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Igor YEVTISHENKOV

JUSTICE HURTS



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Аннотация

I rarely read detective stories, but I was pleasantly surprised and couldn't believe how quickly I came to the last page. It was interesting to see the characters come to life on the page. False ideals and, as a result, an attempt to come to terms with their own world by burying themselves in their work or taking drugs. This is an unfortunate reflection of today's society. Ted Fields, detective, "Justice Investigative Group"

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JUSTICE HURTS

To all readers

All the characters are fictitious, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The described events have never occurred in the described geographic areas.

I am deeply indebted to the following people for encouraging and helping me out in various ways during the writing of this book: Robin Bithrey, Elaine Bithrey and Rece Bithrey.

CHAPTER 1

The sun was slowly setting over the Arizona Mountains, stretching the shadows across the flat surface of the Sonora Desert. The tired red tones of the enormous sunset suppressed the reddish color of the soil, filling it with dense violet hues before it was completely dark and all the colors became the same – the color of deep black night.

In the city of Phoenix, lights began to switch on and life moved from offices to apartments and night clubs. It did not stop at Estrella either, where a batch of female prisoners gradually adapted to the natural law of this institution.

A new working shift also started in a large half-open cell of the «free» inhabitants, who did not want to do voluntary work in the daytime. Having slept in the morning, they proceeded to the amusements available to them. The most common was the distribution of new arrivals between groups of old-timers.

Denise stole a five-dollar watch from a Watch store and ended up in jail for two years. It was considered an easy punishment, but now everything turned out to be quite different to her. The Martinez Chicks, as they were known, chose her to run errands. They ruled everything in this block, because, as the others said, the sisters still had connections to the right people at large. They were caught for bribery, and meticulous investigators got to the bottom of all their contacts and crimes. Those who covered for

them were paid off and reasonably decided to turn them in so that things would not go any further. The sisters did not cooperate with the investigators, but their patrons managed to negotiate with other court-related authorities so that The Martinez sisters got off with a term in this prison.

However, one of the sisters, who led the group, had her eyes on her, and Denise was released from all work. Instead, she had to do other work – to please the two sisters in the far corner of the cell, hidden from the cameras by the bunks and bodies of the prisoners, especially at night time. Denise refused to do this, before the «upbringing» began. Every night it was equally wild, brutal and terribly painful. She was beaten, silenced and raped, as much as they could.

A month later, Denise was in the infirmary, where patients with tears and blood, infections and tumors were not uncommon. Two weeks passed like one day. Her return to the cell after a «long vacation» was met with cries of joy and pleasure. Further violence continued with the same persistence. Moreover, every time it was the eldest sister's turn, the half-crazy Laura, everything turned to hell, and Denise heard her hoarse whisper in her ear for the thousandth time.

«I'm Sergeant William Lindstone. I swear to tell the truth and only the truth. You are also Sergeant Lindstone. Tell the truth! Right, justice hurts!» these words were repeated in different sequences and sounded like a curse. In the end, Denise ceased to understand the difference between reality and the fictional

world of Laura Martinez and began to shout the same thing back to her. The woman was sincerely happy and stopped torturing her and then an incredible thing happened.

«Do you want to join „Last Chance“?» she whispered in her ear after being mocked again. Did Denise want to join this squad? Of course, she did! The prisoners got there on their own statement. In fact, however, it was only if they were allowed to do this by the leaders of the groups in common cells. The work in the squad was fine: they worked there during the day on community work, and at night they slept in separate cells, two people each. It was a paradise compared to what was happening to her now.

«Yes,» Denise whispered not believing her luck. Will they really let her go?

«Do you?» Laura grinned and burst out laughing all over the camera. The sleepy cellmates began to grumble in displeasure, but she paid no attention to them. «She wants to be in the „Last Chance“! Have you heard?»

After these words the other members of her group began to laugh.

«I'm Sergeant William Lindstone. I swear to tell the truth and only the truth. And you are Sergeant Lindstone too. Tell the truth!» and everything repeated again.

A week later, Laura Martinez and several of her «girlfriends» were diagnosed with HIV, after which the cell was almost half empty. Denise was spared this misfortune: at least her tests were clean. The next day, Bruta, an old prisoner from another group,

approached her and told her to leave for the «Last Chance».

«Tell the inspector you are allowed,» she muttered. «Now you can go.»

Denise stretched her face in a terrible grimace, as Laura Martinez did, and, twisting her voice, began to repeat her words.

«I'm Sergeant William Lindstone. I swear to tell the truth and only the truth... Justice hurts!» after that she giggled and squatted, hugging her knees with her hands.

«She's totally whacked,» one of the prisoners said, and after that no one paid attention to Denise.

The next morning, though, she filed an application for community service, and a day after she was first taken outside to the steel-wire fence, put on a plastic handcuff with a sensor, and connected with five other prisoners, whom she saw for the first time. Then the bus drove them to a wasteland, where the first day of work began with the burial of corpses of the homeless, of which more than ten had been collected in a local morgue in a week. In the evening, her head was aching from the heat and hard work, her arms and legs were aching with sweat from the metal rings that rubbed them almost to blood, but it was worth it because she was not taken to a common cell, but to a separate box with four bunks, two of which were empty. Here Denise was able to calmly wash herself in the sink for the first time and immediately fell down onto the bunk, feeling that she could no longer stand on her feet. The past turned into darkness, she didn't even think about the future – it simply could not come, so only

the present remained for her.

CHAPTER 2

«Hi! I would like to talk to you,» Carol looked tired.

«Hi! Sure, no problems. What happened?»

«William, I tried to stay silent for a long time, but I can't do it anymore. I'm tired.»

«Err... Are you talking about your work?»

«No. Please, listen to me, don't interrupt. It's hard for me, but I have to say that. I cannot go on. You're at work all day in this damn job that eats away at you. I'm alone, totally alone. I talked to Ted and he agreed to let me go next week. I want to leave and go to my parents. I need to change something. I cannot take it anymore.»

«It's because of me?»

«No! Although this is all complicated. It's about us – you, me and Sofia. Four years have passed, and I just cannot clean her room.»

«Do you want me to call the cleaning service?» William suggested.

«No, you don't understand. It's inside, here,» Carol put her hand to her chest.

«Maybe we need to think about a second child?»

«No, no, nothing of the kind! I'm even afraid to think about it,» a familiar expression flashed across her face. Her mother always pursed her lips when she spoke of their marriage –

wrong, unreasonable, too fast, useless to anyone, and another thousand words to humiliate William and show Carol that she made a mistake. He did everything to prove the opposite to her! He rose to the rank of lieutenant and passed all the exams. These damn awards and medals...

«Yes, I see...» William was looking at her painfully familiar face, on which the agony of inner emotions froze, and for the first time for the last four years he felt the same pain as on the day of his daughter's death.

«Here... I already packed my things. I just need you to understand me,» Carol said sighing.

«I deliberately took a day off tomorrow so that we would go to...» started William.

«Stop!» she clasped her fingers and held her hands to her chest. The sleeve of the blouse on her wrist tightened, and he saw a button come off but Carol didn't notice anything. A small plastic circle attracted his gaze, preventing him from thinking. There was a complete void in his head.

«Did you file for divorce?» finally, he asked quietly. She nodded and lowered her head. Her thin shoulders trembled like willow branches in the wind by the river, and Carol, clutching her fingers, turned away to the window.

«I asked the lawyer to solve all the issues for me. She has your phone number. I've signed all the documents. I don't want to go to court. Let's do everything quietly and decently?» Carol whispered.

«But you can't...» the elusive sense of reality deprived William of the ability to think and speak. Despair swept over his mind, and a lump formed in his throat.

«Please don't interrupt me. I ask for the only thing – let me go – and promise not to call at least for a year. I beg you!»

«I wanted...» he spread his hands in dismay, catching himself thinking that he had long been ready for such a turn of events. After the death of their daughter in a psychiatric hospital, an abyss came between them. He insisted on sending Sofia for compulsory treatment, although Carol was against it, and when the tragedy occurred, she was so silent that it was worse than any words. Yes, Carol considered him guilty of the death of their daughter, but Sofia was already eighteen years old. She came across her more than once smoking pot and dabbled in light chemical drugs. When she was expelled from college, he decided to send her there and never regretted it because bouts of her rage were later replaced by lapses in memory and hallucinations. Even on the day of her death, when they were informed that Sofia was hit by a car, when she tried to escape from the hospital at night... Even then, he believed that he had done the right thing. At home they would not have been able to deal with her addiction. This was true – they lost Sofia long before she became addicted to drugs. They just didn't want to admit it and now... now it was too late. «Where will you go? To your mother?» William asked hoarsely.

«Yes. I'm gonna stay nearby with my friend. She agreed to let

me stay me for the rest of the week,» said Carol.

«But this is your home. I'm not kicking you out of the house. You can stay. I'll leave. I can spend the night in the department. It's okay. Or in the car. Why do you need...»

«Don't! I can't. For me it's torture. I've already made the decision. I am really sorry, but it will be better for both of us. I'd better go. I'm starting to cry. This is bad. If anything, call my mother or better the lawyer.»

«Yes, it's better to deal with your lawyer,» William shook his head, seeing that the awkwardness of the situation was beginning to weigh on his wife. Finally, Carol straightened upright, pursed her lips again and, trying not to look at him, passed by. Then the latch of the front door clicked softly, and everything was quiet.

William was left alone, all alone, in the small house, 22 Low Street where he and Carol dreamed of raising children and living a full life but now there were no children and now no wife. He went to the cabinet door and stood for a long time, in a state of complete dullness. It was real dullness, because his head was empty inside. There was no grief, no pain, despair or anger – merely nothing. He started looking for whiskey. The last time he drank it was four years ago... Now it seemed to be the only way to pass out and stop thinking about what happened in his life, dividing it in half – before and after today.

CHAPTER 3

At dusk the street seemed empty and deserted. A lone passerby crossed to the other side and looked around several times. He was wearing jeans, sneakers and a jacket with a hood, like thousands of young residents of this city, who outwardly differed little from each other. Having approached the gate with a low fence in front of the lawn, he looked around again and only after that opened it. The door sign read: «Dr. Woodruff. Psychiatrist». Adjusting the backpack on his shoulders, the young man pressed the bell button and pushed his hood back from his head. Footsteps were heard in the house.

«No more patients?» instead of greeting, he asked when the door opened and the owner of the house appeared on the threshold.

«What happened? We didn't arrange a meeting...» Doctor Woodruff was clearly puzzled and could not hide his embarrassment. He did not understand what could have brought this man to him at such a late hour.

«I wanted to see you. You, as always, don't drink? Even with pretty girls?»

«Stop it! You'd hardly come for this. I told you a hundred times – no alcohol. I have heart problems. Come in!» standing on the porch was not very good, it was better to question him about everything inside the house.

«Yes, you told me but you don't look bad at all, though, and in particular, you are so great in bed.»

«It's too late. What happened? Are you feeling paranoid and hallucinating again? Do you need some medication?» he sat on the sofa and, clasping his hands in front of him, prepared to listen.

«Yes. This frigging ghost showed up again, and he screamed again. It was the same, but today he got to me. Yes, yes, I know what you told me about this: you need to get rid of him, steer clear of him, relax, do something else... It doesn't work. Only our meetings help me, when you tell me about the others. Today it got me down, I felt very bad, got sick at work. I had to beg to be let off work but he followed me everywhere, can you imagine what that's like? Yes, yes, I took your pills, sat down, counted to a hundred. It didn't help. I don't know... It hurts.»

«Do you definitely take all the medication that I presc...»

«Sure! You see, I stopped talking to myself and my memory is okay now but all this is rubbish! The best medicine is you and your stories – you are a good doctor. I'm probably crazy, right? Well, I'm so sorry to say this, but you are the best medicine for me and your antidepressants are shit.

«Listen, I was thinking, why wouldn't you adopt a child? This is the most powerful incentive in life. It can change everything. Now you can even have...»

The sound of a mobile phone ringing interrupted him.

«Who is it?» his visitor asked in surprise.

«I don't know... Damn it, this is... one of very important

patients. It's quite unusual for her, we did not make an appointment, not least at this time of night. Quiet, please,» he put a finger to his lips and went out into the kitchen. «Yes, Mrs. Lindstone? Good evening! Yes, yes, of course...»

When the psychiatrist returned to the living room with a pensive expression on his face, a question was already waiting for him:

«Well, what is it?»

«She wants to stop by for half an hour just to talk. She even begged me as she is divorcing her husband.»

«Wow! Didn't you refuse?»

«No.»

«Great! Is she the same Carol, the wife of the policeman, right? I have not heard about them for a long time. There'll be a new interesting story. It turns me on. What about you, Mickey?»

«Don't call me that. At least for now. I need to get my thoughts together,» it was unpleasant to hear hints of past relationships, especially because he was going to break up with this once and for all.

«As you wish. I'll wait in the bedroom. I promise to sit quietly. Don't worry! I'll be waiting for her news. Just be sure to find as much as possible about her divorce and bring Bill's glass here. I like looking at it. It turns me on too.»

«You're crazy' noticing dissatisfaction in his visitor's look, Woodruff waved his hands: «Okay, go, go now. She's

pulling up.»

There was a rustling sound of tires on the street. The doctor looked around the living room and headed for the door.

«Michael, hello!» Carol was incredibly attractive in the dim light of the entrance light.

«Come in, hello! What happened?»

«I'm going to my friend's and I decided to call on you to say thanks for your help. Things went to plan, he was quiet, as you said. But I want to help me with another thing if you don't mind.»

«No, I don't. Come in, come in, of course,» he stepped aside, letting her in. The pleasant scent of perfume, cream, and something else distant, alluring and inherent in real women, touched his nostrils and carried him into the living room.

Carol confusedly told him everything that they had already discussed with him more than once before, when she was just getting ready to make this difficult decision, but then the conversation took on a different tone, and when Michael understood it, it was too late.

«To be honest,» she leaned forward, as if she wanted him to hear better, «I cannot forget what was between us.»

«But this... we both agreed it was an accident,» he muttered in panic, watching the door in the corridor out of the corner of his eye. Carol spoke quietly, but her voice could be heard in the bedroom.

«Yes, we did. You're right, but you felt sorry for me and understood. You were so imbued with my grief that I didn't even

know how to explain it, and your attention... it did something unimaginable to me. I think about you constantly. I agree that I shouldn't have done so. Perhaps, I was too weak and wanted this, but now I don't care. I miss you. I know that sounds silly but you're divorced too. Why don't we think about... well, you might understand me. At least we could try to live together. We can move to Frisco, I have a house there and it's not far from here. My mother...»

«Carol,» he interrupted her, feeling that his throat was dry. «It's impossible. I have a clientele, my job, connections here... You see I agree that I was wrong and made a mistake, but I can't do that again...»

«You aren't Weinstein and you don't need to make excuses!» a sharp answer sounded. «I knew it!» she cried and leaned back in the sofa. Tears flowed from her eyes in thin streams, as when they first crossed the line of formal communication. «Don't worry, I will not throw a tantrum. It's just a pity, it's a pity... Give me something soothing and I'll go,» she could not restrain herself and burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands.

«OK, wait,» he wanted to make sure that nothing was heard in the bedroom, so he hurried there first.

«Give her sleeping pills!» was the first thing he heard when he carefully opened the door. There was no point in asking if his visitor heard everything – he clearly did. It was terrible. «Faster!» the whisper was hot, burning hot.

«You're crazy! It's...» Michael Woodruff was desperate

to pull himself together.

«What? I'm gonna tell her everything and then I'll tear the two of you apart. Did you sleep with her? Did you sleep?» the last words turned into the hiss of a cobra, ready to take a lethal leap. Michael realised it was necessary to reassure him.

«Wait, wait. I'll be right back! Just don't go out, I beg you!» he spoke in a whisper, but it seemed to him that he was screaming. Having slipped out of the bedroom, in one breath he swept along the corridor into his study and opened the safe. Then he took out the strongest sleeping pills and shook the capsule on the table with trembling hands.

«Thanks! You look so excited. Sorry,» Carol said in a low voice, seeing him with a glass of water. «How many?» she asked with a guilty smile, taking a glass from the doctor's trembling hands.

«Usually three are enough, but you can take four now, I think,» he said in an uneven voice, wondering in his mind what dose she would receive and whether it would be harmful.

«I'll take five!» the capsules disappeared into Carol's hands. She washed them with water and again threw her head back on the sofa. «Now, let me have just a minute... I'll calm down a bit and go. My friend Tina is waiting for me.»

Five minutes later, her body relaxed. A hand slowly slipped into a handbag at the back of the sofa. Michael stood up and headed towards the corridor. He was shaking from excitement.

«Where have you been for so long? I'm about to burst! Come

here! If possible, I would put her on this table instead of this glass. Look what I have! This is a wig. Do I look like her?» listening to this, Woodruff felt that he was beginning to give in to internal instincts.

«You are definitely out of your mind today! Stop it. Otherwise, I...» he did not have time to finish, having received a push in the chest and finding himself on the bed. The only thing he managed to say sounded pathetic and humiliating, «Just don't tie me! She may come to her senses out there.»

Half an hour later, both sat back in bed, and Michael said quietly:

«You are strong and do you also keep taking hormones?»

«Yes.»

«This is odd. Okay, I'm gonna get some water, I feel thirsty. I can't believe that all this is true. Horrible! Imagine, the patient is behind the wall! What if she regains consciousness? That's dangerous...»

«Bring me a drink,» he heard his visitor's answer. «Come back and tell me about her divorce. I'm just bursting with curiosity! Don't argue! Didn't you enjoy it? It was as tough as you like.»

It took Woodruff some time to find whiskey, because he completely forgot where he'd put the bottle the previous Christmas. Holding two glasses in one hand, Michael left the kitchen and, taking two steps, was dumbfounded. Carol looked at him with wide eyes and smiled, but this could not be true! Five

capsules would have knocked down an elephant.

«You still decided to treat me to whiskey?» she asked tearfully. The intonation was sluggish, as if she were tired and wanted to sleep. In fact, she did, but, facing her in a bathrobe and slippers, Michael felt terrible. However, she acted, as if she had not noticed it. «Pour me some. Quite a bit, a third. Do you have any ice? Sorry, I don't drink it, you know.»

Without thinking, Woodruff poured the whiskey. He was completely at a loss, and his brain refused to think. In complete silence, she drank a third of the glass and asked for more. To his words about the car, Carol waved her hand and said that she would take a taxi and pick up her car tomorrow. Instead of drinking the second glass, she leaned back again and immediately fell asleep. All this was very weird, and Michael had a thought that such a reaction could have been caused by antidepressants, which she took on his prescription. If so, then everything was clear, but now he had to urgently solve another problem – his visitor. For five years he had kept an eye on this strange patient and his hallucinations. Obvious personality disorder based on the complete denial of one's gender was not uncommon. However, his inability to pay for surgery and the constant use of hormonal drugs only aggravated the situation and he already had a complex type of nervous disorder that led him to the stage of transition to pathology: tantrums, a sharp change of mood, hallucinations, memory loss, paranoia, feeling ashamed of his appearance and much more.

Patience and Woodruff's sincere interest yielded very positive results. Moreover, after so many years of communication and a positive trend, all those results could be combined into scientific work, although, on the other hand, this has led to unexpected closeness and informal relations between them, which have recently become a burden on Woodruff. The desire to become famous in the scientific community haunted his vanity, and the treatment method, based on a combination of drugs and telling stories about other patients seemed to be unique. Stories about difficult cases of curing psychiatric pathologies, especially in couples, such as, for example, Carol Lindstone and her husband, put his young patient, who had suffered a serious psychic trauma in his youth and decided to change his gender and become a man due to this, completely at ease. Suggestion, infusion and persuasion gave a good result, while the pharmacological effect of antidepressants and other drugs was weak. Discussing the treatment of other patients was best of all. As a psychiatrist, Michael Woodruff sincerely believed that in the head of his ward, his past emotional experience and suffering was overlapped and superimposed on the scripts of other patients, which in a certain way corrected the fears and phobias that periodically haunted him in current life. However, now the materials have accumulated more than enough. It only remained to process them and make a speech at the annual conference, which Professor Sardston from the local university advised to do. The proposal was

made for a reason. The professor also shared Woodruff's views on the free relationship between the sexes, and this could become the basis for something more than just the private practice of a psychotherapist Woodruff was running. In this regard, intimacy with a mentally recovering transgender began to constrain Woodruff and interfere with the implementation of his plans.

He slowly entered the room and wearily put the whiskey on the dresser. His visitor was already waiting for him. A female wig made of real hair was probably worth a fortune. Half an hour ago, it caused him an extreme degree of excitement, and now seemed like an absurd masquerade. Strange, but only now it occurred to him that for all this time their intimate relationship has been one-sided and after psychotherapeutic sessions with discussion of critical patients, his partner always acted as the main one and always used an imitator, without bringing the matter to direct contact. Woodruff always was driven as a slave. Maybe his partner had HIV? Weird... No, the tests said otherwise. In addition to increased hormonal levels, there was nothing to worry about – just perverse imagination.

He caught himself comparing his visitor to the strikers from Lookouts nightclub. Clearly Michael had to break with this past once and for all. Yes, everything has changed and it was time to end this. In the semi-darkness he could see only a shadow on the bed with no face.

«You are simply the best!» I adore you! Thanks for the

whiskey, but I changed my mind. Give me some water. What's up with her? Is she sleeping?» a familiar voice wondered.

Michael told him sparingly about Carol's strange behavior after taking the sleeping pills. Then he looked down and sighed. Now he had to overpower himself and say the most important thing.

«Listen, we need to talk. I'm going to start another practice and collaborate with a university. So I'll have to devote more time to work. I would like to stop our relationship for a while. Do you mind?»

His words, oddly enough, did not cause his partner to react violently. The young man took off his wig, put it in his backpack, and nodded his head.

«Okay. If that's what you want.»

«Will you call a taxi? Michael asked hopefully. The answer was quite predictable:

«Balls! If you're doing this to me, then at least take me home! This will be your last gift. Maybe you can tell me something else and then you can return to this «sleeping beauty' of yours!» In another situation, Woodruff would have found a way out and would never have left Carol alone, but now everything was different. Perhaps the young patient was jealous of him and Carol, maybe something else, but he clearly needed to be reassured. Woodruff had to make sure that his visitor would not do anything wrong on the way home, so Michael agreed. This was the last favor before starting a new life and the next day he could

be free to start preparing for the scientific conference of state psychiatrists.

«Well, get dressed. I'm going to the garage,» he nodded.

«Okay, I'll be right there.»

When the door closed, the young man got out of bed and poured whiskey into a lonely standing glass goblet. Then he took out a napkin and quickly wiped the bottle. After thinking a little, he quickly did the same with all the places on the bed, the doorknob and the nightstand. He pulled off a sheet and a bedspread, a pillowcase from a pillow and a small towel, putting it all in his voluminous backpack. The next place was Woodruff's office and the laptop on the table with the lid open. After a moment, it, too, was in the backpack along with the battery charger. Next was the living room. It was necessary to act quickly as he wouldn't get a second chance. He was definitely lucky that day. Going to the sofa, he wanted to get a box with a medical kit from his backpack, but suddenly stopped. Something in the still pose of the woman sleeping on the couch was unusual. His fingers carefully touched her neck over her collarbone – there was no pulse. Nor was there on her hand. There was a cosmetic mirror in his backpack. Bringing it to Carol's nose, he counted to ten. However, the surface remained smooth and not foggy. The guess was confirmed – there was no breath and her heart did not beat. There was the last way – his phone. Finding «Rantastic» cardiograph icon on the screen, he took her pale, thin finger with a napkin and put it on the back camera. The first and

second attempts showed zero result. After the third time, there was no doubt she had no pulse. Wiping Carol's wrist and neck with a napkin, he pulled her smartphone out of her bag. Gently holding her index finger with a napkin, he pressed it to the scanner. The screen did not want to unlock. His hands were trembling, but then it worked out for the sixth time. Now the last thing he had to do was to type 911 on the numeric keypad, and he could go.

Michael Woodruff was about to return to the house, when the back door opened and his secret visitor fell with a sigh of relief into the back seat.

«Sorry,» the face of a strained apology reflected in the rearview mirror. «I did not touch your creams and manicure sets, don't worry. Here, my hands don't smell. Go! I'll be looking at you from behind like in a taxi.

«Where are we going?»

«Go to the port, and from there to Green Street.»

The conversation along the way did not go well. Michael tried to tell some details from his recent practice but was nervous and kept opening and closing the window all the time. At one of the traffic lights, he still overpowered himself and decided to thank his visitor for his patience and everything that was between them. The answer struck him. He was apparently right having decided to give him a lift to his home. He had a panic attack.

«That bitch should have thanked you for licking her behind her husband's back!» he cried. «Now she will not say anything –

she must have had a heart attack. She deserved it! Yes, don't look at me like that! She was no longer breathing. I tried a mirror – it was clean. She got what she deserved! It's fair, right? Yes, justice hurts!» The man in the back seat of the car was clearly gloating. In the rearview mirror, his face blurred with a contemptuous smile, and anger flashed in his eyes.

«What?» muttered Woodruff, hardly understanding the meaning of what he just heard. His blood pressure jumped instantly, and his ear drums pounded. Thoughts in his head started circling around the drugs he had prescribed Carol, around sleeping pills and alcohol – could their combination really cause a heart attack? «We must urgently return!» he croaked, feeling that he was starting to suffocate. At some point, he felt so bad that he dropped his head on the steering wheel and stopped.

«I cannot breathe. It's burning in my chest,» he breathed out with difficulty. «There's St. Mark's Hospital... around the corner. We'll stop by. I will ask „Nitrolingual“.»

«I have „Cardiotex“,» the voice said behind him.

«Not enough. It's weak. Also, I have to ask them...» then a spasm caught his throat, and Michael fell silent, trying to concentrate on the road.

When they stopped in the parking lot behind the hospital fence, he felt even worse. Tearing off his shirt, he began to gasp for air, holding out his hands to the glove compartment. His face showed that he needed urgent help. Michael was breathing heavily and holding onto his chest. His passenger took a small

plastic jar from his backpack and handed a pill over his shoulder along with a bottle of water. Michael was about to faint. Having hardly swallowed the first pill, he could not take a second sip and dropped the bottle from his hands. The young man picked it up, closed it with a cork and took out napkins. The pain lasted several minutes. When Woodruff stopped wheezing and froze in an unnatural position, his patient lowered the back of his seat as far as possible. Now, from outside, no one would be able to notice the person lying on it. Then he disconnected the DVR and took Woodruff's phone.

«Sorry, I wanted to do that a bit later. You've spoilt it. You betrayed me. Well, somewhere by the sea, of course, would be more pleasant, but it's not bad here either,» with these words he began to wipe the psychiatrist's dark hands, neck and ears, then he did the same with the inner surface of the door. Michael's smartphone was the latest model, but the psychiatrist didn't set up a face recognition input on it. Unlike Carol's, his screen was unlocked immediately, so he disabled all passwords at once. When everything was finished, glasses wrapped in a handkerchief appeared from the backpack, while napkins returned to their place along with a bottle of water. This was difficult to do, as the backpack was packed tightly. Having wiped the dark glasses with a cloth, he put the handkerchief back on, and before putting them on he carefully looked out the window. There was no one around, so he could go out. Holding the door with the last napkin, he sharply pushed it back, trying

not to touch it. In the darkness it was not visible how a small handkerchief fell out of his full backpack, slipping from a seat onto a rubber mat. The road to a McDonald's with free Wi-Fi was ahead. Yes, his life really was getting interesting, and the coincidences in it did not seem to be accidental.

CHAPTER 4

There was silence at first but something was in its way. The distant, insistent ringing of the phone broke through the fog of sleep and reached the depths of his desolate consciousness. His eyes slowly opened, and his hand reached for a bright spot on the nightstand.

«Lieutenant Lindstone?» it sounded somewhere far, far away, as in space, but his brain has already begun to work. His first thought was about the voice – who has such a sharp, creaky voice in their department? «Lieutenant Lindstone?» was repeated.

«Yes, I'm listening,» he said, quietly gurgling and wheezing at the same time.

«This is Sergeant Huston. We have an incident. The corpse of a woman was discovered in a house. There's a suspicion that it's your wife.»

«What?» for a few seconds he could hear only a thumping heart beat in his head and nothing more. In his mouth, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth and his throat was blocked up from the disgusting bitter aftertaste of alcohol. «Repeat,» he asked, in a barely audible tone.

«Sir, we have an incident...» followed the repetition of the same words.

«Address?» he got up and sat on the bed.

«I'm texting it to you now, sir.»

«Thank you... Oh, shit!» his attempt to get out of bed was unsuccessful. A sharp pain hit his head, right in the middle of his brain, before spreading from his forehead to his temples and sank down the back of his head to his shoulders. He obviously has to take something urgently. Last month, the psychiatrist prescribed him a new antidepressant, but it was unclear whether he was allowed to take them in the morning, and in particular, after alcohol. Would it be better to take aspirin? Hell, it was necessary to call the doctor and ask him what to do.

Suddenly, his thoughts returned to the call, and his whole body strengthened, as before jumping over the abyss. Even the pain hid in the back of his head, frightened by the tension of the brain. A huge ball of fire was approaching him, gradually filling the entire space around with bright light, and Carol stood still in the middle of it, looking at him. His head seemed to burst from this feeling, and, clutching his temples with his hands, he moaned. He knew he had to urgently put his head under cold water. A chair, a wall, a door, a faucet, water, goosebumps – all these existed, but he was not able to get rid of the vision. Only the headache subsided a little. William quickly changed clothes, drank some water, which made him feel even worse, and yet he swallowed one capsule of the new medication. His thoughts were revolving around a luminous ball, not daring to get inside. He was watching it from the side, blocking his emotions inside and tried to restore the course of events of last night in his head. Taking a bottle of water, he called a taxi and went out onto the

porch. The cool spring air touched his face pleasantly. It was only six in the morning. His gaze lingered on the SMS with the address, and for a few moments the letters were dancing before his eyes, as if they didn't specifically want to connect together. He had already read them and realised that it was him who was trembling along with the phone, and a wet layer appeared on his eyes – either from tears or from the light wind. The rustling sound of rubber on asphalt made him tear himself away from the screen. He had to go and now the light ball in his head turned black, and Carol's figure turned into a white outline. The world in his head turned upside down.

«Eleven Walnut Street,» he said in a hoarse voice to the taxi driver, sitting in the back seat. The car slowly moved forward. Outside the window, yellow maple leaves were dancing in his eyes. He closed his eyes and there was an unpleasant feeling of slight nausea in his stomach. It was better not to look out the window. So, what happened? How did Carol end up in Doctor Woodruff's house? It was clear that this happened by chance, but then what the hell could get her there the night before?

CHAPTER 5

«Stop at the yellow ribbon!» he said to the driver. The taxi drove up to the fence, a few meters from the policeman on duty. The man took several steps, but when he saw who got out of the car, he stopped.

«Good morning, sir!

«Hi Douglas. How are you? It's meant to be your day off, isn't it?»

«Yes, it is, but we were told to come here urgently. Sorry, sir, but Inspector Wilson asked me to call him when you arrive.»

«Tom? Is he here?» That was unexpected, although, if he thought about it, it was quite predictable. William raised his collar and put his hands deep in his pockets, and he turned to the house. There was a familiar lawn, a yellow mailbox at the gate, steps made of dark stone and a wooden door without glass – soundproof and thick. He almost imagined opening it and entering inside. He seemed to recall having been here just recently, maybe a couple of weeks ago.

«Bill! Hi! How are you? Sorry, bad question. Anyways...,» Thomas Wilson's usually good-natured face grimaced unpleasantly. «Follow me, let's talk inside.»

«Who called you?» asked William, climbing the stairs. The door was ajar.

«The guard, Mike Rith, you know him. I worked with him

in the investigation department. When he saw that it was your wife in the house, he decided to call me. Was that okay?»

«Not really,» he had to report to anyone on duty in the department. «Okay, what is it?» he thought it wouldn't matter but everything happened by itself – his nose and eyes started stinging after which everything disappeared into a translucent film of tears. Quickly brushing them with his sleeve, William took a deep breath and held it there, closing his eyes and freezing for a few moments. Suddenly, he composed himself, the tears stopped and now he had to pull himself together.

«Put these on!» Tom handed him shoe covers. «There are still so many questions. The guys will need to work with prints. Don't touch anything!»

«What happened?» William asked sharply, feeling that the inspector was hiding something.

«I think it was a homicide – either intentional or accidental. Calm down, let me tell you something. At five thirteen a 911 call was received from her mobile: no-one spoke. The operator registered the call, but did not hang up. Something seemed strange to her. She requested a geolocation of the place, received confirmation and transmitted the request to the patrol for a routine check. When they arrived, the door was open, everything was silent, and then everything was as it is now. Look!»

They walked through the narrow corridor to Doctor Woodruff's office, and Tom gestured him forward. A cuff from

a white shirt appeared from under the sleeve of his jacket. It stood out sharply against the dark skin of his hand, appearing as a strip between the past and the future – before and after.

William nodded and stepped inside. A table, an armchair, two wide semi-circular sofas, a low table with a glass were in their places. There was something like whiskey inside the glass. Carol reclined, leaning her head back, her knees were shifted to one side, to the armrest, one hand lying limp on her stomach, the other on the couch. The phone was nearby. The face in the dim set of the gray morning looked even paler than usual. How many times had he seen such a look? With fixed pupils staring into space and relaxed lips, she looked like she was sleeping with open eyes. The lump appeared in his throat again. William swallowed several times, went to the far wall, trying to find something small and inconspicuous, which could easily slip away from the eyes of experts.

«Suicide?» he asked, not believing this option.

«Unlikely. Until we've collected everything here, we can't say for sure. Plus, I'd love to chat with Doctor Woodruff. By the way, did you also visit him?» Tom pursed his wide, fleshy lips, which made his face look Joaquin Phoenix in Joker. William felt that the pain in his head had passed, but the nausea remained, and now this piling up of stupid images began to interfere with focusing on the circumstances of the incident. He might not have had to take that painkiller at home.

«Yes, I'd consulted with him about depression four years ago

after Sofia passed. It was hard then. Carol and I would come to him since he was just an ordinary person. This is a strange situation and there are so many questions.»

«I agree completely. You will need to make a statement and describe your relationship with Carol. I don't want to talk about it here right now but do I make myself clear?»

«Yes of course! Thanks, Tom,» William sighed and turned away from Carol's body. «She told me she wanted a divorce yesterday evening. She said she'd work until the end of the week and then go and live with a friend of hers, Tina, initially and then with her mother, but it didn't happen. She obviously went to the wrong friend.»

«Don't jump to conclusions as nothing is clear here. Let's forget what you've just said, I'd prefer to wait a little while. Let's go, forensics have arrived now. It's necessary to collate all the evidence. You'll have to tell everything to the detective.»

«To the detective?»

«Of course. Don't think you'll be assigned to investigate this case, especially after she told you about the divorce last night,» The inspector raised his eyebrows, which made the whites of his eyes look even larger, as if they were painted on his face. William nodded and rubbed his forehead. Tom was probably right.

«Mister Wilson?» someone outside called to Tom. They went outside and saw several cars, from which medical experts and policemen were getting out. Sergeant Huston from their office stood nearby. «I have been entrusted with conducting this case,»

he began timidly, noticing William.

«It's quite clear, Sergeant. Lieutenant Lindstone has examined the scene and he's ready to share his thoughts with you. I hope you know the procedure,» Tom asked rhetorically, adding: «So stay calm and do everything by the book, is that alright Bill?»

«Okay,» William doubted his own judgement, but wasn't going to go it alone or go against the sergeant. He had an overwhelming feeling of nausea, but managed to control it. «Don't worry Tom, I'll be fine. Let's go back to the car. I feel terrible and just need to sit down.»

The day had just begun and gray skies seldom signify sunny weather. The city had just awoken, but to William, an eternity had passed, and it felt as if night should soon fall.

CHAPTER 6

Sergeant Huston drafted a preliminary statement and let him go. The next day, William would have to go back to the office to give more detailed evidence. He was recorded as a witness. Everything went like clockwork, yet a black cloud constantly hung over William's head, as if acid had been poured into his skull and burned his entire brain.

In the taxi, William felt even worse. As he sat in the back, drinking water, something hit him. He'd made a mistake. That whiskey he drank last night. The drink's effect had continued to set in. When at home, William had wanted to find a cure against the nausea, but he ended up vomiting right into the sink. Following this, he brought an unfinished bottle into the living room and poured it, along with two others that were sat in the lower cupboard. Then, he went into the bedroom and had a lie down. Beginning to shiver, William wrapped himself in a blanket and soon fell asleep.

The doorbell rang for several minutes, but William heard nothing. It was only when someone shook his shoulder that he started to open his eyes. Memories returned, as did the vision of Thomas Wilson with them, who stood nearby. Tom looked at William sympathetically.

«You left the door open. Let's have a chat', he said. They went to the kitchen. «Sit down,» Tom gestured. «I'll make some

coffee. Want some?»

«No, just water thanks. I felt sick when I got home. Any news?»

«You don't look too great now either! Are you trying to sober up? Okay, let's talk about Carol, but it needs some perspective. What happened between you? I've known you forever, but I need to understand what happened.»

«She filed for divorce', said William, rubbing his forehead. Then, he went into more detail about Sofia and all the reasons Carol wanted a divorce. Tom picked up his coffee and they went to the living room.

«I have a lot of questions, to be honest,» Tom said, taking his first sip of coffee. He leaned over and picked something up. It was a button from Carol's blouse. He held it close to his eyes, then looked at William.

«Yes, I see it, it's her button. It came off yesterday when she left. Tom, I know you don't believe me, but it's the truth.»

«The truth is irrelevant in our business, only evidence and the decision of judge and jury. The evidence doesn't stack up.» Tom looked at his friend, noticing him tense and lean forward, clearly expecting more details to emerge. He'd seen this expression a hundred times before, especially when solving difficult cases. He knew William too well and didn't believe Sergeant Huston's assumption. Huston saw a motive in William's behaviour, but Tom was more careful not to jump to conclusions.

«So what?» Lindstone finally asked.

«First, the bad news. We haven't found Dr Woodruff yet. Don't make that face at me, I know as much as you do. I don't think he was alone in the house. Why? There were no sheets on the bed. They just disappeared – no sheets, no pillow cases, no duvet covers. Strange, isn't it? Carol's clothes don't have a single thread from the bedroom. Secondly, only one camera spotted his registration plate on the exit to the highway at the end of the street. There's no further video evidence yet. The pictures were enlarged, but no one else was visible in the car. Why would the doctor leave the house with Carol left inside? Was he aware that she was already dead?»

«Maybe he was taking a second corpse in the trunk or someone was hiding?» William suggested, frantically making sense of what he heard. He was immersed in the investigation and wouldn't rest until he had answers.

«Totally agree,» Tom nodded. «I also believe someone else was in the house. Officers are already looking for patient records, despite having no warrant, but we'll solve it. Thirdly, there's no computer, nothing. Looks like he kept all his notes on a laptop – there's a wireless connection and we're checking logs by his IP address. Maybe he accidentally recorded a video at home, but we have no evidence. Did he take it with him? If so, what for? What's hidden on it? Were there notes about you and Carol?»

«What notes? Are you joking? A list of drugs and confessions of helplessness? There must be evidence about other people on there too – it doesn't matter if they were in the house or not, but

maybe they ordered Woodruff to take the laptop for them?»

«If that person existed, then yes, it's a possibility. Fourth, Carol's car is in his driveway, yet she was supposed to be at her friend, Tina Laiton's. Tina was waiting up for her. It seems Carol stopped by for a while, but we don't know why. To me, it doesn't appear to be an affair, but that's my opinion. I knew a little about her, but after my divorce from Tina, I don't want to make assumptions.»

«Don't worry about it. Your situation was completely different,» William didn't agree.

«Was it? You were always in the office, too, I saw it myself. Where was Carol though?»

«Do you think she could cheat on me?» – There was doubt in William's voice.

«No, I don't. I'm making an assumption.»

«I also think that she could have said thanks to Dr Woodruff over the phone.»

«Let's dig a little deeper. Why would Carol have phoned 911? She dialled and said nothing. Twenty-two seconds passed before the operator's question. Therefore, something must've happened to her during this time. Okay, here's a suggestion. Carol felt bad, she dialled the number, and as the call reached the operator, she was already in a state, so she didn't feel fit to answer. We'll get more answers later. The pathologist will help with the time of death a bit later on. However, the question regarding the emergency call remains unanswered.»

William replied with several questions:

«Did Carol feel threatened? Maybe she didn't want to be heard? Why didn't she ask Woodruff for help? Maybe he threatened her? Or maybe he wasn't there at all? Actually, maybe he was in, but didn't Carol didn't want him to see and hear the call?»

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