

# OBVIOUS DECEPTION

REVIVING ANEW AND  
MUCH STRONGER



OLYA AMAN

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## **Reviving Anew and Much Stronger**

**Olya Aman**

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### **Chapter 1. Boring life**

It was not that his life was unsatisfying, but each day after day used to begin, continue and end exactly the same as the previous one... Maybe that's why Steven used to always forget the date?

- "What day is it, darling?" - he asked indifferently as always, fastening a tie in front of the mirror - as always unsuccessfully.

- "Friday, darling," - Kate replied from the kitchen with the same information, as usual, already rustling towards him with her soft slippers. Something was wrong.

- "Aren't you going to work?" - he looked suspiciously at her fluffy morning robe and her messy hair. - "Someone is not such an exemplary worker anymore, huh?" - he grinned and winked at his wife.

- "Oh, stop it." - she said wearily, adjusting his tie. - "It's just that in our company, exemplary workers are often given a day off before important conferences."

The mirror informed Steven in time that he could not hide his astonished face and would not be able to do it anyway - Kate was already looking at him inquisitively, and he immediately took a defensive position:

- "And isn't it normal not to inform me about important affairs when I have been talking about Harry's upcoming birthday, which, I would like to note, will be next Saturday. Do you remember my friend Harry and his family?"

- "Of course, I remember your friend. But is it normal to inform me so blatantly about the invitation at the last moment, when I've been talking all week about my conference, which, I'm asking you to note, will be held next Saturday?"

Kate looked up from the mirror and peered at her husband's face with a laugh. He sighed secretly in his heart - the storm passed. So, he could feel safe until the next evening, for sure. Although, it was impossible not to play along with the joke, so he collected all his pseudo-actor's skill into a fist and, having cast a dull look on his face, began to mutter, dusting invisible specks from his jacket:

- "It's a pity to upset the guys - the seats are already nailed down and the food is purchased. Well, that means that someone will get more..."

- "Come on, you're not going to stay home because of me?"

"Bingo!" - Steven's self-exclaimed happily in his head.

- "And what do you suggest?" - an inventive husband was not letting go of his opinion. - "Should I have fun while you are working hard at work?"

- "I don't see anything wrong in having fun with a friend."

For a minute, Steven stood, looking at himself and Kate in the mirror. Time had changed them so much. This thought, which recently has been overtaking him so often in the most unexpected moments, almost led him away from the already

nearly won victory.

- "Do you really think so?" - he finally broke the silence, having barely reached the boundary that if he crossed, he would clearly lose control of the situation. But he got used to dealing with such cases during the years of his marriage, so there were no problems.

- "Why not?" - she answered unconstrainedly, stepping out of the way and letting him pass to the front door. - "Go, or you'll be late for work."

- "See you in the evening, my dear!"

- "Have a nice day!"

She kissed him on the cheek, seeing him off. The same as always.

Steven loved his wife. At least, he always thought so. She was a reliable companion in life. She could finish his sentences. They rarely had quarrels. They have been living in perfect harmony for five years and no one seemed to think that anything could be different. And why?

The only thing that used to stress Steven out, was Adam Gosling - Kate's father. No, he lived separately, was independent financially and emotionally, did not require anything outrageous, and did not speak out against their marriage. On the contrary, he was quite respectful of Steven, who had a respectable job in an office. The only problem was that his work was clearly not the best.

Adam Gosling had a prosperous business. He was a successful private entrepreneur. What was everyone shutting their eyes on, including Kate? There was something more than just a legitimate business. Something for which entrepreneurship was only a cover, a means of money laundering. This question was never raised in the family, and Steven was grateful to the father-in-law for this - it was not necessary to involve him and his daughter in these dirty criminal activities.

Steven could close his eyes to all this and would do it if he hadn't been noticing these scams with cars, money, which were coming and going devil knows where, especially when some of them, and a significant sum, suddenly became a gift to the couple on the anniversary of their wedding, a gift for New Year's or for absolutely no reason. Something was preventing Steven from taking this money, but he was afraid of speaking to his relative.

It was not the first time that this question tormented him. He was trying to

discuss it with Kate, but all was in vain. Additionally, there was something else that could not but cause stress. Something that was rising from within and was making him look at things that were surrounding him invariably every day from a new perspective.

- "How old are you, my friend?" - he asked himself sometimes, looking in the mirror, when he was sure that his wife would not hear him. In general, he had begun to talk to himself quite often lately and he was already worried.

He did not want to answer his own question honestly. Maybe he would even try to convince himself that he was a little less than thirty, but the shadows under his tired eyes and the skin around his neck were throwing a bitter truth in the face of their possessor: the line was crossed. Maybe even a large part of his life was behind him.

Having realized, in time, that he had been sitting several minutes, thinking about the unhappy distribution of his own affairs and completely forgetting about his work, Steven shook his head to dispel his depressive mood and concentrate, or at least pretend that he was sorting papers.

Finally, what if this all was a bluff? All these labels about those who were "over thirty"? Who needed this at all? Finally, who would dictate to an adult how to live and when to bury oneself?!

But an even harsher question - "What are you doing with your life?" – was bothering him incessantly. It invariably followed the question about his age. And Steven could not answer this question either telling the truth or lying. He didn't know what to say or even lie to himself.

He wakes up in the morning. Kate fastens his tie and always kisses him the same way, always on the left cheek. He spends eight hours a day at work, turning off his whole personality and intellect. Then he comes home and receives a kiss on his right cheek, eats his supper and lies down on the sofa reading a book or watching a stupid TV show until he falls asleep to get up in the morning and again fasten a tie and get a kiss on the left cheek...

Could this continue until his death? Until his fingers get tired of fastening his tie, or his cheek gets tired of receiving its daily kiss?

"What do you miss?" - a new question used to come after these reflections. "In fact," - he thought, - "He had everything he could dream about: work, home,

prosperity, status and a loving wife. What else was there to dream about? About growth? About personality? But the stable career growth was already provided for years to come, and all the most comfortable conditions already existed for his personality. Did he need more?

Behind such philosophizing, Steven did not notice how the work day ended. Another useless grain of sand in the useless hourglass of life. "Paid eight hours, for which I have not done any good to anybody. Office rat. Good doggie." - he said sullenly to himself.

Kiss on the right cheek with the same pressure and smell of lipstick, as before. Supper. Quite a good one, although today it was worse than yesterday. And what was yesterday? "God, what am I spending my life on?"

TV until midnight. The long-awaited dream.

"Tomorrow everything will be different."

Tomorrow began quite soon. It seemed that the alarm clock rang as soon as he closed his eyes. Seven hours of sleep had flown by in an instant. "Is it that I can't wait for the upcoming party?" - Steven was surprised and, as if waiting for some gift from fate, looked out into a suspiciously silent corridor (the bed was already empty and cold), and then to the kitchen.

- "There it is!" - a note was on the refrigerator:

- "I'll be home at five. Do not sit too long and, be kind, do not drink too much: it's bad for you! Breakfast is on the stove. With love, Kate."

- "Thank you!" - Steven replied to the note for some reason, and, becoming lost in thought, suddenly laughed to himself. - "Today will be completely different than yesterday."

Steven spent a good three hours searching for a nice gift in the local stores and decided to go with a book. A science-fiction novel about aliens. "Stupidity!" - he would proclaim arrogantly if he were here with his wife, but he was alone and something in his heart flashed when he saw the old writer's familiar name on the bookshelf: back in school and in early university years he and Harry used to read a lot of this nonsense about aliens. So why not let an old friend feel young again on his birthday?

Paying, he involuntarily thought that he was buying this, because he himself would like to be given the same present. But his wife used to give him

unnecessary gifts. She didn't know his hobbies, maybe never was interested...

Actually, he didn't know her hobbies too. This thought dawned on him already at the exit from the bookshop when he was taking a taxi (despite his wife's demands not to drink too much, he was not sure that he could resist the temptation. After all, she herself, said "to have fun with a friend"). They had not even gotten to know each other after having lived together happily for five years! What can be said about such life?

- "Where are we going, boss?" - the taxi driver asked tiredly, when Steven, having fallen into his thoughts again, didn't answer for a long time.

He apologized and gave the driver the address and, clutching the book wrapped in shiny paper more tightly in his hands, tried again to get rid of the obsessive thoughts creeping into his head.

Despite the fact that it was relatively early, there were a lot of Harry's guests and they had already drunk a lot.

- "Do not get old in your heart, brother!" - Steven gave a present to his old friend without long reflection, hugging him and slapping him on the shoulder. After thinking, he added: "It doesn't matter if half of your life is behind you..."

- "Do you know where to go?" - Harry laughed good-naturedly and finally looked at the gift. - "I cannot believe you still remember!"

- "Aren't you glad?"

- "Are you kidding me?" - a friend called without waiting for an answer - "Let's get acquainted!"

- "Get acquainted?" - Steven did not understand.

Frustrated by his friend's incomprehension, Harry sighed in contrition and rolled his eyes pathetically. Steven barely held back his laughter - he had not been in the company of friends for so long. Kate was right - he needed to have fun.

- "You see, even though you are such an exemplary husband, it does not mean that we should all be like you." - Harry began to explain the course of his thoughts, he grabbed his friend by the shoulder and persistently dragged him into the living room. - "During this year I have met a lot of new acquaintances, so be kind, show yourself to people!"

- "Come on, you know, I'm not the soul of the company!" - Steven protested, but



it was too late: the door to the crowded hall was shut, and there was no chance of escaping...

It seemed that Harry's house itself was providing a mood for amusement: Steven had not been here since the last repair. A formerly wide space seemed to become even wider - this place was just designed for parties!

It got dark very fast. As fast as Steven managed to get drunk.

- "You are losing your grip, man!" – Steven's friend could hardly shout over the rumbling music, drinking a lot without getting drunk. – "Do you know why?"

- "Why?" - Steven asked with a stumbling tongue.

- "You've overstayed your welcome, old man! You will become covered with moss in the blink of an eye this way!"

Steven suddenly felt offended. The old friend shoved him into the most painful place. He had already pulled himself together to say something offensive to his friend, but suddenly Harry was called by his friend and having crouched for a moment on the arm of the couch where Steven was sitting, he immediately rushed to answer.

He waved his hand after Harry with annoyance, Steven decided not to go for revenge and remained sitting on the couch. Moreover, it seemed that he would immediately fall flat as soon as he stood up. That's why he began to stare at the women and men all around him - everyone had their own company and friends. Steven had friends too, but with each passing year he had less and less in common with them. He had already "dropped out" of all possible clubs: fishermen's club, film club, in which, during his student years, it was always possible to find a couple of people for an entertaining movie showing. Even a club of book lovers, into which one day a classmate enrolled him for fun, and which, according to the degree of sadness reminded him of the cemetery, now seemed to live a more interesting and more meaningful life than he did.

Steven did not get acquainted with the guests. It seemed that he was already starting a chat, but as soon as he got drunk, everyone went to look for more interesting interlocutors. "The devil made me go without Kate! Now there's no one to talk to!" - Steven lamented to himself, helplessly shaking a half-empty bottle.

- "Why aren't you having fun?" - a female voice suddenly sounded in Steven's

ear.

Steven shuddered and turned. A charming girl in a matching charming blue cocktail dress was sitting in front of him smiling, and was looking at him inquisitively, waiting for an answer.

- "W-what?" - Steven tried to squeeze out, but his throat was dry, and he remained sitting with his mouth open. And, coming to his senses he tried to justify this in the most absurd manner: he hastily swallowed. "It turned out as if I had ignored her." - Steven realized suddenly. It was awkward.

The girl laughed. It was clear that she was not offended, but Steven could not help blushing.

- "I'm just not one of those." - he replied finally, - "Not a fun person, I guess. I don't know how to have fun."

- "You don't know how to have fun?" - the girl exclaimed in surprise. - "Don't make me laugh!"

- "I am absolutely serious!"

- "In that case, I'll be serious, too." - the girl suddenly gave him such a stern look that drunk Steven almost got frightened and laughed to himself about it. - "And I absolutely seriously invite you to the funniest dance."

For some reason he nodded and sipped again, which caused another burst of laughter from the girl.

- "Aha." - he said suddenly. - "And when is this dance?"

For some reason his knees trembled suddenly as if he was looking at her in the purple glow of the lamps standing on the edge of the abyss, not sitting here on the couch.

- "Oh, my God! Right now!" - the girl screamed desperately and having grabbed Steven by the sleeve of his jacket, suddenly dragged him into the middle of the room.

Hardly standing, Steven was feeling like the floor was striving to get out from under his feet. Or was he dancing like that? Must be. After all, this damn girl was twirling here and there, smiling and leading him. So this is supposed to be fun?

It took a little time for his drunken brain, warmed up with a breath of the old and, at the same time, new carefree life, to get used to not only not having the floor underfoot but also the whole world rolling around. It seemed that everything that could fly off the coils, suddenly decided to do it at once, the same evening.

Having hardly rolled in such a state for one song, Steven found himself dancing a slow dance with this mysterious stranger, who appeared out of nowhere. With every minute the world was accelerating, turning in a circle of faces and sensations: friends, more friends, a stranger, Harry - the originator of the triumph and all this was in a halo of a wonderful feeling somewhere in his heart - like when you come down from the top of the "roller coaster". However, there was no desire to be cut off from it, as this feeling was only becoming lighter, brighter and surprisingly happier so that he wanted this moment to last forever. Steven was thinking about this, when the girl was already kissing him on his lips, having wrapped her arms around his neck and getting up on her toes. She broke off, said something and laughed again. It must have been a joke. But was it so important now?

## **Chapter 2. Morning after the party**

Steven had not woken up like this for a long time - almost since the time, which now his peers had the habit of calling "youth." His head was buzzing, and circles were floating in front of his eyes as if someone had beaten him on the back of his head with something heavy. He wanted to drink because he had a hangover.

Hardly being able to recall the evening, Steven marveled at the silence around him and the light that enveloped him. How good it is when such light shone in the room, such a fresh, peaceful silence. In the room. In which room?

Having driven away the annoying gasoline-rainbow circles in front of his eyes, Steven stared at the ceiling. Someone else's ceiling.

He threw off the blanket and planning to get up, he suddenly saw what he did not expect to see at all: a thin hand, like the branch of a birch, was resting quietly on his chest. Slowly turning his heavy head on the pillow, he sighed feebly: the girl, who was amazingly beautiful asleep, the same as she was being awake yesterday, was sleeping next to him, her beautiful blond hair spread on the pillow.

- "Had fun..." - Steven thought in despair.

- "Damn, damn, damn!" - Steven cursed himself and, trying not to make a noise, cautiously rose from the bed. It was good that the large towel, in which he wrapped himself almost up to his shoulders, was near. He could not explain to himself what had happened in any other way than satanic obsession. It contradicted his consciousness so much. Getting out of the framework of the norms in his world, without ceasing to be absurd, it was slowly but surely beginning to plunge into the absurd the entire world around Steven.

Steven entered the bathroom and closed the door behind him, he glanced at his mobile phone with a terrible foreboding. 10 missed calls from Kate. "That was to be expected." - he remarked to himself with eerie reproach.

It was impossible to think that he could hide what happened from his wife. Perhaps, if somebody made him recall the last time he hid anything from his wife, he would have to think a long time. And the reply would be the most trivial - when he was preparing a surprise for the anniversary. A conspirator from God!

Such a spirit of knowledge of everything was declared in their small social group from the very day they got married and was never discussed personally. It was impossible to be subject to doubt, even in his thoughts. There could not be even a word about it!

And it was not because Steven was pressured by his wife or brought up with especially Puritan customs - not at all. He was just that kind of person – he had valued stability through all his life. He had not been a brilliant student at school, but he used to study quite well. He had never got into bad company not because his parents prohibited it, but because of his own unwillingness to have such "unstable" friends. During his student years he used to hang out with classmates only occasionally and exclusively on holidays. He had something to remember, but he never looked at the consequences. Because of this, Kate, who was so suitable to all of his criteria for stability, could not help but be his companion for life. At least, just a few years ago he was one hundred percent confident in that as well as in the steadfastness of his own moral principles ...

But something went wrong. It must be that a lot of people have a moment when something drastically changes at the most inopportune moment. It is like when your ship is steadily carried by a warm Atlantic stream to the northwest, but a sudden gust of wind destroys all plans: yours, your ship's, and the current's.

No, that impulse that overcame him was not because of the girl, who was

peacefully dozing in the bedroom. To his horror, Steven could not even recall her name, although he was trying hard. Something seemed to break down in him, come out of order a few days ago. Or weeks? Or years? And maybe it did not break, but, on the contrary, it was fixed? Did it start to work?

Or maybe he had not changed at all, but had always been like this? Perhaps it was the simplest excuse, but even now Steven did not care about it at all. Let it all go to Hell, because now he was on the verge of a global catastrophe - personal catastrophe and the catastrophe of the whole world, which was not yet ready to fall apart completely to some consolation of its observer, but already certainly had a notable crack.

Steven washed up and went to the kitchen, where Harry, standing in the midst of the messy space littered with cigarette butts, wrappers, glasses and other garbage was already scraping burned sausages from the frying pan.

- "Good morning, macho man!" – his friend greeted him. - "You look disgusting!"

- "And you're good, as always!" - Steven grumbled back. - "Did everyone leave?"

- "Most - the day before. But you guys drank a lot. I could not let you go like this. And I was not able to escort you myself..."

"How could YOU let this happen, tell me?" - Steven interrupted him suddenly, grasping his head with his hands. – "After all, it all started beneath the glare of your vile eyes, and you didn't even stop me when I lost my head! Isn't that what friends are for?"

Harry only laughed in response and put a plate with sausages and scrambled eggs on the table in front of his friend. He spread out the curtains so that the room became instantly flooded with the brightest sunshine that made Steven squint, and his head roar with echoes of the evening. Harry walked around the back of his friend and slapped him on his shoulders. Steven shuddered as if he completely forgot about the presence of his friend in the kitchen for half a minute of silence. That was how tense he was.

- "No, bro! Friends are needed to be able to not stop you, when it is clear as a day that you do not need to stop."

Steven felt the anger spill over his body, almost ready to pour out from the color

on his face into his heavy fists and punch the low-life.

- "I'm a family man, you, idiot!" - Steven immediately turned from red to pale, like a dead man, suddenly having recalled the missed calls from Kate.

From his look, full of horror, Harry guessed what his friend was worried about.

- "I spoke with Kate about ten minutes ago."

- "And what?" - Steven wanted to ask, but the naughty words had become a lump in his throat.

- "Nothing, relax already!" - his friend waved his hand - "I just told her not to worry. I said that you drank too much and stayed at my place."

Steven was silent, picking at a cooling breakfast, which he could not swallow.

- "Look, it happens to me often, too. Sometimes you need to change your passions at least for a while." - Harry insinuated suddenly, sitting opposite his friend, twiddling his portion between words and bending over the table closer to his friend. - "You did what no one can forbid you to do and has no right to forbid. - "Believe me, sooner or later it happens to many people..."

- "I'm not many! And I'm not you!" - Steven hissed at this, but then the door to the kitchen opened and she entered.

Silence reigned for a minute, which was painfully long for Steven. During this eternity, which lasted sixty seconds, the girl was standing on the threshold half-asleep staring without contact lenses at those sitting at the table. Harry was grinning slyly looking at Steven, and Steven again was ready to suffocate from the color, which poured suddenly onto his face.

- "This is Mia, my friend from Spain." - Harry took pity on his comrade finally.

- "I think it's time for me to go to work." - Steven said, clinking his fork on the plate. He did it almost at the same time as his friend and even jumped up, because of confusion.

Mia chuckled slightly, and Steven was ready to fall through the ground.

- "Dude, it's Sunday!" - Steven's friend added fuel to the fire.

Steven nodded without another word, staring with a pleading look at the wall, as if he was apologizing with this nod. He bent unnaturally (God forbid he touch the edge of her dress) and jumped out of the kitchen putting his boots on

hurriedly, almost confusing the left boot with the right one.

He reached the house in a total daze. Only when he had walked more than halfway, he was surprised thinking about how he managed not to get hit by a car in this condition. Only his wife pulled him out of his stupor.

- "So, did you have fun?" - she asked, not looking up from her laptop - must be again a deluge of work. There was nothing to say, she was a hard worker. Perhaps, even more hardworking than her husband. There was not a drop of reproach, anger or sarcasm in her words.

Someone would say: "Women are like this! They use your own words against you! Do not lose your vigilance! Do not be led by provocations and tricks!" But Steven knew for sure: stable Kate was not one of those who builds intrigues. When she did not like something, she used to say it directly. Isn't it the ideal quality for any person and a fundamental trait for the peaceful and united life of a whole society?

She did not say anything. Therefore, everything was ok. Of course, because she didn't know anything.

- "Did you fall sleep there?" - she giggled, watching her husband take off his boots, looking in front of him, but not seeing anything.

- "Oh, yeah... Great, you know!" - he suddenly surprised himself by how cleverly he spoke. "Everything was going according to the plan - nothing unusual". - "Contests, new people, dances, music. Harry can throw a party. It's a pity you were not there!" - he said, and having stumbled, felt the need to change the subject:

- "I drank too much because I was out of the habit. Didn't I tell you and that I should not. I don't know how to drink!"

- "Oh, come on!" Kate laughed in response, tearing herself away from the laptop.

- "But you had fun with all your heart. I'm not angry at all: it can happen to anyone!"

- "It can happen to anyone..." - Steven said thoughtfully for some reason, but, coming to his senses, stepped towards his wife hastily, and, marveling at his own intuition again, asked gently: "Are you sure you are not angry?"

- "No, darling. I love you!"

- "And I..."

A kiss on the cheek. Steven went to change his clothes. But there was an obsessive, intrusive, itchy thought in the inflamed convolutions of his head: "This is the beginning of the end."

### **Chapter 3. Starting the forbidden**

He went for a run not because of habit. Of course, he had a sports schedule for the week, but this day he could make an exception as his body was so sick. However, he was feeling a clear need to air his thoughts. His wife's company suddenly became unbearable for him. He was lucky, she has just begun to do the laundry, and the idea of going for a run together fell away without questions.

Even though Steven was trying hard, the morning Mia did not want to disappear from his head: she seemed so frighteningly attractive in the kitchen that day. She was not any less attractive the day before...

At the moments when he was overtaken by similar thoughts, he used to frown and shake his head to get rid of them just as if he had just climbed out of the water like a boy or a dog. It was turning out badly, but he was afraid to think about this. It seemed that it was worth taking only a step, and the world, known to him, calibrated to a millimeter, to the slightest emotion, would collapse into an immense abyss, and would finally and irrevocably be pulled from under his feet.

- "Maybe nothing happened at all?" - he thought from time to time. Oh, how he would love to believe it! Unbeknownst to himself, his legs themselves brought Steven to a miserable place, as if they knew from somewhere: there are all the answers.

His feet went upstairs to the first floor by themselves. Right the same way they brought their master into the elevator. Steven approached the door and began to listen warily: something like a vacuum cleaner was humming on the other side of the door. "Who could make such a bachelor to the bone like Harry decide to clean up? However, even slobbs such as him do not live in the pigsty that we left." – Steven was musing, knocking again for the next time.

The vacuum cleaner was obviously muffling both the knock and the doorbell, so, without thinking twice, he went in without waiting for an invitation.

And to his surprise at the entrance to the house he met... Mia.



The same Mia. But now with a vacuum cleaner in one hand and the cord from it in the other. She was going to open the door. Having realized this, Steven grieved himself inwardly. He could drop down the stairs like a mischievous schoolboy. He would run so fast!

- "Oh, it's you! What a meeting!" - the girl exclaimed with mockery but cheerfully.

Steven tried to squeeze out something in response, but it turned out to be an unintelligible mooing. Mia rang with a new overflow of her wonderful silver laughter.

- "I actually came to see Harry." - he was trying to sound cheeky and unconstrained, but it seemed to come out badly.

- "He stepped out for a bit. Decided to run to the store." – she put the ill-fated vacuum cleaner into a corner. – "And I am helping to clean up after yesterday..."

- "Yes, after yesterday..."

Steven himself didn't know why he said it, and he already got frightened that an awkward silence would return. However, contrary to expectations, another burst of elegant laughter sounded. It seemed that everything in her very essence was elegant.

- "Come on in, we'll wait together."

- "Well, I am actually..." - he hesitated, but was interrupted very unexpectedly:

- "Are you running to work again?" Who are you? A professional runner?" – she took a funny mischievous look at his T-shirt, sport shorts, and boots.

There was no way to escape anymore. There was nothing left to do but to stay and joke about it as best as possible.

- "Well... Let's say I'm a runner." - Steven drawled, taking off his shoes and feeling how self-control was returning with every word. – "And who are you?"

- "I'm a photographer." - the girl stated simply, and, turning gracefully, went into the kitchen. She spoke from there – "I create beauty on film and digitally".

- "Excellent profession!" - he exclaimed, feeling embarrassed slowly but surely retreating - the color began to fade from his face. - "Will you show me somehow?"

- "Somehow." - Mia replied with a smile. - "Come in, don't be shy – after yesterday Harry won't mind." - she laughed.

On the words "after yesterday" Steven again felt how difficult it was to balance on the very edge. He went to the kitchen and gently set himself in a chair near the door to instantly focus his attention on Harry as soon as his friend came back.

Mia started to make coffee. Unexpectedly for Steven, the sight seemed unusual. He had never before seen the process of coffee being made for him personally. It was not because his wife has never made coffee for him or made it badly - just usually everything was already made in advance, almost a few hours before his arrival. Returning home, he felt as if he was approaching a working conveyor: everything that was made at the previous stage of production was ready at the right time and at the right place. Always in a certain state. Uninterrupted.

Finally, he managed to feel differently than a factory worker. This was spectacular.

- "What else will you tell me?" - Mia smiled, serving a cup of coffee and putting hers in front of her. The drink was tempting him with a breath of hot, airy milky foam.

- "For example?" - Steven asked trying to delay an unpleasant conversation about his personality, sipping his coffee and squinting without knowing himself if it was because the coffee was hot, or from the fact that the taste was so pleasant. - "Excellent coffee!"

- "Thank you!" - the girl said without a trace of embarrassment. – "Well, what are you doing? In addition to running, of course!" - she laughed loudly pointing at his t-shirt, which was soaked from jogging.

Enjoying the joke and being embarrassed already deliberately playfully, he did not answer directly:

- "Nothing interesting. Just a manager of an automobile company."

However, the residue remained: Steve didn't tell her that the company belonged to his father-in-law.

- "It must be interesting when you appreciate what you work with." - She answered thoughtfully, – "Just like with photos. To me, automobiles have always seemed nothing more than soulless pieces of iron. And this is not even

because I do not understand them and vice versa. But anyway, for some reason, neither "Mercedes", nor "Ferrari" seduce me." - She smiled again charmingly and unconstrainedly.

- "In fact, there is sense in this..." - Steven began and flinched when a heavy hand dropped to his shoulder.

- "Did I interrupt you?" - Harry asked loudly and cheerfully, having entered unnoticeably even though Steven was sitting close to the door.

Steven suddenly fell silent, jumped up from his seat and remained standing, looking at Harry silently. He seemed to have instantly forgotten everything he wanted to say to him. Of course, he did not forget, but in the presence of Mia he would not allow himself to say that.

Extra words were not required. The girl smiled sincerely, taking the grocery bags from Harry and putting them on the table, and, under the pretext of the need to continue cleaning, went to the living room, where she started to rustle with a vacuum cleaner again. Harry and Steven stayed alone.

- "What the hell is she doing here?" - Steven hissed at his friend as soon as the girl disappeared behind a door.

- "It's my house, okay?" - Harry grinned sarcastically. - "She's my friend and helps me - what's wrong with that, bro?"

- "I was not expecting to see her today when I was seeing you to discuss what had happened without her."

- "It's your problem!" - Harry replied instantly, - "And this house is - you can read my lips - MINE."

- "Are you sleeping with her?" - Steven blurted out suddenly, and when Harry was already ready to burst into an angry tirade, he grabbed his sleeve hard and painfully to make Harry speak more quietly.

- "Of course not!" - an outraged response sounded, - "Why are you so concerned about her? Who is she to you? Or do you think that anyone who sleeps with you automatically becomes your girlfriend?"

Steven was ready to hit his friend again.

- "Are you crazy?" - he almost shouted back. - "What nonsense are you talking about?! I'm a married man!"

- "That's it!" - Harry exclaimed in such a solemn tone, as if he was deliberately leading to such a conclusion. - "You just slept with her one time when you were drunk. This could happen to anyone. Nobody owes anything to anyone! It happens with grown-up people!"

- "I do not want to hear about it."

Harry did not answer. Steven looked at him attentively: would he say "Go away". However, he did not say that.

- "I think I have to go." - the guest said more gently.

- "Won't you stay for dinner?" - the question was also softer.

- "No." - the man replied, carefully concealing his surprise. – "Thank you!"

- "Bye..."

Steven ran the usual way to his house, but the thoughts in his head were moving in a completely different direction.

#### **Chapter 4. Falling into a trap**

He came home as usual, not a minute later, not a minute earlier. And although it was not dinner time, Steven knew that dinner was ready. Everything in his life was predetermined: what he would eat, where he would go, what he would put on. Stability.

- "Darling, do you want coffee?" – his wife's voice sounded from the bathroom.

- "No, thank you!" - he answered, and himself felt horrified at the cold tone he could detect in his voice. - "I'll take a shower and rest."

- "As you wish!" - she shrugged, sitting on the floor in front of the washing machine and sorting the laundry.

As soon as she reached the last worn shirt, something brought her to attention: the smell of clothes was different. Barely subtle, delicate fragrance of perfect women's perfume - inexpensive, but extremely elegant.

Hearing her husband's steps, Kate quickly threw a heap of clothes into the washing machine and silently took a T-shirt from her husband. Having started the washing machine, she left the bathroom, forgetting to sort the leftover clothes.

- "Do you feel bad?" - Kate asked her husband at dinner.

- "Why do you think so?" - he asked.

- "You became uncommunicative, you aren't eating well, and you hardly tell me anything."

Steven sighed, chewing his dinner, which was nice, but in the fridge during the day, now warmed up.

- "Honey, you know perfectly well that I don't drink, and a hangover for me is a strong blow. That's why I don't like going to such parties, because it takes time to recover from them."

- "I don't think this is the case." - Kate said carefully. - "You've been behaving strangely for a long time already. Tell me, what happened?"

Putting the silverware away, Steven tried to make the most ordinary possible expression to conceal the thoughts about how to answer such a tricky question and not fail under a mask of meditation.

- "There's nothing you should be worried about." - he finally answered insinuatingly. - "I just have a lot of work, a lot of end-of-the-month reports, you know. There is nothing to worry about. I am just overloaded a little more than usual. I will handle it, I promise..."

- "Darling, it's not a joke!" - Kate interrupted, tapping the plate in turn, and he realized that somewhere he took a wrong turn. - "In the end, we are all one family. I think that I should talk to my father so that you do not have to work so hard. I'm sure he will understand, because he treats you well..."

- "There cannot even be talk about it!" - Steven said sharply, and again felt guilty when he saw a question in Kate's eyes.

He got up. It was time to find the way out. Steven turned on his theater of one actor and began to walk around the room with a crushed and at the same time guilty look.

- "You know..." - he began to speak quietly. - "Sometimes it seems to me that I'm not good for anything."

He looked at Kate out of the corner of his eye. She was silently looking at him. It was difficult for him to guess her emotions by her expression, and he just continued, counting on luck:

- "And here this all - work, unsuccessful party and my nerves are almost at the limit, and I... Generally, I would love for everything to be fine. And it will improve, I'm sure!" - he took her hand and felt with inner gleefulness how she squeezed his hand in response. - "I just need a little time and I will handle it. I do not want you to have doubts about me and worry about every trifle... I know it's all temporary, it will all go away!"

- "Okay." - Kate said calmly, almost having disturbed him in mid-sentence. As if she received the answer to the question.

- "Are you sure?" - Steven looked at her with suspicion.

- "Absolutely." - she answered.

- "Do you promise that you will give me a chance and wait?"

- "I promise." - Kate said shortly, and having stood up, hugged him. He responded warmly to the embrace – he achieved victory, another milestone was reached.

The night seemed very ordinary. Steven was half-sitting, leaning the pillow against the wall vertically and reading a book in the light of the bedside lamp. His wife was lying by his side, facing the wall. Her shoulder, covered with half of a light blanket, was rising and descending gradually in the rhythm of a serene breath.

- "Are you sleeping?" - he asked softly, leaning against her shoulder, and touched it gently, checking her. Like before. "Sleeping" - he said affirmatively, and, turning off the lamp, put down the book, lay down and turned to the opposite wall.

He could not sleep. Again and again, like all the past day, hardly recalling it, he was scrolling the fragments of what had happened in his head, and analyzing it. So much happened as if it was a week ago, or, maybe, in a completely different life.

Neither did Kate. She was lying silently, pretending to be sleeping for her husband, looking at one point, thinking about what had happened, what was happening, and what else could happen. A tear rolled from her eyes involuntarily. Why? It was not clear to her, either.

## **Chapter 5. Lie**

In less than two weeks, Steven was quite confidently, dexterously evading his wife's questions, thinking he was successful in his lie, invited Mia for another walk or a visit to the cinema. They exchanged compliments via phone and agreed on another meeting like old friends.

- "How are things on the personal front?" - Harry asked out of habit, coming out of the shower with one towel and with the other thrown over his muscular shoulders.

Steven used to often visit him before the meetings, put himself in order and consult with his best friend like a schoolboy before his first date.

- "Mind your business," - Steven said indifferently, brushing off the issue in a friendly way. He tried to tie his disobedient tie several times, and finally, angered at the accessory, tore it from his neck and tossed it onto the sofa in his friend's bedroom.

- "You always act like that" - Harry muttered, grinning and tousling his hair, and went into the kitchen.

- "What do you mean 'like that'?" - Steven's tone was calm again.

- "You pretend that nothing is happening, but you are all nervous."

Harry was waiting for his friend's answer from the hall, taking out fresh orange juice from the refrigerator. Steven hadn't been answering for some time. Only his puffing could be heard. He was probably buttoning and unbuttoning the top button, deciding whether it was too formal or not.

- "Are you a fool, or what?" - Steven responded finally. - "My hamstrings are quivering. When I walk down the street, I am afraid of meeting someone I know inadvertently! What will people think?"

- "They will think what they should." - Harry said reasonably, sipping the juice right out of the box and slamming the refrigerator. - "You went too far, young man!"

- "What?" - Steven interrupted with irritation, appearing from the hall with a tie around his neck. This time it was turned to the left side. It was obvious that the attempts to tie it were still unsuccessful.

- "What is wrong?" - Harry smirked foolishly. - "I am telling the truth."

- "Weren't you provoking me?!" - a friend exclaimed in righteous fury. - "We

have only one life! It's time to have fun!"

- "Didn't you have fun? So sit down on your fifth point quietly as before. I just gave you the opportunity to have fun once, and you started doing it with all your might, you villain..."

- "And what do you think the relationship should look like?" - Steven interrupted his interlocutor again.

- "Re-la-ti-on-ship" - Harry drawled in syllables, saying it deliberately nasally and awkwardly, as if he had heard such a long and abstruse word for the first time. - "So, when did you start them?"

Steven sighed and disappeared around the corner of the corridor.

- "You do not understand a damn thing in your life." - a calm voice sounded finally in an offended tone.

- "And you do not understand a thing about style!" - Harry retorted boldly, following him. - "Rid yourself of the control, finally! Don't disgrace yourself, for God's sake!"

Steven furiously tore off his tie for the second time that evening and threw it through the open bedroom door.

"That's better." - Harry smirked, straightening Steven's disheveled hair with a flick of his fingers. Steven was shaking from his touch. When Harry finished, he stepped away from Steven and bowed his head to the side, narrowing his eyes slyly, like an artist who finished his work of art with concluding, final touches.

Steven put his shoes on and was scrambling at the entrance, looking in the mirror aimlessly. He was glancing at his watch with a worried look, then, out of habit, was reaching out to fix his tie, which he took off, after that he was blowing off the invisible specks of dust from his flamboyantly open jacket (Harry insisted on it).

- "Get out of here, you, damn romantic! - Harry said jokingly turning his friend by the shoulders in the direction of the exit, opening the door in front of him, and gently pushing him out. - "There is nothing sacred for you!"

On this sarcastically ironic note, the door to Harry's apartment slammed in Steven's face and there was nothing left for him to do but to go on a date with his own destiny. It was not that he did not want to meet his fate - quite the



opposite - only there he saw a bright, boundless and cloudless future, merging into a calm with the horizon. However, no matter how hard he was trying and how openly he was communicating with Mia, he could not get rid of shyness leftover from the very first meeting. Was it good or bad? He did not know for sure.

Yes, it was embarrassing. After all he was an adult, quite wealthy and independent, an emotionally mature man... However, there was something attractive to Steven in this shyness as if this shaky feeling was making his relationship with Mia a little more gentle, sincere and clean, despite their status about which Harry did not miss an opportunity to remind them. It was making Steven worry a lot...

...However, he forgot about everything when he saw Mia from afar.

On his way he bought a small, neat bouquet of red tulips - her favorite ones - and now was waving them like a signal flag over his head, although he saw that she was already hurrying towards him as quickly as her feet allowed. If somebody asked him in that miraculously stupid moment why he was waving, he almost certainly would not answer. It was not an expedient action, but rather the only possible expression of his already superhuman joy.

Only a half-minute later Steven noticed that thanks to his efforts, a couple of flowers had already lost some of their precious scarlet petals, which were scattered everywhere. One clung to the lapel of his jacket, the other crawled under the collar of his shirt and Steven tried to catch it until it fell below his collar.

He met the girl in a completely ridiculous pose and he gave her a bouquet having almost merged with the color of tulips because of the color, which immediately flooded his face. The flowers had a withered look now.

Mia simultaneously confused him even more, and reassured him with her laughter that rang like a bird's chirping, which immediately sprinkled on him like precious pebbles, shining in the sun.

- "You are such a big and serious man, but you act like a boy." - she continued to laugh, looking at him slyly and burying her face in the flowers.

- "I am who I am." - Steven grumbled in return, giving her his hand as she grabbed him by the elbow, walking down the street towards the cinema.

- "What does this high feeling do to people!" - the girl gasped playfully. - "Isn't it wonderful?"

Mia was chattering, showering Steven with jokes, and he was walking happily, listening to her voice without understanding the meaning of the sentences to which her words were coming so competently and sometimes even too smartly and cleverly. He was walking and rejoicing that he could see the sun and her body illuminated by the sunlight, feel the warm city breeze and see her wonderful hair and her light dress flutter in the wind. He was happy to hear her voice, which rarely left him, and he was ready to listen to this voice for hours, days, years... even an eternity. He wanted her stock of jokes over him to never end. Let her joke, let her laugh at him and admire his naive love, provided that she would talk, sing and laugh forever... Just forever. Is this too much for a happy, rich and at the same time poor man in love?

The movie passed as if in a fog. Everything that Steven knew about the movie was only that it was some new well-known melodrama awaited by the whole world. However, it was obviously cheap quality, certainly full of profound philosophical meaning, like everything new that was being produced. It was deliberately serious and therefore ridiculous. And why was this unnatural, tearfully tortured story about a strange, unreal, invented love needed when a new, lively, happy and pure, true love came to their life as unexpectedly as snow?

Mia was watching the film with extraordinary attention. It even seemed unimportant to her that there was such a loving and affectionate Steven nearby, who did not notice the world around him for her sake. And Steven seemed to need only that. He was selflessly looking at her in the darkness that shook from the projector's reflections! Her face looked as if it was living some special life - the life of what was happening on the screen. Who knows, perhaps, it was only an illusion of revelations, and, in fact, she had little to do with what was happening to these worthless, stereotypical heroes when a warm, beloved, loving and tender person was sitting next to her?

- "So, did you like the movie?" - asked the girl as always with a sly squint, as soon as they left the movie theater.

- "A great movie!" - Steven lied, melting with the bliss of hearing her beautiful voice again after a two-hour silence.

- "As for it, it was total bullshit!" - Mia said cheerfully.

Steven could not hide the bewilderment on his face at the rejoicing Mia.

- "Oh really!? But it seemed to me you've been watching very closely..."

- "I was hoping that at least at the end the director would fulfill the task that he so shortsightedly set for himself!" - Mia continued his indistinct murmur.

- "That's true, he did not." - Steven guessed the obvious thing and immediately thought that it was not worth repeating such nonsense aloud.

However, to his surprise, Mia gave little importance to his words, if she heard them at all.

- "He absolutely failed at it!" - she stated the verdict. - "Where did he get such a stupid and poetic love from?"

- "And what should it look like?" - Steven asked with a sinking heart.

- "Love?" - Steven nodded. - "Well..." - Mia drawled and fell into thought having lowered her eyes and was smiling. - "For example..."

Steven's heart was anticipating the answer of his beloved, dying of ecstasy.

- "For example..." - Mia was not hurrying and the man again caught a note of cunning and play in her voice. - "For example, at least like my love for... cinematography!"

She rushed like a schoolgirl who ran up to her friend from behind and pulled off his hat in the frosty winter noon after school. Steven, not having time to understand what just happened between them, and only catching that again she was performing some prank, instantly rushed after her with laughter and joking threats, as if he was the same schoolboy. For the first time during many years Steven did not care about passers-by, who looked disapprovingly at the childishness that was unsuitable for their age and appearance.

## **Chapter 6. Suspicion**

Steven returned home later than usual. This rarely used to happen before, but he knew that he could find the way out if his wife disapproved of his deed. Never in his married life did he give her any reason to doubt his marital fidelity, and now this was simply obliged to help him. Plus, Kate's father respected him. Would he say anything bad about his beloved son-in-law if his daughter suspected her

husband of anything?

However, Kate, contrary to Steven's expectations, met him grimly. This never happened before, even on those rare evenings when she had to worry over his absence.

- "Hello, my dear!" - he shouted briskly, appearing on the threshold feeling cheered after the evening tag with Mia.

- "There is no need to bawl like that." - Kate said in an indifferent tone, which, as he knew from years of living together, began to cover his wife's soul with ice.

- "I'm late, aren't you angry?" - he entered the unpleasant and dangerous topic himself. "They say: the best defense is an attack." - Steven thought. Passing Kate, he kissed her cold cheek and was surprised to feel that it was slightly moist, as if she had recently wiped away tears. Stopping at the entrance to the bedroom, he lowered his head, as if listening to something inside himself. Nothing moved in his soul and for the first time in his life he independently made a firm decision: he would not ask. "After all, wasn't it easy not to notice?"

- "I am overwhelmed with documents at work." - he went on, not noticing that Kate wasn't responding to his question. - "But don't you dare tell your father that I'm complaining!" - he added with a laugh. - "After all, I'm going to get a premium. We don't work that hard every month! Probably, I will become the worker of the month!"

After changing his clothes as usual, Steven went to the kitchen. Here he could not help but notice that Kate was still standing near the kitchen window in the same old dressing gown as she had met him in. She was standing with her back to him and her head bowed. He realized that ignoring her condition further was already tactless and impossible for the status of a loving husband, which he was trying to preserve and, as he thought, succeeded in this, he cautiously approached her and put his arm around her shoulders.

- "What's wrong, darling?" - he asked, kissing Kate's head. - "What happened?"

- "Where was your tie today when you came in?" - she asked unexpectedly dryly. He did not see her face but expected to hear a weak voice and crying, as his wife's face was wet just a minute ago.

- "I smeared it with sauce at dinner. You know I eat like a pig." - he instantly found an answer and smiled. - "And in the afternoon I had an important

meeting. I could not go out with a greasy stain on my clothes. And there I was so busy that I forgot to take it. Don't worry, it will not disappear..."

He paused, and suddenly recalled the "defense-attack" tactics. He asked making his voice sound drier:

- "Or, what did you mean?"

- "Nothing." - Kate answered without confusion, which Steven expected.

- "I hope so." - he remarked cautiously and walked away.

Dinner passed, however, as if there had not been an unpleasant conversation that evening. Beneath the background noise of some stupid, typical television cooking programs, they were talking about ordinary and exhausted topics with voices of people, who were long-bored with each other - perhaps even overly explicitly. They were talking about the weather and construction at the nearby intersection, about the children of common acquaintances and about an absence of their own, despite the long-standing desire and lack of medical problems, about his father's business and Steven's upcoming award in his office.

## **Chapter 7. Friend of a rival**

- "Is it the same on the personal front?" - Harry asked quizzically, when his friend once again dropped into his house without warning. - "Do I have a right to be alone with myself in my bachelor's kennel? It seems like you are meeting me, not Mia!

- "Have I bothered you?" - Steven grinned, looking at his friend in the mirror. "Today I'll drop by to get my stuff in the evening." - he insolently confronted his friend with the fact.

- "Or after you ran into me last week without knocking and calling me, and started to spread mayonnaise on a forgotten tie in panic, on which of the two fronts should I specify?" - Harry continued to scoff, not listening to his friend.

- "And this is told to me by a Romeo?" - Steven sneered.

- "At least I'm single, I can walk as much as I want and with whom I want." - Harry sniffed reproachfully and lit a cigarette. - "To cheat means to not respect yourself." - he said, releasing a puff of smoke right onto the ceiling.

- "And smoking is bad for the health." - Steven chortled and tried to snap his friend's cigarette with his fingers, but he managed to dodge it.

- "My house - my rules!" - his friend shouted angrily. – “And I did not tell you to cheat. Everyone has a head on their shoulders! There's no need to add more sins.”

- "Yes, let them lie down, you have so many of them!" - Steven continued to joke. His mood was clearly better than usual that day.

- “You drank too much yourself. I tried to calm you down, but you... you're a damn dog, that's who you are! No shame, no conscience!”

- “But didn't you almost bring us together, you idiot!?”

- “I just introduced you to my friend, that's all!” - Harry continued to furiously smoke his expensive cigarette. And the fiercer he was speaking, the more he was smoking. - "She's a good person, I'm not arguing with that. But how did Kate offend you!? Did you think about it!? She does not deserve such an attitude!”

Steven did not answer for some time.

- "Do not intervene in my relations with Kate." - he said at last, mentally and not without a reproachful warning in his voice, nervously fixing himself in front of the mirror, although everything was perfect already. - "Kate is a good wife." - Steven continued after a short silence, almost apologetic, but still serious. - "It's a sin to complain about her, it's true. But I don't live with her, don't you understand? I fell in love! What should I do?”

Now Steven flared up.

- “I would call you something if I were not a decent person!”

- "Yes, I see your decency!"

"No more words..."

- “Get out of here, finally!”

On this unfriendly note, Steven and Harry parted on that evening of the date with Mia.

- "What the hell is happening to him? Damn moralist!" - Steven was thinking, squinting disapprovingly at the doorknob, hoping that Harry would see his stern face in the peephole. He had already forgotten what had happened, as if it had not happened to him, and he was not offended by his friend's behavior, and nothing was bothering him.

What could have disturbed him at such a wonderful moment? He had not been seeing Mia a lot recently and was not afraid that Kate would suspect him. He decided that to lure her father with excuses about working at his enterprise was not worth it, although at first nothing terrible could happen. Steven knew this and acted wisely: he was not taking advantage of Mia, but he was also not depriving Mia of his attention.

Today, because of fate, which was cast, of course, by the inventive Mia, they went to the "male" thriller. And from now on they agreed to alternate: a week she chose and the next he did.

But what was Mia's bewilderment, when even during an interesting and dynamic film Steven hardly glanced at the screen.

- "Why do we spend money on going to the movies, which I cannot discuss with you? You are not watching at all!" - she whispered to Steven.

- "No no, I am watching" - he assured her, barely tearing his eyes away from her and staring with unseeing eyes at the next cinematic shootout.

Someone on the screen was screaming like he was cut, bleeding and shooting with the last of his strength.

- "What the hell is going on?" Steven muttered involuntarily. Somewhat out of habit, he was taken aback when he discovered that Mia heard him.

- "Oh, do I hear a voice of common sense!" - the girl jokingly and solemnly lifted her eyes towards the invisible sky. - "Let's get out of here!"

- "But when will this end?" - an irritated stranger grumbled from the side. - "What a sweet couple!? You won't let us sit quietly. The last rows are free for those like you." - he added unceremoniously with a mouthful of popcorn.

- "No problem, little brother." - Steven said, took Mia's hand in the dark, and got up. He purposely went to the exit bypassing the grouchy neighbor and blocking the screen for a good minute during his artificially prolonged fuss. This elicited the eloquent cursing of the man and restrained chuckles of the theater.

- "That was brave!" - Mia laughed at the exit from the cinema building, squinting in the sun and exposing her beautiful face to the warm wind.

- "I'm a real rascal!" - her "boyfriend" buzzed having puffed his chest.

Mia was overwhelmed by long, iridescent laughter again.

- "I really like our walks!" - suddenly the girl said for the first time in many weeks, turning to the park and picking up her gentleman's arm.
- "You don't know how I like them." - he answered in response, feeling a new surge of warm happiness and love for the whole world somewhere in his stomach.
- "I hope you don't have any problems because of me?" - she asked for some reason, having suddenly turned serious.
- "No, absolutely not!" – Steven hurried to reassure her and a strange sensation, some alarming aftertaste of the question confused and alarmed him.
- "Is something wrong?" - he asked, trying to be calm and expressing anger in his voice, which was always disclosing most of his thoughts and feelings.
- "It just seemed to me you were confused." - the girl answered awkwardly. – "You are all tense, as if you are afraid of something."

Seriousness recoiled from her voice and consequently fled from his heart. Boyishly running ahead of her, as he had been doing often recently, he grabbed her by her slender waist and lifted her over the ground with the accompaniment of her bewildered, silvery laugh, showing the skies what happiness he was holding in his hands, as if he was thanking the heavens for giving him this happiness ...

- "By your side, I'm not afraid of anything!" - he shouted and was pleased to see two women passing by look at them with adorable smiles and the men passing by look puzzled. - "Maybe you did not know, beauty, that once your rascal was a fearless knight?"
- "So, why aren't you a knight now?" - she kept laughing.
- "The knight took off his armor and changed it into street clothes, tattered with the salt of the seas and the blood of the royal naval commanders, but his heart and soul were forever subordinated to the Beautiful Lady, my Lady!"

He caught Mia in his arms and with a victorious shout, urged by her uncontrollable laughter, rushed to the flock of pigeons, who, in the next instant, flashed with a motley blue wave into the joyfully reddish evening sky.

## **Chapter 8. Misery of life**

The next two weeks passed miserably for Steven. His work became



overwhelming, as if someone heard about the lie of a negligent husband, and now was providing him with everything that he was so cleverly composing the days around for home excuses for his evening delays.

Harry was contacting Steven less and less - he must have been worried about the family balance and the well-being of his friend. His wife was behaving as usual, although she used to meet her husband in the evenings with an alarming dryness and coolness.

He had not been able to go out with Mia for a long time, and Steven felt the gray chunk of routine settle on his shoulders, tired of work, family obligations and a boring circle of communication.

Steven used to talk with his wife languidly. He had already forgotten about his previous intimate conversations with her at night, not to mention other intimacy. But one night, long after the couple got into bed, when Steven was already starting to doze off peacefully, freeing his brain from the disgusting reality of life, the tired voice of his wife sounded from behind him:

- "So you haven't gotten our results from the medical center? - she asked, flashing a magazine in the light of the bedside lamp, judging by the sound.

- "Results?" - Steven muttered sleepily, not wanting to get out from the embrace of Morpheus, which began to envelop him so sweetly. - "Which results?"

- "The results of our analysis, darling." - she answered coldly and abruptly, being evidently irritated, as she put a special emphasis on the word "darling," which used to only happen to her when she was in the most unpleasant mood.

"Oh, hell!" - he slapped his palm against his forehead, and the dream completely disappeared from his head.

Steven and his wife used to get examined monthly at the medical center. The doctors were unsuccessfully searching for evidence of Kate's inability to conceive in their lab results and examinations.

- "Sometimes it seems to me," - the woman began again after a long pause, - "You don't want children."

- "How can you say that?" - Steven barely listened to her. - "I wanted and I want children! But this work... I've been busy, darling, It's the truth! I promise, tomorrow I will do everything."

- "Tomorrow is Sunday."

- "Well, the day after tomorrow, then."

Kate did not answer. Steven turned around - the magazine rested on the table, the lamp was turned off, and his wife lay silently on the very edge of the opposite side of the bed, wrapped in her half of the blanket.

- "Good night." - Steven whispered, completely upset. That night he could not fall asleep until late.

## **Chapter 9. Dreadful life**

The days began to merge again into one solid gray mass for Steven: Mondays and Tuesdays were no longer distinguished by color, for they were equally sulfur. No scent was different, for each day used to smell equally of office paper and printer ink. No tastes were different for they were as bland as badly cooked lean soups.

But very unexpectedly an event that literally knocked him out of his rut happened in his life. It was a completely sudden, ugly, dirty and terrible event. The old phobia of his own sin, buried by the sweetness of his fresh love, rang somewhere in the depths just like on the morning after a friend's party ...

Kate somehow found the evidence.

Steven understood this as soon as he came home from work on time, as he had been doing for the whole month. He used to dedicate his time to Mia only online during lunch breaks at work and during evening readings of a book, when Kate, as he thought, was already asleep.

It was obvious: she was crying in front of him, her mascara flowed, and her hair was messy, probably from hysterics, which Steven safely missed. Now he was praying in his soul to all familiar and unfamiliar gods to not see the second round.

He did not have enough spirit to ask what happened. He knew what happened himself, and so he asked another:

- "How?"

This word sounded strange and lonely in the hallway full of his wife's sobbing and the ticking of old, ugly wall clocks. He was tired and it was a surprising relief, as if Steven was finally glad to stop all the lies, which were poisoning the

happiness of the days he used to meet with Mia.

- "I don't have the faintest idea." - she answered, trembling because of the sobs, which were rolling over her, and which she was hardly suppressing. - "They were in my drawer."

- "What was in the drawer?"

The next second, she threw the pictures in Steven's face.

He did not flinch under this impulse of her rage, only humbly closed his eyes. "You deserved it." - words came to his head. And the voice that uttered these words somewhere in the depths of his subconscious mind was suspiciously like his friend's voice.

Squatting at the doorstep, Steven began to pick up the photos, simultaneously looking at them. Here they were with Mia in the park - their last meeting, that time they left the boring action movie early ... Here they were, like children, running after each other after watching a tearful melodrama ... Here they were lying naked on a crumpled bed in Harry's house ...

- "What..." - Steven managed to squeeze out.

- "You have nothing to say?" - Kate asked Steven in a dull voice.

- "I... I don't know... what..." - he muttered incoherently, at the same time horrified that someone had been following him and Mia all this time, and removed from the fact that he had never thought about what he would do, talk and how he would behave when Kate found out about everything. And he had no doubt that at some point that would happen. A powerless, morally weak person who was unable to stand up for himself in a difficult life situation, awoke in him again. Life struck him more than ever wickedly and unexpectedly.

- "You don't know." his grief-stricken wife said, still in a low voice husky from her sobbing.

Steven was silent.

- "I wanted to say..." - he finally exclaimed.

Kate had not been answering for a long time, and he had been on his knees in front of her afraid to get up, and consciously punishing himself accompanied with her reproachful look. He had not dared to raise his eye to her, but he had been feeling that her damp eyes were looking at him intently. He still had a hope

that a drop of the old Steven could be revealed in his face, which he was about to raise...

But none of the past Steven remained, and he did not raise his head, not wanting to provide false hope. A heavy sigh that came from above made him understand that the storm of the soul was moving away from his shore, taking the whole sea after itself, as if leaving him alone in a desolate desert land, which was dry, lifeless and useless - for life, and for love and honor.

Steven finally lifted his eyes and cautiously rose from the floor, not letting go of the pictures, holding them with the images down, so as not to injure Kate again. She was standing in front of him, still in the same old dressing-gown, with disheveled hair and with her back to him. Her head was bowed and her embroidered handkerchief, which he presented to her for the anniversary of their first meeting, was wet from bitter tears. He recalled that distant celebration, not the warmest in his life, but still very sweet and joyful, he felt his heart wrench involuntarily. An unpleasant lump clenched in his chest, as if everything dishonest, deceitful in his soul that so openly manifested itself now, was concentrated in one small, ugly and restless creature that was not loved and was not recognized by anyone, suddenly recalled how to cry and cried at the sight of his crying wife.

- "I don't want to see you again." - she said softly, without taking her handkerchief away from her lips.

- "I'll stay in the living room." - he said quietly, - "And tomorrow I'll take my things to Harry's."

Kate silently walked past him hunched over as if she was afraid to touch him even with the edge of her gown, or even accidentally touch him with her hand. It was as if he was a leper, excommunicated from something sacred or damned, and touching him would infect her with some deadly, murderous disease, or would condemn her to eternal torment or a terrible divine punishment.

She herself brought a pillow and a second blanket to the living room as if she did not want him to even enter the bedroom. He grinned sadly, taking the blanket from his wife's hands. She was not looking at him to stop herself from bursting into tears again. He never understood why the second blanket was sometimes put in a set of bed linens, and especially - why did they need it if they had no children, and even if they did, they would obviously buy everything new and

special? Now the expediency of this "spare" element was sarcastically laughing at him from some unknown, almost mystical predestination or fate. After all, everything cannot fit so ideally in this life. If only the word "ideally" was appropriate when talking about such things...

- "I went to the medical center today." - Steven's words suddenly fell from his lips.

Kate, who wanted to close the door behind her, silently stopped at the entrance to the living room and did not turn around for a long time. Her posture was unnatural, as if someone pressed a pause button on her and Steven realized that her heart was beating in anticipation of the answer, even though she would not turn around, and perhaps even would leave without waiting for the answer if she would find enough strength, as she wanted to have children so much... "However, now she would probably find", - Steven thought and said in a quick tongue, being afraid to get into a new confusion:

- "Everything is fine with the results. No incompatibility or disease... They did not find a reason again."

Kate did not leave as if she was waiting for something else, and Steven added something that he did not dare to add at once, not knowing what his wife could answer in such situation:

- "If now it, of course, does matter."

He had already shaken up the pillow, arranging these words, pushed the blanket into the duvet cover and turned around: Kate was still standing at the entrance, but now facing him, with dry and empty eyes, which were cried out to the last drop and spark of life.

- "It never mattered to you." - she whispered quietly and powerlessly, almost with her lips only, and quickly left the room, unable to close the door completely. She let go of the handle before she left, and the door, having stopped at the level of the crack to the doorpost, began to open again, with a long, plaintive and whiny creak.

- "I'll have to grease it tomorrow." - Steven thought suddenly, and only now understood all the horror of the situation. There would be no more "tomorrow" in this house. And this door, creaky and almost completely withered, the repair of which was so often postponed by a married couple for later, will now forever

remain with Kate as a reminder of a disgusting and ugly, rotten person like him.

Steven thought this way about himself, closing the door behind his wife. He turned off the light and lay down under the blanket, but he was feeling cold all over his body despite the density of the fabric and the working heat in the apartment. It was like something broke in him and would never get on track again. Something had just closed the doors before him. A page of some huge book flipped over, and Steven painfully shut his eyes in the dark, afraid to look at the new page.

He fell asleep unexpectedly quickly - probably from overwork and grief.

## **Chapter 10. Divorce**

"It's all very bad," Steven told Mia bluntly at their next meeting.

This conversation could not have begun any other way. Only this way: directly, with the whole truth discovered.

- "My wife is filing for a divorce." - he lit a cigarette.

He had not been smoking for a long time and he had never liked smokers. Until recently, he had never tired of annoying Harry with his advice on a healthy lifestyle. And now he took the cigarette for the first time since the distant years, when he was seventeen and has been smoking for a couple of months influenced by his friends as it often happens in a rebellious youth.

He did not like to smoke. Cigarettes were harsh for him, and it was not difficult for him to throw them out. Now, after many years of a healthy lifestyle, he was blowing a cigarette so passionately, as if he was kissing a long-abandoned and loved person.

Mia lowered her head and covered her face with her hands. Steven was already almost frightened that she would cry too, and he, as before, would stand as a column and not know what to say and how to behave. But after a moment her serious and worried face appeared from behind her hands.

- "You should not smoke." - she said, but he only smiled bitterly and shook his head in reply.

- "I can't, sorry. My heart is breaking."

The pause dragged on.

- "It's cold." - he noticed finally.

- "Let's go inside." - Mia nodded at the cafe they were passing. Random passers-by occasionally appeared on a deserted street. They were sad, anxious, hidden behind the raised collars of jackets and coats or autumn scarves, although it was not even autumn. The weather played a cruel joke on people, confusing the seasons, maliciously mockingly pulling the clouds, which were gray as leaden cotton wool, on the tarnished sky and the Sun, which seemed to cool from fright.

There were darkness and the smell of tasteless coffee in the cafe. Steven took himself and his "beloved" hot chocolate. But this day that was nasty in all senses of the word, the chocolate seemed to be unjustifiably bitter, tasteless, and watery.

- "I'm really sorry." - she said, making it clear that she had not forgotten what they were talking about and was not trying to avoid an unpleasant conversation. – "True. And I'm confused. What a fool I am!"

"Do not blame yourself, you have nothing to do with it." - Steven interrupted.

Suddenly, Mia's phone rang. Without attaching much importance to this, Steven casually slid his eyes across the screen, which lit up on the table, and saw a picture of Harry on the screen. For some reason, having hastily grabbed the phone from the table, Mia got embarrassed.

- "Can I leave for a minute?" - she asked in an apologetic voice and with such a guilty expression on her face that Steven softened even more, and something unpleasant, painful and piercing creaked in his soul again.

- "Yes, sure." - he nodded, and involuntarily compared his fallen voice with yesterday's fallen voice of his wife, who had been crying so helplessly and defenselessly, not guilty of anything. No one was to be blamed for anything. "Only I, only I, only I..." - Steven was saying endlessly, having suddenly fallen into reflections and staring at one point without seeing anything.

He would have sat like this for a long time if a drunken visitor hadn't passed him by. Moving to the door with a swaying walk, he accidentally pushed the chair on which Mia's bag was standing. When it fell, unexpectedly for Steven, the visitor apologized and wanted to begin to pick up the fallen things, but Steven made him understand that no help was needed. As soon as the drunk man went out the door without ceasing to apologize, Steven knelt and began to lift all the contents

that fell out of Mia's bag. There was everything that could be found in the bag of an average girl who knew how to take care of herself and who was not frivolous: lipstick and a mirror, a comb, an e-reader in a hard case (Steven sighed with relief when made sure that the reader was not broken), headphones, which were traditionally tangled, a pack of wet wipes and tissues, a notebook, (Steven sighed twice) a purse and... a stack of wrapped photos.

- "What the hell?!" - Steven sighed, unable to believe his eyes: in front of him were the same photographs, which Kate threw at him last night!

Walking, catching up, the stupid knight bravado and a drunken acquaintance... There also were others - with hugs and kisses, and Steven was already beginning to vaguely guess why these did not go into Kate's collection, if, of course, she had thrown everything she had into her husband's face. On the photos that were not included in the second collection, the faces were either poorly visible or not visible at all because of either an unfortunate angle or a long exposure and blurriness. It was clear that the photos were made using a good technique, but by an unskillful man... What was this? A conspiracy?!

He did not have to wait for the continuation of the story for a long time: Mia returned, having finished her telephone conversation, and found Steven sorting the photos surrounded by several scattered things.

- "Your bag fell," - he said dryly, feeling that all the tenderness with which he came a minute ago to explain to her and to solve, and probably, their common future was evaporating. He got up and, having put the bag back, sat down in his chair and looked at her inquisitively: confused and now ready to cry.

- "So... I'm waiting for an explanation."

And she explained to him. She told him everything, repenting in tears and pleading for forgiveness. She spoke about everything that was, and every other minute Steven's soul was rushing from side to side, from person to person, from image to image, from guess to guess. Word after word he was losing the course of events. Less and less, he understood the cause-effect relations of events, the connection of people and phenomena.

- "He came to me one morning and offered me a lot of money." - she was sobbing, but was not crying courageously. She was looking into Steven's eyes with a defiant but not guilty look, as she was talking about Harry. Having heard his name, Steven was completely confused. - "I could not refuse; my mother is



ill. I've never told you..."

- "Why didn't you tell me?" – Steven asked touched by this remark.

- "I did not want to burden you." - she answered sincerely. – "I thought that this all was for a while. I thought you were just playing. I did not want to hang my problems on you as I don't need love because of compassion..."

She paused for a moment, gathering her thoughts.

- "Did you have bad time with money?" - he asked perplexed, feeling a gap in Mia's story. – "You said that you were earning a lot doing photo shoots and often had exhibitions?"

Mia did not answer right away.

- "I lied to you!" - she whispered finally. People at the neighboring tables first were turning to look at the drunken visitor, the fallen purse, and the girl's telephone conversation. Now they were looking back at the couple, clearly attracted by the flaring drama, insolently hungry for "bread and circuses." Mia had to lower her voice so that Steven had to bend over the table, listening to her conspiratorial whisper.

- "I lied to you because I'm actually working..."

- "Where?" - Steven asked in anticipation, feeling that soon he would forget how to get surprised.

- "For your company." - the answer followed, and Steven realized that he made a mistake in his conclusion a second ago.

- "What?" - not believing his ears, grinned, but then he asked seriously. – "But how?!"

- "There are two hundred and fifty employees in this bloody car company!" - she explained, involuntarily smiling at the current situation in life. - "You hardly know all the junior accountants personally. You are an important person in our corporation." - Now her smile lightened, and a splinter of her happy past with Steven flashed in her face. - "I've known you for a long time. You are almost the best worker of the year..."

- "Let's not talk about this." - Steven said in a confident voice, with a strange feeling of gloating over everything around him, or fear of himself, so unexpectedly firm, stale and evil. He did not know what to believe now. Lost

and unable to soberly assess what was happening, he kept asking her questions.

- "Go on. What did he make you do for money?"

- "He..." – Having recalled something, Mia covered her face with her hands. – "This all was a joke. I didn't think that everything would go so far. I didn't know what it was for and that he would show it to anyone..."

- "What did you do?" - Steven insisted, stepping closer and feeling uncontrollable anger.

- "We recreated our bed scene with you while you were drunk and asleep that first night." - Mia was saying horrible things in a trembling voice, - "He took a picture of us..."

- "Do you mean..." - Steven did not believe in his ears. - "There was nothing between us?"

- "I'm really sorry..." - Mia whispered, tears began flowing involuntarily from her eyes. - "I'm very sorry... I'm to be blamed for everything!"

Steven was silent. Now the self-respect, which was so deeply wounded by all the events and by what Mia, the one whom he loved so selflessly and purely, for whose one smile he was almost ready to say goodbye to life, was talking about them, was not allowing him to tell her that she was not guilty of anything. Oh, this girl was so guilty! Probably, even more than him?

- "And what about everything after that?" – hardly restraining himself he spoke again. Tears came to his eyes either from resentment or from the fact that he realized how cruel the world was towards him. He asked, breathing hard, again and again not believing a single word from his beloved girl, - "Everything after that? Heck! What am I talking about? Oh my God!"

- "Don't you believe that I really love you?" - She exclaimed, ready to burst into bitter tears.

- "I don't know what to believe anymore!" - Steven exclaimed. The people surrounding them began to look back at them again, and Mia gently touched his arm, making a sign for him to be quieter. He angrily jerked his hand away from her, though these easy casual touches so recently used to bring him the most happiness and bliss.

- "Who are you? Where did you come from? Is your name Mia at all?" - he said

angrily, but now in a quieter tone. - "I hope you didn't deceive me in that way too." - Steven could no longer restrain his tears. Let them flow to hell!

- "Harry deceived me too, Steven!" - she did not stop, starting to speak with a perfect pater, as if she was afraid that he would not want to listen to her until the end. - "We just had an argument. I did not want to hide anything from you, and walked away so as not to make noise. I wanted to tell you myself, and I'm so sorry that you found out about these horrible photos in such a way... I didn't know that he had been photographing us all this time... He must have been originally spurring us on for this on purpose. Both of us, you and me. He wanted to get more compromising material so that your wife would definitely believe him..."

- "So, was this all because of Kate?" - Steven interrupted thoughtfully. - "In that case I do not understand anything at all."

- "I think you should talk to Harry." - Mia said cautiously, putting her hands to her face again, and gradually calming down, wiping her tears away.

- "I suppose it cannot be avoided now." - Steven answered drily again, as if coming to his senses. - "Goodbye!"

He left the cafe, without finishing the cooled chocolate and leaving Mia alone with her misfortune, a half-empty cup, and photos on the table.

## **Chapter 11. Separation**

Steven left the café. He didn't go to Harry. He still could not make himself stop calling this abandoned place home. There were still some of his things, and he wanted to pick them up while Kate was not at home so as not to meet her again.

But to his surprise he found his wife at home. And moreover, not alone, but with her father.

He entered his home cautiously, having quietly opened the door with his key. His wife had not changed the lock yet. He found his father-in-law's shoes at the door, he almost ran away. However, he got a hold of himself, and having gathered all his masculinity and determination into a fist, he crept to the closed door, from under which the shadows of figures moving around the room were seen.

- "All of you women are the same..." - her father was grumbling, obviously not knowing how to approach his weeping daughter, not wanting to show her his

sympathy and express unflattering tenderness, and because of this he was becoming more and more angry.

- "How can you say that?!" - the sobbing girl exclaimed. - "Do you think this is normal? This should not happen in any family!"

- "In any family"! - the man mocked with a dull grunt. - "What kind of a family is it without children, tell me, please? Calm down, do not cry." - he relented in a voice, which was still stern, but was already softening. - "You're crying now, but before that, what was wrong with you? You've been walking like a blow-up doll! You've been like made of plastic, that's why he began to cheat."

- "Dad! Are you telling me this again?"

- "Again! Again... What can I do with this breed? This is people's biology to not remain faithful. And because of one precedent, are you ready to break many years of investments?"

- "What kind of investments?"

- "Emotional, financial, commercial finally! I was going to appoint Steven as a Director General." - her father explained, - "The guy loves his job so much! Such a nice employee will be lost!" - he waved his hand.

- "But am I guilty of what's going on?" - Kate sobbed tiredly. - "Do something!?"

- "I don't understand what you're waiting for, Kate! I'm not going to kill your infidel!"

Steven reflexively did what common sense dictated him: he quietly opened the door, and, having stepped loudly in place twice, slammed it loudly and deliberately noisily began to take off his leather jacket. The voices behind the closed door became silent.

Steven's father-in-law stepped out of the room and measured his son-in-law and his employee with his usual penetrating gaze, as if once again judging whether he was worthy of the director general's position and his daughter's hands in the past.

- "Good afternoon!" - Steven stretched his hand, not counting on anything. His father-in-law passed by, without giving him his hand and without saying a word.

Kate closed the door behind her father.

## Chapter 12. Unexpected news

Steven had not been answering Mia's calls for a few days. She had been calling him often: at least 3 times an hour from early morning until late at night, so soon he had to completely turn off his phone.

- "Yes!?" - he picked up the phone on the third day of incessant calls.

- "I'm pregnant." - Mia said without greeting, revealing the hard truth, as he himself had been recently frankly speaking to her.

- "What?" - Steven's heart fell somewhere in his stomach and involuntarily fluttered there like a bird in a cage. He was happy, frightened, anxious and dumbfounded - all his emotions blended into a vigorous adrenaline cocktail. So many years of fruitless attempts in the literal sense of the word to have a full family with Kate and only a few months - and Mia is carrying the meaning of his whole life in her heart! - "We need to meet."

- "It's not a phone chat." - she agreed. - "I have something to say. It is very serious."

An hour later, Steven was already at the appointed place, lighting a cigarette. He saw Mia and hastily extinguished the scarcely lit cigarette, threw it on the ground and having ruthlessly trampled it with his shoe into the asphalt, waved his hand through the air furiously, dispelling the smoke harmful for her health.

"I need to leave urgently," she whispered hotly and quickly, immediately throwing herself into his arms, without greeting him and not waiting for his greeting. Too much was said and too much still was to be said, so, were such trifles and formalities needed at all?!

- "What?! What are you talking about? What's wrong?"

- "Your father-in-law's people want to eliminate me. Your wife takes revenge."

- "It ... cannot be true! He's not the most honest person, of course, but to kill... I cannot believe it."

- "His secretary Maria called today all in tears and conveyed their conversation in detail."

- "But..."

- "My flight is tonight. I will not tell you when and what flight it is. You don't

have to be there." - Mia continued not listening to him.

- "What are you talking about? What nonsense!?"

- "I'm not afraid for myself. I want to save this child!"

- "I will not let you go, Mia!"

- "After everything I've done?"

Steven did not answer. He still had not forgiven either her or Harry, and would hardly ever be able to forgive. But the child - his child!

- "I'll take care of it." - he said, pressing her head against his chest and laying her against his shoulder.

- "I'm scared!" - she was crying and pressing herself against him more and more.

- "You do not have to fly away."

- "I cannot stay here, do not try and persuade me! Let me go!?"

The leaden sky was again pouring unfriendly rain on the two happy, loving and loved hugging people, who were so unhappy and lonely at the same time.

- "I'll take care of it! Everything will be fine!" - Steven repeated firmly.

### **Chapter 13. Intrigue unravels**

- "Be so kind to explain what kind of intrigues you're building!" - he exclaimed no longer deliberately slamming the door at the entrance to the apartment. – "So, you want to "eliminate" her? Did you read too much of your idiotic detective novels?"

On the threshold of the living room – his living room he was met by... Harry...

He was standing, fastening his cufflinks at the entrance to the room with a creaky door in his old friend's tie, which he was so recently selflessly and comically dirtying with mayonnaise in his house, when he was not making any predictions about the future, terrible times.

- "Well hello!" - Harry spoke with an unexpected intonation that had never sounded in his voice before.

- "Hello..." - Steven replied with a pale tone. – "What the hell is this?"

They did not need to call Kate – she had already appeared after Harry from the

living room. It was almost impossible to recognize her - a fresh hairstyle and moderate make-up with a well-chosen classic female suit and the amazing fragrance of the new perfume.

- "I see someone is enjoying herself?" - Steven continued to question grinning more and more with each examined detail. - "I think I'm starting to understand."

- "Shall I help the old man understand?" - Harry turned to Kate mockingly, and she smiled, having bowed her head in agreement, however, not looking at her husband.

- "Someone is getting the position of the Director-General in guess-what-firm!?"  
- Harry barked through the whole apartment, triumphantly spreading his hands with shiny cuff links.

For a moment Kate went to the living room and returned with her neat handbag. She took something from it and silently handed it to Steven. This time she looked him straight in the eyes.

Steven took an empty package of pills from his wife's hands, turned the foil to the top and felt goosebumps. His throat went dry with horror. On the medicine package, he read the name of the contraceptive.

- "You..." - it was extremely unpleasant to speak with a dry throat and Steven choked after a pause, - "You've been lying... All these years living together you've been lying to me that you wanted a child! And you've been blaming me for everything!?"

- "I've never wanted a child from you. Nothing personal. That is just fate."

How unceremoniously and disgustingly her voice sounded now in comparison with that dry and cold voice, which wounded him on the day when she allegedly learned about the cheating, which was almost organized by her.

- "You..." - Steven clenched his closed teeth looking steadily at the face of the traitor, who had been pretending to be his good friend for so many years. - "All these years you've been going behind my back while I've been loving you both as if you were the closest people in my life!"

- "Good hubby, nothing to say." - Kate snorted contemptuously. - "You chased after the first skirt, bed-hopper!"

- "And an excellent friend!" - Harry added oil to the fire. He was so unlike

himself, but, regrettably, it was his real face. – “You used to remember me once a year only to get drunk. I wish everyone had such friends and husbands!”

- “You are crazy!” - Steven was already completely lost in time and space. – “You’ve been playing on human feelings!”

- "Does your heart ache?" – Harry’s habit to taunt, as well as his amazing ability to irritate and cause a desire to strike him in the face, remained unchanged. At this moment Steven wanted this more than he had ever wanted, even in the most drunken state. This time his mind was fresh and very clear. It must have been that the stress was affecting and clearing the picture of what was happening from the impurities of life and subjectivity. That's why now it was so precise, as if it was a film whitewashed by the camera.

- “You've arranged everything!” - Steven bellowed like mad, with difficulty unclenching his hands, which were clenching into fists. - "She told me everything! You've set everything up!”

- "There's no one in this world that you can rely on." - Harry sighed. – “That's always like that - you work with someone side by side, and they fall in love with some scum! She got her money, so, let her go in peace. You know, Steven, I forgive her. Yes, I forgive!”

Harry laughed disgustingly. Kate supported him, which caused a new explosion of indignation in Steven. Now he turned to her:

- "And you, damn witch! What are you doing now!? Wasn't it enough for you to ruin my life? I know, that was your job! You planned everything! Why didn't you just get rid of me? Why didn't you file for a divorce?”

- "I was afraid that you would take the shares and put the company in your hands! All this time I wanted Harry to take the place of the Director-General!”

- "What scum you are! How have I been living with you? I don't need a penny! I would just leave. And now let Mia calmly help her mother! After all, she is pregnant, and you are causing that ridiculous, bloody slaughter! Stop your father. He doesn't want that, and you are pulling the wool over his eyes! Of course, he believes your fairy tales that you are suffering so much because of me and Mia.”

- "I have no idea what you're talking about!" - Kate said, turning pale. Harry put his arm around her waist and frowned at Steven. All three of them had been silent for a while.



- "Go to hell, you both!" - Steven spat on the entrance and ran out of the apartment, slamming the door.

## **Chapter 14. Love**

There was a real hype at the airport that evening. It seemed that the whole city in a moment decided to fly somewhere. The people were just like in the New York subway at rush hour. It was impossible to creep through an incredibly dense, hot and evil crowd.

- Miii-aaa! - Steven shouted to the whole airport, as if there was only one Mia for the whole city.

There was still hope in his heart. Picking up the things scattered from the bag the day they were at the cafe together the last time, he accidentally glanced at a page of the open notebook. There was a city written there. He did not know what this note was about, but all that he could hope for now was a miracle. "What if it was her hometown? Maybe her sick mother lives there? Or relatives and friends? Or maybe it was just a city that she wanted to visit so long, but didn't have a chance? And now it was helping in his hunt for her. Was it the birthplace of his future child?" - Steven was thinking with reverence, furiously searching the closest flight on electronic information boards.

Painfully familiar eyes with a sly shape, but wet with tears, seemed to glitter in his direction in the crowd.

- "Mia!" - he shouted. - "Mia, I'm here, darling! I'm here!"

The familiar aroma of spring suddenly struck him. His favorite perfume. Someone's gentle, cold and thin hand with transparent-like fingers touched his cheek in the crowd cautiously and lovingly.

## **EPILOGUE**

How much time can do? Grind away the rock with a single, dripping raindrop. Destroy fate. Build happiness ...

Harry was promoted but did not become the Director-General, no matter how hard he tried. Two months later he lost even the position he was appointed for. Kate's father could not trust him as completely as he used to trust Steven. The new shares of the company were re-written to the account of the owner and his

daughter, and soon Harry had to leave the firm.

Kate's father continued to work in the automobile production sphere, carefully choosing the employees and doling out the important posts. The criminal part of his activity declined gradually, although it did not immediately lose its priority in his affairs.

Kate went abroad soon after she learned that the Harry would not be promoted and their relationship did not work out. Provided with her father's fortune, she went to build her own destiny and started her own private business in Germany. She was married unsuccessfully three times after Steven and never gave birth to a child.