time. He also grew emotional when his son had been born some time before that. Nonetheless, he started feeling like was losing the grip of this whole situation. There was too little time and too much to lose, too many people to protect. At the very moment he reached for his phone.

'Dad,' Jack instantly dialed his father's number, 'Listen, it's urgent. You have to take Timi out of the town as soon as possible. Please, don't ask any questions, just do it. I'll call you in the evening and we will talk. You can go to your sister. I'm sure she'll be delighted to see you both. One more thing, dad, don't come back until I tell you. Love you.'

'Okay, I'll do that. Please, be careful. Love you, son.' His dad responded shortly.

Ending the phone conversation Jack spotted a familiar car passing by. He recognized old George and his charming nephew in it.

'Shit, Helen!' The man realised that he hadn't talked to her about it yet.

He grabbed his phone again to make another call.

'Andy, I have to dash to check on Helen. She's not answering her phone.' Jack running to his own car kept talking. Before entering it he stopped and turned back to Andy. Embracing him with his arms said,

'I'm sorry mate for all this mess, but no police, please.'

18.

Having taken a quick shower, Helen walked downstairs straight to the kitchen to grab a cup of coffee. She drank it very rarely, but that morning she needed it big time. After putting the kettle on Helen approached the back glass door with the intention to sit in the garden. As soon as she opened it she felt a cool morning breeze that changed her mind. *“Brrrr...Where has summer gone?”*

She thought and got back to the kitchen. Summer was over indeed. Although there were still sunny days, trees started changing their colours. Leaves began presenting various shades of gold, sun was setting down faster and nights became longer and colder.

The house seemed to be ready to welcome its first guest. Despite the fact that Helen didn't want to lose any of them. She could still remember how tough it had been to complete such a great team. Knowing that the house would be vacant and having taken two days off from work, Helen grew content. She could use that opportunity for her and Jack to spend some time together. He would finally be able to tell her that important story. Kate's little help, did a really great job with the renovation, she still felt bothered, which herself could not comprehend. The house looked perfect, it smelled even better, but there was still something that Helen wasn't able to take in. Maybe it wasn't the house, maybe it was the anxiety she'd been feeling for a while. Maybe she was just overwhelmed with everything. She grabbed her coffee and walked around not really knowing what to do. Her idleness was interrupted by a text message from her first visitors.

“Dear Helen,

We'd love to apologise but due to a family emergency we have to postpone our stay.

We're really sorry. Joe will call you later to talk about the details.

Much love'

To her own astonishment, she wasn't even upset with that news. Soon after reading it she made a couple of phone calls to the staff with the guarantee that they would be paid anyway.

'What if....what if he wants to propose?' She thought and cried out, "Oh my God!"

At that very moment, leaving her phone behind, she ran back to the kitchen to start preparing a surprise dinner for her man.

19.

Jack jumped into his car, pressed the gas pedal and screeched away. Driving was thinking about getting through to Helen or reaching her house before old George and his pretty boy would do so. He kept calling her phone over and over in such a hectic manner that the phone slipped out of his hand and fell under the passenger's seat.

"Shit!" Jack yelled.

Outstretching his arm and trying to grab the device, he overlooked the red traffic light. All he could hear was the sound of honking cars. At the very moment he lifted

his body and maneuvered the vehicle in a hazardous way just to avoid collision. No sooner than he managed to get out of trouble, Jack caught another unpleasant noise. It was a police siren, that time.

‘Damn you, Perez!’ He cried and hitting a steering wheel pulled over.

A tall police officer approached his car.

‘Good morning, sir.’ Jack rolled down the window and greeted the man, then added,

‘I can explain everything...’

‘Your driving licence, proof of insurance and registration, please.’ The policeman interrupted.

‘Sir, please, let me justify myself.’

‘Your driving licence, proof of insurance and registration.’ The officer insisted.

Jack didn't hesitate any longer. As soon as he shifted to grab the documents from the glove compartment the phone, which was still under the seat, started vibrating. Just at that moment when Jack leaned forward to retrieve the phone the cop pointed a gun in his direction.

‘Put your hands up and step out of your vehicle!’ The police officer screamed.

‘Sir, please, it's just my phone. I need to pick it up. You don't understand.’ Keeping his voice down Jack began slowly raising his hands.

‘Step out of your car!’ The man shouted again.

Jack followed the order that time. He left the car with his hands up. The policeman took hold of his arm, shoved him to the back door, turned his body facing the car and placed handcuffs on his wrists.

‘Perfecto.’ Jack only muttered under his breath.

‘You have the right to remain silent.’ The officer expressed and pulled Jack to his car.

20.

The whole house smelled as if the world's best chef was in the town. Helen was a great cook. She knew various types of dishes and specialised in Italian cuisine, especially pasta. Lasagne alla Bolognese was her masterpiece. The secret was hidden in fresh ingredients and milk. She always used whole milk as she could find in traditional recipes. What's more, the cherry on the top was a fresh basil from her own yard. Cooking became her hobby when she started living on her own. Before that she had just been helping in her mother's kitchen and rather prepared what she was asked to compose.

Having laid the table and opened the wine, Helen went back to her room to change clothes. She didn't realise that her phone was off for the whole time while she was working downstairs. As soon as she turned it on she found out about the missed calls from Jack. She called his number instantly, though without response. She kept calling for a while when she eventually gave up after the fifth time. Feeling apprehensive, Helen walked downstairs. She sat at the table and began cogitating what might have happened to Jack and why he had tried to reach her number several times without leaving a single message. While she was contemplating she realised how late it was and Jack actually should have been back by then. She grabbed her phone again and decided to call Jack's dad. Unfortunately there was no signal either. At the very moment Helen understood that there was absolutely something wrong and grew anxious greatly. She didn't know what to do any more when suddenly she remembered about Andy. She picked her phone again and

searched for Andy's phone number, but first she decided to call Jack's office. The last time she rang that number was the day when her old car refused to cooperate and her own sister got on her nerves. For a very short moment Helen felt pensive recalling that day, then she pressed the number. After a couple of signals someone answered the call. It wasn't Jack.

'Hello' She greeted the person first.

'Hello. How can I help you ma'am?' The masculine voice asked.

'I'm sorry to bother you, but is Jack around?'

'Unfortunately, he's not here today. Would you like to leave a message?'

Helen hesitated for a while then added,

'Could you tell him please, when he's back, could you tell him...' She wasn't sure what to tell him. What if there is someone else, she thought. What, if he was ashamed or embarrassed to confess and just ran away from her.

'Ma'am, what should I tell him?' The man asked.

Losing her mind, Helen kept the line engaged. Suddenly she heard Andy's voice in the background.

'Andy!' She yelled. 'Could you pass the phone to Andy, please?'

The man just was glad to shift the phone to the other one.

'Hello, who's this?' Andy asked immediately.

'Andy, it's me, Helen.' She replied and asked, 'Andy, do you know where Jack might be? I've been waiting for him for such a long time and he's not here yet. His phone is not responding, his dad's either. I don't know what's going on, I don't know what to do..' Helene cried out.

'Calm down, Helen.' Andy tried to abate the situation. 'I spoke to him this morning. We met at the garage due to the emergency case, then he got into the car and said that he was going back to you.'

'He has never reached the house. Oh my god! What if he had an accident.' Helen burst into tears.

Andy paused for a second then carried on.

“Let’s not make hasty conclusions, Helen. I believe he’s fine.”

“How can you be so sure? It’s been a few hours and he’s not here. So where he can be. I have a really bad feeling, Andy. He wanted to talk about something important but you called and he didn’t manage. What it may be, Andy.” Helen couldn’t stop crying, then added, “Don’t you think we should check the hospital? They might have brought him there if there was an accident.”

“Helen, don’t panic, please.” Andy responded and said, “Look Helen, I can’t leave work right now. He’s not here, I must stay at the garage. Can you go on your own and eventually call me if you know anything?”

“Yes, I can. Bye for now.” Helen ended the call in the rush.

21.

There are places you wish you had never visited. There are also places you wish you had never been located in and still places you were advised to avoid.

Nonetheless, lots of unforeseeable things in life put us in conditions which we had never thought about in our darkest dreams. One of the places is...

Jack sat on a hard iron bench next to a sleeping stranger. There wasn’t any other unoccupied spot, either. The place was filled with random weird men. However some of them, wearing similar outfits, looked alike. One could figure out that before they were brought there they might have attended some sport event, such as

a football match. Few others seemed to be drunkards or just vagrants. Wearing his suit Jack looked rather odd.

‘Hello, sweetie!’ One of them addressed Jack. ‘Who did you piss off?’ Laughed and added, ‘tell us why you are here.’

Jack, sitting with his arms placed on knees and his head bending down, slightly lifted his eyes just to look in the speaker’s direction.

‘I don’t want to talk about it.’ Mumbled.

‘There’s plenty of time’ the stranger carried on, ‘we all have at least 24 hours.’

Jack was aware of it and unfortunately there was nothing he could do. The fact that Helen was unconscious of the whole situation drove him crazy. He was only glad that he had managed to contact his father. At the time when he should be taking care of people he loved, he was sitting locked-up with some criminals. On the other hand he was a lawbreaker too. The villain in a suit.

‘Everyone has a story to tell, you can start.’ The stranger added.

‘I don’t.’ Some of the drunk men lying on the ground growled and rolled over to fall asleep again.

Jack stood upright and approached the bars. He searched with his eyes for any officer whom he could talk to.

‘Is anyone there? I need to make a phone call.’ He yelled.

‘They won’t hear you.’ Someone said, ‘They don’t care.’

‘I need to call Helen.’ Jack whispered, resting his body on the barrier.

After a short while he turned back to his previous place. The man who had been sleeping next to him was already up. It was a younger man with an eagle shaped tattoo on his neck. He wasn’t drunk as Jack thought initially, rather drained. Sitting next to him again, Jack introduced himself.

‘I’m Mike.’ He responded and added smiling, ‘Nice suit. Did the party go wrong?’

For the first time since he was arrested, Jack’s mood was a bit enlightened.

‘No, the party was great. It happened after the event.’

22.

Helen grabbed her bag and car keys. Leaving the garden doors open she departed the house. Little did she know that for the last hour her house had been watched. As soon as her car disappeared round the corner the observer abandoned his vehicle and approached the building. Although the day was rather sunny, he was wearing a leather jacket and gloves. Having reached the property the stranger peeked through the window glass inside, then rang the bell. He assumed that there was nobody in, all he needed it was the double check the house in fact was empty. After a very short while standing at the front door the man decided to take the path leading to the backyard. How bewildered he was when he realised the gate was locked. “*Oh, man!*” he thought, “*I’m not even dressed to jump over the fence.*” There was no other way just to climb the barrier. Having looked around if there was no passerby, the intruder pounced, took the hold on the top of the entrance, dragged his body up, placed his right foot on the handle to secure balance, his left leg lifted up then turning and bending his whole body in analogous direction...fell over the obstacle. “*Damn you!*” only howled. Pulling himself together the trespasser carried on his mission. Little did he know that while flying over the fence he lost some very distinctive object. His face beamed when he discerned the fact that the patio door had been left ajar.

“*Someone was in a hurry.*” Thought with a silly grin on his face.

23.

It was going to be a long evening for Kate. Being alone in the pub she opened a guitar case and produced her indigo blue high gloss guitar. She loved that instrument not only for the fact that it was her anchor, her therapy, but it looked exactly the same as her very first one. For anyone else who could just sit and listen to her playing and singing the performance was a sort of entertainment, but for Kate it was a way of self expression. Not only was she able to deliver pleasure for ears, but also she could relax and release tension. She had been feeling fatigued for the past couple of days, indeed, and all she needed was a peaceful time.

There was something weighing on her which she couldn't stop thinking about.

Having sat on a chair, the woman placed the instrument on her lap. She was about to rehearse when all of sudden someone entered the local.

"There you are!" Robert expressed straight ahead while coming in.

He approached Kate and kissed her cheek.

"You look worn out, girl." The man detected it as soon as he got closer.

"Thanks, I know that. I'm not feeling well, indeed. I just need to give this performance tonight and I have two days off so that I'll be able to rest a bit."

"Exactly, talking about your days off." Robert, thrilled, carried on, "My uncle invited us to spend some time with him in his cottage by the lake."

He noticed a bewilderment on her face so added, "It would be an excellent place for you to unwind for a moment."

Kate was sitting silently still, contemplating the narration. Robert bent his knees

and crouched in front of her. Suddenly she felt that the weekend away was the invitation she actually had been waiting for. She looked in his eyes and whispered, “This is all I need right now.”

24.

The time at once stopped galloping. One minute lasted forever. Forever continued endlessly. Endless never ceased. Jack and his new mate transferred on the floor. The bench wasn't any more comfy, if it had ever been. They were leaning against the wall and chatting. Jack felt a kind of spiritual connection with the other guy, which staggered him to some extent. He comprehended the situation very close to the earliest years he and Andy experienced. Extremely natural, instinctive and unwary. “The police officer stopped me while I was dashing to my girl and I dropped my phone, and moderately lost control over the car.” Jack explained the reason he was arrested.

“You know, you must have pissed that dude. That's all.” Mike added.

Jack beamed. He was aware of the fact that he couldn't talk much about his problems, especially about old George and his nephew, however he was eager to know more about his companion.

“So, is there any hidden meaning behind your tattoo?” Asked and added, “I've

heard people usually have the tattoo done with some link to their personal lives.”

Mike slightly smiled and after a short while uttered,

“I’ve always admired eagles. Especially for their power and supremacy, but foremost for their liberty and wisdom. Do you know that an eagle is called a king of birds?”

Jack just nodded, then pointing out a small window down the corridor added,

“Well, I wish I was a bird right now so I would be able to fly away from this place through that window.”

They both laughed again.

Some of the detainees managed to fall asleep, some others kept walking round the cell, some random lad sang a song in a language that nobody could acknowledge, and still some other chaps, such as Jack and Mike, conducted conversations.

“Tell me Mike, what might have happened in your life that you’ve found yourself here?”

Mike scratched his head. He seemed not to be keen to talk about it. Nonetheless he sighed heavily and expressed,

“The thing is, I’m rather glad to be here.”

Jack stared at him baffled. What might have happened in someone’s life that he’d rather be in jail than freely walking down the alley. He wasn’t confident in asking any more questions. As a matter of fact, he either wasn’t positive about the idea of knowing the story. Mike recognised his bewilderment and minor rejection.

“It’s not easy to be a homeless man.” Uttered and added, “At least I have a roof above my head for a while.”

Jack made an effort to grin slightly but he felt strongly sympathetic for that young fellow. It was beyond his comprehension to grasp the life circumstances that brought him to live on the street. On one hand he didn’t want to poke nose in that dude’s existence, but on the other one his curiosity grew stronger and stronger.

“Well, you know..” Jack started, “life is unpredictable and many times we must

accept what it brings.” He didn’t want to sound too inquisitive therefore hesitated to ask any questions.

“My life was well planned, but it wasn’t the way I wanted.” Mike responded.

Jack detected a sense of sorrow in his buddy’s voice hence, despite his own inner debate, said,

“I can’t say I know how it is, because I’ve never been in such a place, but if you’re in need to talk about it, I’m all ears. We still have plenty of time.”

Having expressed that Jack observed the atmosphere shifted to its prior condition. He felt sort of relief and detected the same from his pal.

25.

George approached the back yard door and entered the house. He came across a couple of tables for two and one family table, which in fact was set.

“*Aw, what a shame hubby hasn’t turned up..*” He thought and, grabbing a bunch of grapes, walked towards the kitchen.

The delicious aroma was still floating in the air.

“*Oh man, this smell is whetting my appetite...*” He thought again, swallowing his saliva.

The main course was still in the oven, however George, following the aroma, located it with no difficulty.

“*Before I continue with my visit I must consume some of this mouth- watering speciality.*” Having said so, George pulled the casserole out of the oven and helped himself with an ample portion. He gobbled it down as though he hadn’t eaten for a really long time. All of sudden he felt fatigued and dropped off to be awakened in a

flash by a caterwaul. Little did he know that he wasn't alone. Having opened his eyes, he stood up and stretched his ageing body.

“No time for resting old man, you have some work to do.”

While rubbing the tomato sauce from his hands with a white kitchen table, the man caught sight of a cat passing through the other room.

“It wasn't a dream, indeed..” He thought and carried on with his own business.

The kitchen was entirely equipped. The chef supplied it with all components to prepare every single dish from the menu. When George opened the cupboard his eyes twinkled. He found everything he needed.

“So, let's start the party!” He spoke to himself and smirked.

26.

Before she headed to the hospital, Helen had decided to stop by Perez's house.

Little did she know that Jack in fact had ordered his dad to leave the town and there was nobody in. She dashed to the front door as soon as she got out of the car,

“Jack! Jack! Mr Perez!” Helen cried out while banging on the entrance.

Having hit the door and pressed the doorbell a couple more times, Helen realised that her whole effort was aimless and the house was actually empty. Leaning against the door, she slid helplessly down and sat on the door steps.

“Where the hell you're, Jack.” Whispered while looking ahead.

There was no sign, there was no clue, not even a tiny hint that would guide her.

Sitting there alone and contemplating where to go next and, as a matter of fact,

what to do, a sudden voice appeared from afar.

“It’s no use waiting. They all left.” The passer-by yelled.

Helen instantly lifted her body up off the ground and ran towards the stranger’s direction.

“What do you mean, all left?” She asked as soon as she reached the man.

“Old Perez and little boy.” Seeing Helen’s determination, he answered swiftly.

“What about Jack?” She kept questioning, “Have you seen him with them?”

The man recognized a sense of discomfort and rather wished to follow his path.

Nonetheless, Helen blocked his way.

“Please, answer my question. Was Jack with them? It’s very important.”

The gentleman looked at her and spotted tears in her eyes.

“No, he wasn’t. I’m sorry. Will you let me go now?”

As Helen was stepping aside tears fell down her cheeks. She wiped them with the edge of her hand. Having taken a deep breath she opened the car’s door, got into it and screeched away on the road to the hospital.

27.

Kate wasn’t pretty sure what to pack in her small suitcase hence she just grabbed a few casual outfits and toiletries. Having stuffed the bag swiftly, she only managed

to send a short message to her sister that she was going away for the weekend and left the house.

Robert had already been waiting for her.

“That was fast.” He said with a mischievous smile then placed the luggage in the boot. Together with the clothing Kate decided to take her guitar as well. In two days she was going to have an audition. The chance to be in a recording studio emerged once again when on a stormy night one of the sound producers appeared in the *Drag-On* and heard her singing. She was then invited to give a brief performance. She couldn’t believe that life was offering her another shot.

While Kate got into the car she asked Robert to stop at the chemist’s. For the past couple of days she wasn’t feeling well. She suffered from fatigue and recurring headaches. Initially she had thought that it could have been caused by her overwork and late nights, but now she rather thought about something else. Something which would complicate everything and turn her whole life upside down one more time.

The road was clear, there was no traffic and they managed to get out of town quite effortlessly. They were driving through the route which had forests on both sides. The sun rays tried stiffly to break through thick tree crowns. Singular beams managed to transfer the branches and bedazzled voyagers.

They didn’t talk much. Kate relaxed her head on the headrest and although she wasn’t able to fall asleep, she kept her eyes closed. As much as she wanted to destress, she couldn’t. She kept thinking about both the audition and the item she had bought at the pharmacy. She grappled with her thoughts. The drive lasted about an hour when Robert expressed all of a sudden, “We are almost there.”

Kate lifted her head and opened her eyes. The track was leading through the forest. They passed by the lake and then drove across the small bridge to get into the farm surrounded by a wooden fence. From far it looked as if it was a rodeo ring. As they were driving at a slow pace the small wooden house was becoming more visible. It

gave the impression of not being vacant for a while.

‘Does your uncle live here?’ Kate, without looking in Rob’s direction, spoke at last.

‘No, it’s only his holiday cottage.’ Robert replied while parking the car just next to the building, then added, ‘You will love it here.’

‘Yeah, it’s really peace and quiet.’ Nonetheless, Kate was a bit concerned about the area, hence when Rob got off the car and went to take her stuff out of the boot, she ensured that her mobile was on. There was still no response from Helen, though.

‘Are you going to spend the whole weekend in that car?’ Robert approached the front door and asked with a smile.

‘No, of course not.’ She grabbed his hand and jumped off the vehicle.

28.

‘My father’s desire was for me to become a lawyer. He was a lawyer, his dad was a lawyer and he expected me to be one too.’ Mike eventually began his revelation.

‘I thought I owed it to them. My parents, you know. I don’t even comprehend why this came to my mind and why I was thinking that way.’

Jack nodded while listening intently and expressed his thoughts,

‘Well, it happens many times when you think about your mother and father. I have the same, it just obvious to me that I must take care of my dad as he did care about me when I was young and vulnerable.’

Mike absolutely agreed with what Jack said and carried on ‘Exactly, bro. I thought

if he pays for my food, my clothes and my school, I should not disappoint him and complete his will, despite my own one. Therefore, I started the school he had selected for me, which I haven't finished, anyway. To be honest, I quite liked it initially, especially criminal law, and I thought that it might have worked out. Nonetheless, things totally went wrong when my best friend died. I couldn't cope with it. Believe me, I was torn apart. I stopped attending lectures, I failed my exams and eventually I dropped out of college. We were just like brothers. The world stopped for me and I was not able to see any logical future for myself then. He supported me in everything and encouraged me in following my dad's aspiration." He paused for a while and stared into space without a single motion. He might not have blinked even once. Jack placed his own arm on his companion shoulder and uttered quietly,

"Sorry mate to hear that. I may not be the best at cheering people up, but one thing I can say is that I know how you feel when you lose someone you love. My wife died at the birth of our son and I also thought that it was the end of everything for me."

Mike shifted his head and glanced at Jack apologising for what he just heard, then continued,

"Then I decided that I didn't want to live for others, you know what I mean. I want to live my own life, the life I chose for myself, not somebody else appoints for me. When I told my dad about my decision to quit college. He kicked me out of the house shouting at me and saying that I was ungrateful and using some other unpleasant adjectives. Well, it's been over a year since that and I haven't heard a single word from him. I've been travelling from one place to another and sleeping rough, but I live my own way. I know it's temporary and one day I'll settle down somewhere, and stand on my feet."

Jack, pensive, engaged deeply in his own thoughts and Mike's story, wasn't sure what to say in that particular moment. He scratched his head and eventually

gaspd something out, ‘So that’s why this tattoo.’

Mike smiled and confirmed. ‘I’ve told you, free like a bird.’

Jack had only one piece of advice which he wanted to give his companion, but hesitated. Life teaches us all the same lesson, no time for quarrels. Later might be too late to say what you feel and how sorry you are.

Jack just sighed and looking towards the same window mumbled,
‘Like a bird.’

29.

It was getting late and Helen started feeling exhausted from running around the town in a search for her beloved man. Having visited the hospital and some local shops she surrendered at last. She was heading to The Kents when her phone rang unexpectedly. She grabbed it instantly.

‘Andy, do you have any good news for me?’

‘Actually, I was going to ask you the same question,’ Andy replied.

Hearing that Helen realised at once, there was no good news. There wasn’t any news.

At that very moment she gloomed again.

‘Andy, there’s only one place which I haven’t been to. I think it’s high time we informed the police.’

There was a little while of pause, as if Andy was taking a very deep breath, when all of sudden uttered inaudibly,

‘I believe that Jack may be in trouble.’

Although he tried to be as soundless as possible, Helen got what he declared. She stopped the car promptly without grasping that actually she was just in front of her house. Not moving a muscle, she was processing the information to in a moment start screaming at Andy,

‘Why didn’t you tell me this five hours ago?! I’ve been looking for him everywhere and you assumed that he could have been in hot water! Over and above that he might have been dead until now!’

It was no use for Andy trying to interrupt because Helen hung up on him. She got out of the car furiously and approached the house. Little did she know what she was about to see.

The corridor was an absolute mess. The carpet, which belonged to her parents and Helen had kept for many years, was completely destroyed. It wasn’t torn apart, but it was doused in oil and tomato puree. The two rocking chairs, which Kate had bought occasionally on the flea market, were smashed entirely. Horrified of what could have happened if she kept moving, Helen seized a piece of wooden leg from the ruined chair. ‘*What else may happen today.*’ She thought while steadily shifting towards the dining area. She dropped her ‘weapon’ as soon as she entered the room. The whole capacity looked as if it was hit by a tornado. The tables were upside down and chairs were scattered around the place. The plates and glasses were shattered, the tablecloths were ripped up, the yellow curtains were blotched with huge red spots as though someone splashed them with a beetroot soup. The walls were also bedaubed with unknown matter. When Helen advanced towards one of them she recognized that it was simple ketchup and some other food products, such as mustard, mayonnaise or red wine.

‘*Who would have done something like that?*’ It was beyond her scope to comprehend. She slightly moved in the kitchen’s direction and opened the door ajar. It was enough for her to not shift any further. She stepped back and without

any hesitation made a call,
‘Hello, I’d like to report a burglary.’

30.

For Jack, the last six hours seemed like the whole eternity. As if time stopped and never moved further again. Awareness that somewhere out there are people who must have been concerned about him, was giving him the hump.

He lifted his body from the bench and moved nearer to the bar with tiny hope to spot a new face whom he hadn’t begged yet for just one phone call.

‘Perez?’ Someone called his name abruptly.

Jack barely turned his head to the right to detect a familiar figure.

‘What the hell are you doing here?’ The person continued.

‘Oh, my God, Carla!’ Jack cried out with joy, ‘you can not imagine how happy I am to see you!’

Carla was a girl, a woman, whom Jack met at a petrol station before he had even got married. They both were still very young then. At that time her car was acting up but luckily for her Jack stopped there to fill up a tank in his own car. He offered his help, but only on one condition that she would go out with him. They went for dinner, then they met a few times. Carla wanted to pursue her career and moved out of town. Initially they kept in touch then gradually the relationship ceased to

exist. Jack never heard from her again and then he met his future wife.

Now she just emerged out of blue exactly at that police station, and certainly she wasn't a criminal.

"I just can't believe it. You, Jack Perez, are in a place like this." Bewildered she arose in front of him.

Jack stood there, slouched, with his head down. He had thought several times that one day they would meet again. But not in such circumstances, not such a setting.

"So, you are a policewoman now, aren't you?" he affirmed with a slight beam on his face.

She also smiled moderately and replied, "And you're a criminal, are you?"

It wasn't the best time and place to talk much about the last ten years. They only exchanged few details about their lives and Jack briefly managed to explain the whole morning accident,

"...and since then I haven't been allowed to make a single call," ended.

Carla discreetly looked around then opened the gate speaking to Jack's face,

"You have one minute and one phone call," let him out.

In a rush Jack approached the line phone which she pointed out on the corridor table. He had no doubts whom he should inform first. Fortunately the line wasn't busy.

"Andy?" The only person we could always count on.

"Jack! Where are you? What's been going on?" Andy fired questions at the caller.

"I can't talk much. I have one minute, later I'll explain everything. Listen mate, Mr Donovan is one of our clients, he is an attorney, please call him, and tell him that I have been arrested this morning. He must get me out of here as soon as possible.

Are you getting me, man? I have to go now, but please do as I'm saying."

"I'm getting you, mate. Keep tight!" Andy responded flatteringly. There was nothing else to talk about.

Hanging the phone up Jack looked at Carla and passing by her whispered, "Thank

you.”

It was a miracle for him that she was there. History came full circle. She needed help when her car broke down back then on that petrol station when Jack appeared as her saviour and now she was able to return the favour.

At last Jack could slightly breathe a sigh of relief, *“I just hope it wasn’t a dream.”*

31.

Having unpacked their stuff, they went for a stroll. The weather was still warm enough to just wander around for a while, and secondly Robert wished to show Kate the nearest surroundings.

The forest was snuff-coloured with towers of trees. Cracking branches and crispy leaves created a rustling sound while they were stepping on them. In a remote wilderness one could detect scuttering badgers or hares. A little squirrel ran hurriedly and a magnificent jay made a loud screech. As they kept marching, mostly in silence, they reached a lake that twisted smoothly down the forest. It was peaceful and motionless. The sun was going down thus the place looked magnificently. They only were able to catch sight of a family of ducks drifting on the pink- coloured water.

The place would be stunning for everyone who saw it, but not Kate. She acknowledged the fact that Robert did his best to cheer her up and please her, but she couldn’t take her mind off something else.

“What’s going on, Kate?” Robert eventually addressed her bad mood, ‘Sorry, but

you've seemed to be a bit grumpy since morning." He added with a slight beam. Kate tried to avoid the response and declared that she'd been absolutely fine. She put all her blame on the coming music audition. Although Robert wasn't quite convinced, he let it go.

As soon as they returned home, Robert got to prepare dinner whereas Kate chose to rehearse a few songs. Roberts' uncle still wasn't there. He had told him that he might have stayed longer in a town because he had to settle some tasks. Never mentioned what kind of tasks.

While Robert was in the middle of cooking, the sound of the guitar all at once faded away. Briefly after it, he walked into the room to notice that Kate wasn't there. "Kate?" he called with uncertainty, "Kate!" He called her name again but a bit loudly and firmly.

"I'm in the bathroom." She responded all of sudden, and added "please, come here."

Robert instantly entered the bathroom and found Kate sitting on the edge of the bathtub. She was holding a pregnancy test in her hands.

"Kate, is it...?" Robert made an effort to choke it out.

"Yes, it is." She replied quietly and muttered under her breath, "I'm pregnant."

At the same moment the front door opened and a strong male voice uttered, "I'm home!"

Robert abruptly grabbed the test from Kate's hands and placed it in his pocket saying, "Let's not mention it to anyone about it, especially to my uncle, alright?" Staggered, Kate looked at him and just nodded.

Having left the bathroom they walked to the corridor to greet George.

"There you are!" The man announced seeing the couple, "You must be Kate. I'm glad to finally meet you," George posed to be pleasant to see Kate, "Robert told me a lot about you."

In fact Robert hardly ever talked to his uncle about Kate. All George was interested

about, was her relation with the Perez family.

After having dinner, which Robert eventually finished, Kate opted for a warm bath. The day was pretty long and, in point of fact, exhausting. She laid her debilitated body in a cosy bath. For the first time since last morning she could feel mellow. Regrettably her blissfulness didn't last for long. From the other room she could hear Robert and George. It wouldn't be anything exceptional about it, only the fact that they were rather yelling. Having wiped her body and wrapped it in a nightgown, Kate walked towards the door to quietly open it ajar so the dialogue would be more audible to her.

"I'm out of it!" Robert shouted *"I don't want to take part in your insane plan any more!"*

"You have nothing! All you have it's mine!" George responded with fury in his voice and carried on, *"You have no place to go, so you must stick to me and do what I say!"*

"I'm not your property!" The other one replied and added *"We came here to do business, not this! I'm taking Kate tomorrow back to town!"*

The discussion suddenly ceased and commenced again,

"Aw, someone is going to be a daddy!" George exclaimed with a laugh then Kate realised that he must have tried to stop Robert from leaving the room and the pregnancy test fell out of his pocket.

"Yes! I love her, and I won't let you hurt her! You hear me?!" Robert reacted strongly and left the room. Kate, hearing his steps swiftly closed the door and rapidly went back to the bath just to jump out of it right away. The water was already cold as ice. Hardly had she dressed again when Robert knocked at the bathroom's door,

"Can I come in?" Asked before entering.

"Yes." Kate answered briefly.

Little did he know that she overheard almost the whole conversation.

"We're leaving tomorrow morning, and please don't ask me why. We must leave."

Kate, keeping poker face, approached her man, held his face with her both hands

kissed him, then added,
'Anything you want.'

32.

Not waiting a minute, Andy dashed to the garage to get contact details to a lawyer Jack had told him about. He had had some other plans for the evening but his best friend was more significant than any other things. Even the most beautiful girl in a town would not stop him from helping his buddy.

Andy wasn't married or had children. He had hardly ever had a serious relationship with another woman. The most meaningful relationship he had ever been in was his bromance with Jack.

Having arrived at the service, Andy came into the building straight away. The place was already shut and it was deserted. The man was rather content, otherwise he would have to make up another story for Jack's absence. Entering Jack's office, Andy instantly walked towards files where each client's personal information was kept.

'*Mr Donovan, Mr Donovan...*' Andy, turning pages with all people whose name starts with 'D', kept repeating the attorney's name under his breath.

'*I've never expected that we've had so many clients with the name starting with D.*' He figured out when at once cried out,

'There you are!' Then thought, '*Alexander Donovan, what an excellent name for a*

lawyer.”

Mister Donovan was the best in his profession. He had won every case and there was no one in the town who had never heard about his law skills. By happy chance his favourite car had broken down a few years ago.

Without delay, he looked at the contact details and right away dialled the man number. After a short while, which for Andy seemed to be eternal, a strong male voice responded,

‘Hello?’

‘Is that Alexander Donovan?’ Andy asked optimistically.

‘Yes, speaking. Whom am I talking to?’

‘Andy Brown. I’m calling on behalf of Jack Perez.’

‘Oh, Jack. I haven’t heard from him for a while. How is my friend doing these days?’

‘The thing is, he’s not doing well at all’ Andy responded with his lower voice, then added, ‘that’s why I’m contacting you, Mr Donovan.’

‘Don’t tell me that he has gone into trouble with the law. Jack is a good man, what’s could have happened?’ The man responded with disbelief in his voice.

‘Jack has been arrested this morning. I’m not sure what caused it, but he called me an hour ago and asked to find you and bring to the police station, where actually he’s been kept since then.’ Andy briefly explained the whole situation.

‘Listen Andy, it’s six in the afternoon. I’m not sure if we’ll manage to get our buddy out from there tonight, but we can try. The problem is, we have no clue what he has done, so I don’t know what to expect. As long as he hasn’t killed anybody, however we both are aware that he wouldn’t be able to do that, we can pay the bail and take him out. However first we need to go and figure out what situation took place to put Jack behind bars. Andy, please give me half an hour and I’ll come to pick you up. Where can I meet you man?’

‘Maybe in front of the ‘Jack’s cars’?’ Andy suggested.

‘Yes, that works for me. See you in 30 minutes.’ Alexander Donovan ended.

Andy, still having some time, collected all the folders he removed from the bookcase and attempted to put them away. Holding them in his arms abruptly spotted something on the wall at the back of the cabinet, something that he hadn't noticed while he was hurriedly taking the folders out of the shelves.

"What it might me?" He speculated while approaching the furniture. He kneeled and placed the files again on the floor. *"It looks like a secret safe."* He thought and touched the wall. *"Why does Jack need a hidden place like this? He's never mentioned anything."* Kept deliberating, *"Anyway, it's none of my business."* Andy said out loud and picked all the files up from the floor to place them on their initial location, *"I'd better hurry up."*

The attorney arrived sooner than was expected. Andy jumped into his car and both men headed towards the police station where Jack Perez had been waiting for his saviour.

33.

Helen, holding Watson in her arms, had been waiting in front of the building when police eventually arrived. It had gone about a half an hour since she had phoned them, therefore she managed to contact Kate once again.

"I'm coming home tomorrow morning" Kate declared on the phone, *"Rob and his*

uncle had a row and all I know is that he didn't want to be involved in something," and added *"and that he loved me."* Kate also clearly described the place she stayed at and said that it was the most tranquillizing location she had ever been to. Helen's initial intention was to tell her sister about the housebreaking and Jack's vanishing, but after hearing joy in her sister's voice she didn't want to ruin it. It would also be catastrophic for her to find out that the house, their whole hard work, was torn down. Kate loved the house dearly therefore she had convinced Helen to rejuvenate it.

Having heard the police car approaching the neighbourhood, Helen ended the conversation instantly. Three police cars emerged in front of the building. As soon as the cars were parked two police officers got out of each of them and moved towards Helen.

"Good evening, ma'am." One of them spoke and continued, "we've received a burglary report."

"Yes, I've informed about it almost an hour ago." Helen responded in a curt manner.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We had another call where a human's life was in danger. I hope you understand." The policeman reacted to Helen's comment.

"I might have been in danger too." Helen replayed with aggravation.

The police officer didn't react to that and others just looked at one another and rolled their eyes.

"Can we enter the building?" The policeman ultimately asked.

They followed her and went into the house. The smell wasn't any more pleasant, it was rather repellent. All spilled ingredients merged and formed a nasty odour.

One of the cops started sneezing and coughing heavily to the point that he had to walk out of the building to the backyard. Others began an investigation of the place and examined each piece of the furniture.

"You haven't touched anything, have you?" One of them asked Helen.

She looked at him with disbelief and acknowledged, ‘I’m not that stupid. Of course, I haven’t.’

They kept carrying on the inspection when all of a sudden the man with an allergy returned to the building with a message, ‘I’ve found something!’

All of them at once followed him to the place where the discovery was located. Hellen ran after them as well. They walked to the backyard fence. There was something shining on the ground.

‘What is it?’ One of the cops expressed.

They all bent their bodies closer to the unknown object. One of the inspectors produced tweezers to pick the piece up. It occurred to be a silver lighter with a very unusual design. An old fashioned style with a rooster embellishment.

‘Excellent, there must be some fingerprints on it.’ Collecting the gadget, the man expressed his satisfaction and added, ‘I’m going straight away to the laboratory.’

The whole procedure lasted another ninety minutes when all of them finally left.

Helen asked for security at least for the night. She felt apprehensive to be left alone. Therefore, a pair of young police officers were ordered to park their car round the corner and watch the building.

Having locked the front and backyard door and checking all the windows for the hundredth time, Helen grabbed Watson and walked upstairs to, at last, get some rest. As soon as she entered the bedroom she laid her exhausted body down on a bed. The bed was still in a mess as she had left in the morning. ‘*I don’t care about anything anymore.*’ She thought, ‘*I just want to sleep*’ and she slept.

It seemed to her that just one minute had passed since she fell asleep, when all at once a doorbell rang. She didn’t bother. The bell rang again.

‘Go away!’ She screamed, but she didn’t expect the response.

‘Helen! Open the door, it’s me, Jack!’

She jumped out of bed and Watson did too. She looked around. ‘*Am I dreaming?*’

She approached the window and looked outside. Jack Perez was standing in front of

the door. She didn't hesitate any longer, ran downstairs and after opening the door she firmly embraced her man with both hands.

"Where have you been?" Whispered and tears fell down her cheeks.

At the same time the two security officers appeared at the scene,

"Is everything alright, ma'am?" One of them asked.

Helen looked at him and replied, "Yes it is. Everything is perfect now."

The police officers drew back and while walking towards their car one of them looked in Helen and Jack's direction again, then said, "He looks exactly as that dude I locked last morning."

Having entered the building Jack's jaw dropped, "What the hell has happened here?!"

Helen put in the picture all the occurrences. "There are no evidence of the burglar, only one small item which was found at the backyard gate." She concluded.

"What item?" Jack asked out of curiosity.

"A silver lighter."

"With a rooster on it." Jack predicted.

"Yes. How do you know?" Helen asked bewildered.

"I've seen it before. Robert, Kate's boyfriend has one like that."

Helen leapt on her feet and began screaming, "Kate must be in danger! Oh, my God!"

Jack realised that she indeed might have been in danger. Little did he know that she was away with Robert and his uncle in a deep forest on her own.

"There is no signal!" Helen, in a blink of an eye, grabbed her phone and tried to warn her sister, however her phone was unreachable.

"She's out of town. She went with that Rob man to his uncle's lake house." Crying out, Helen informed Jack.

"Calm down, Helen. It might have been just a coincidence. Maybe somebody else has a similar lighter."

He comprehended that it was high time to acquaint Helen with the whole set of circumstances. However he wasn't sure if he wanted to involve her in the whole situation. He hesitated again.

'As you are saying, they are out of town, so it can't have been him, then. Helen put the phone down.' Jack tried to persuade Helen that there is no use calling if she's out of reach, then asked, 'Did she tell you where were they going?'

Helen walking round the messy room responded briefly, 'Yes, somewhere by the lake.'

'Alright, let me change, I need a quick shower and if you want we can go there to check on her.' Jack tried not to panic and keep the situation calm. On one side was Helen's sister and on the other one was his own family. He was aware of the fact that if Helen knew the whole story she would overreact and certainly informed the police, which Jack wanted to avoid as much as possible.

He grabbed Helen's hand pulled her closer and said,

'Everything will be fine, trust me.'

34.

'And then Andy emerged with the best attorney, Mr Donovan, by his side...'

Having illustrated his absence, Jack walked into the shower and Helen laid again on bed to

compose herself. He comprehended the idea that he had still omitted morning

coincidence at the garage and the factual cause Andy had brought him there. Jack also was aware that he lied to Helen repeatedly just to protect her and his own family. He absolutely felt overwhelmed with everything that had happened lately. It was high time to cease it all at last.

Staying in a shower for about twenty minutes he stepped out to perceive Helen sleeping deeply. Rubbing his wet body, he thought *‘If things go wrong, it might be our last few hours together.’* Having dressed, Jack took a seat at the window desk and on a small sheet of paper wrote a few words then rested quietly on the bed so as not to wake her up. All he wanted was several minutes just to be with his woman. Just to feel her body, to feel her heartbeat, to feel merrily before the bitter end.

Jack was half asleep, when Helen woke up at a stroke. She sat on the bed and uttered,

‘I saw blood, my sister, you...’ She started crying out, ‘we need to go and get her out of there before it’s too late!’

There was no point for Jack to console her. As a matter of fact, he didn’t even attempt to do it. He just checked the time. It was almost five in the morning, which meant it was the onset of another day. The decisive one.

The sun began to rise when Jack and Helen left the house, got into her car and drove towards Jack’s garage.

‘Why do we have to stop there right now?’ Helen asked impatiently.

‘I need to grab something.’ Jack responded briefly.

After parking the car in front of the building and leaving Helen in it, Jack dashed to his office. Due to the fact that it was still very early, the place was unoccupied. Jack entered the office and approached the same bookcase which Andy did while kept searching for Mr Donovan’s contact number. Perez, abruptly, removed the files from the shelves and the secret space that his buddy had spotted a couple hours earlier, came out into view one more time. Having pulled a small key out of one of

the drawers, Jack opened the locker. *“I can’t believe that I’m doing it.”* He thought and began filling up a gym bag he had in his office with bundles of money. *“That’s all I have.”* He thought again. Taking all his savings out of the box he lifted a small lid up and a pistol was displayed. Nobody, not even his father, knew about this cash box and about the gun. Jack had never needed it and prayed that he would never do so, therefore when he picked it up from its place, his hands started shaking. *“Relax man, you won’t kill anybody, it’s just for your own protection.”* He tried to reassure himself.

Leaving the mess behind, Jack locked the office door and the main entrance and got into the car.

“What’s in the bag?” Helen asked out of curiosity when she noticed Jack carrying a bag while leaving the building.

“It’s nothing.” Jack muttered.

Not saying a single word they travelled the same route as Kate and Robert did the previous day. The sun was already up high and it seemed to be a splendid day.

Not for everybody.

35.

“Helen, no matter what will happen today, please remember that I love you truly and deeply, and I’ve done this all just to protect everyone, you, Kate and my family.” Jack expressed after stopping suddenly the car in the middle of nowhere. Petrified Helen looked at him and asked “What do you mean by ‘all this’?”

Jack grabbed her hand, kissed affectionately and said, ‘When we got there, please take Kate and go home,’ then added, ‘and please, do not ask any more questions now.’

They sat there in silence for about two minutes, when Jack started the engine and drove a few more metres when a wooden farm house emerged among the forest trees. While they were moving closer, two people, a man and a woman, came out from the house. As soon as Jack stopped the car, Helen left it and ran to her sister, yelling, ‘Kate, Kate!’

They both were genuinely astonished seeing Helen and Jack on the farm.

‘What are you doing here?’ Kate asked.

‘We came to rescue you!’ Helen responded, grabbing Kate’s hand firmly.

Kate smiling repeated, ‘To rescue me?’

At the same moment, Jack got nearer. Robert, seeing Perez, drew back slightly.

‘What’s going on?’ Kate began dropping more questions.

Helen, pulling her sister further to her side, revealed,

‘He broke yesterday into our guest house and destroyed everything!’

Kate looked at Robert with a doubt, then turned to Helen and said,

‘It can’t have been him. Robert has been with me day and night. It’s impossible.’

Then Jack joined the conversation and put a question to Robert,

‘What about a cigarette, Robert? I would smoke one.’

Both Helen and Kate looked at Jack with some amazement because they knew Jack not only hated smoking but he also couldn’t stand the fume of cigarettes.

Nevertheless, none of them said anything.

‘Sure man, I can offer you a fag if you feel like smoking.’ Robert responded, and took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. As soon as he produced lighter, Jack displayed his gun and pointed in his direction. The other man froze. Helen and Kate jumped aside screaming, ‘Jack, what the hell are you doing?! Put the gun down!’ But, he was deaf to their words.

“Where is your silver lifther, Rob? Huh?” Jack asked fiercely.

Robert, making an effort to calm the whole situation and especially Jack, spoke peacefully,

“Look man, I’ve lost my lighter. I might have dropped it yesterday in my uncle's car. I don’t want any trouble, Jack. Put the gun down, man.”

At the same moment Kate demanded an explanation from her boyfriend,

“What is he talking about, Robert?”

“One of the police officers found a silver lighter in our garden.” Helen pointed out,

“Jack saw exactly the same lighter Robert used.”

All at once, Jack, holding the pistol firmly, addressed Helen, “Helen, there’s a bag in the car, which you asked about, please fetch it for me.”

Helen looked at him and just whispered, “Jack..” then ran to the car, collected the bag from the boot and dropped next to her man on the ground.

“Now, get Kate and go home.” Jack added without looking in her direction that time.

Helen, with tears in her eyes, grasped Kate’s hand and hastily dragged her to the car. Jack waited until they left, then spoke to Robert again,

“Get into the house.”

Having entered the building both men grabbed chairs at the kitchen table. Jack, pointing the gun still in Roberts direction, uttered,

“Where is your uncle George?”

“He’ll be back soon. Every morning he goes fishing.” Robert responde, leaning his back on the chair backrest.

“We can wait together, then.” Jack responded.

“I wanted to get Kate to town before he’s back. Listen Perez, I know what’s going on. George wants to use everyone, even me to get what he craves for. It wasn’t me in the guest house. I’ve been with Kate since very last morning.” Robert struggled to ease his state and mitigate Jack. “We didn’t want to say anything to anybody,

but she's pregnant and all I want to protect her and be with her."

The news was appalling for Jack, "I don't believe you."

"We can call Kate and, trust me, she'll confirm it."

At that moment Jack lowered the pistol, placed it on the table and informed the other man, "Go, before I'll change my mind."

Robert erected from the chair and leaving Jack behind, abandoned the place.

It might have been fifteen minutes when George entered the building.

"I'm delighted with the visit." The man declared spotting Jack sitting alone in the kitchen.

"If I were you, I wouldn't be so glad," Lifting a gun in George direction said Jack and pointed the chair on which few minutes ago Robert was resting his body, "Sit down!"

George didn't hesitate, "I'm actually a bit tired, thanks. You know they say fishing is good for relaxing, I'm not convinced with the idea so much." The old man expressed while taking his place. "So, tell me Perez, what has brought you here?" Keeping the pistol straight, Jack picked the bag full of money from the floor and placed it on the table,

"There's money, you begged for. Fifty thousand. "

George laughed hearing Jack's words, "You must be joking!"

Jack didn't pay much attention to George's reaction, and carried on, "There's also a document," taking out a piece of paper which he had written, "I want you to sign." He passed the paper on the kitchen table to George who was sitting opposite it. "It says that you won't descend on my father any more and extort money from him. Just sign it, and this money is yours."

George burst into laughter, snatched the note, tore it up and took hold on the bag. Jack dropped the pistol and grabbed the carrier simultaneously. Both men began to struggle with each other. When Jack managed to pull it more on his side George built up the strength and dragged it back to his own. Wrestling for a while around

the table they fell down on the floor,

“You really think that I’m dumb to be satisfied with fifty grands!” George yelled, grappling for the pistol which landed under the table.

“I think you are. Only, idiot can break into a house and leave an evidence.” Jack responded with a weary voice.

George laughed, holding Jack with his strong arms and pressing his body steadfastly to the floor, “I knew it would fall out of my pocket, therefore the last person who held the lighter in a bare hands was Robert.”

These words made Jack’s hackles rise. He punched George in his face, then again and again, rolled over his body and struggled George on the floor. As one George managed to reach the weapon, however Jack held his hands and both men started to wrestle it out. They might have been fighting with the pistol in their arms for a little while when out of sudden the forest silence was interrupted by the sound of a gunshot.

At the same instant the farm house was surrounded by police cars. A few armed police officers entered the building. All they saw were two men down on the floor in a pool of blood.

EPILOGUE

The surgical operation lasted up to two hours. The bullet was located beneath the diaphragm, within the liver and the right kidney. By good fortune, it hadn't damaged any of the organs and the internal bleeding had been terminated at the right time.

He stayed in hospital for ten days when eventually was discharged. Nonetheless, therapeutics and medical treatment were recommended. In the aftermath, not only was the gunshot physically destructive but also, and foremost, he was mentally devastated. On the day when he was leaving hospital only his father was there for him.

Helen visited Jack sporadically, saying that she was busy at work and with "The Kent" guest house. Together with Kate, they decided to sell it after all. They talked it over and ultimately the property was put on the market. It wasn't easy for them to do so. To refurbish and breathe life into the house, they had invested their own savings, and not only. Regrettably, none of them was eager to restore what had been demolished. Over and above that, Kate decided to leave town with the father of her child. It would be too challenging for all of them to live in the same place.

On that fatal morning, when Robert was let free from the farm house, he was caught by the police and arrested. His fingerprints were discovered on the silver lighter. According to what George had said, Robert was the last person who touched it. However, when the police arrested George later on, at the end of the day he admitted breaking into "The Kent" guest house and revealed that he had intentionally framed his nephew. Subsequently, Robert was released and cleared of charges. He had never received his lucky charm back.

Having arrived home from the hospital, Jack was welcomed by his son and his aunt, with whom Pablo and Tim had stayed when they were asked to. He was pleased to see his son and to be back home, at the same time felt miserable not seeing Helen. Later that day he managed to reach her phone.

"Helen, I've left the hospital today. I thought that you'd be here."

There was a short interval when she responded,

"Jack, I need some time on my own. It's happened a lot recently and I have to sort everything out. The whole situation, you and your dad, Robert and his uncle, and my own sister in the middle of all that. It's too much for me."

One day when Helen went to see Jack at the hospital, he clarified the whole story to her in which, in fact, all of them were involved. She left the place furious.

"I won't see you any time soon, shall I?" Jack asked reluctantly.

"Jack, I wish you a good recovery." Helen responded, quivering.

"I still love you, Helen."

"I love you too, but now I can't." She replied and ended the conversation.

It took Jack a fairly long time to get over the accident and especially the heartbreak. He didn't want to bother Helen and respected her will, thus he had never contacted her again. Once he got better he returned to work. There was still something on his mind, or rather someone. Everyday, Jack drove around the town and stopped by

spots where vagrants dwelled. He would ask them about a young man with an eagle tattoo on his neck. Unfortunately nobody ever heard about a fellow with a name Mike. However, Jack was very persistent in his searching to the point that he would wake up at night and drive to the darkest places in the town. One night sitting alone in his car and watching stars he thought, *“What if you never existed? What if Mike lived only in my own head?”* Shortly afterwards, he started the engine saying loudly, *“What the hell am I even doing?”* and drove home.

The following morning his phone rang. It was Helen,
“Are you free for a drink?”

“I’m always free for you.” Jack responded jolly.

Helen also had saved Jack’s assets. The other day on the farm, when she was asked to bring the bag full of money from the car boot, she swiftly emptied it and filled it up with everything she had in the trunk. Therefore not even Jack was aware of the fact that there was no cash when he was fighting with old George.

The evening when Jack met Helen he was informed that George had died in jail. He had suffered from cancer and refused medical treatment. She also told him that *“The Kent”* house had been bought by a younger man. There was nothing special about the buyer, however her attention was dragged by an ink on his neck which was in the shape of a large bird. It could have been an eagle.

Thank you for reading

