

PART 3.

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*7 years later*  
*Moving closer*

 Publio

## **7 Years Later**

*Volume 3*  
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It was a bleak, dark morning. A light drizzle began to fall just as Lana stepped out onto the street. She looked up at the sky, wrinkling her forehead, and noted that the flock of grey clouds arriving from the West promised nothing grand as far as the weather was concerned. The overcast sky seemed to reflect the exact state of her mind; it fit her mood. In Hayden's departure she had seen some kind of symbolic event which, in one way or another, would bring about a change in their relationship. Unless they wanted to lose their mind, they needed to put an end to the self-torturing struggle which had been going on for many long months. She assumed that the solution might be painful or devastating, yet she was certain that it had to be final.

In the office she delved into her work, and with much self-control, managed to absorb herself in the files that Stephanie had carefully placed on her desk. She had a lot to do, but didn't mind. Through the week, she had a few tactical discussions with the clients she represented, and was even able to reach a conclusion to a long-standing inheritance trial. All things considered, she had put some successful days behind her. She had worked with all her strength both day and night at the Chancellery, and at the Foundation's office. Masters had invited her out for lunch at the end of the week to discuss some suspended cases. Her boss had left the choice of the restaurant up to her, with the only condition that the place not serve spicy food only. The reason behind this was Masters' inability to take anything that had slightest hint of hot spice in it. Over time, this strange feature of his had transpired in professional circles, and the 'monster of the courtrooms' would often be teased about it. Masters didn't mind this, he just laughed. He was of the firm opinion that as long as he was the victor of most courtroom cases, everybody might as well gossip about him as much as they liked.

Lana had chosen a simple little eatery in the vicinity of the office: that way they didn't have to waste much time getting there. The only thing she had been careful about was that it shouldn't be a place she and Hayden had visited before. She had felt it would be better for her peace of mind not to remind herself unnecessarily of certain things and events. Listlessly tossing the broccoli and carrot pieces from one side of her plate to the other, she had reported to Masters about her two recently terminated cases. Before they had moved on to discuss the challenges of the near future, however, Thom had stopped to observe her for a while with a tilted head, furrowing his eyebrows. He couldn't really tell what was wrong with Lana, and yet, something seemed unusual, out of the ordinary.

Concerning work, he had found nothing to complain about. As always, she had been ready with the right answers and could give account of everything she was in charge of. She may have looked a tad paler than usual, and her gaze sometimes wandered far away as she spoke, as though her mouth and words were living a life of their own, quite independent from her inner thoughts. Indeed, she had lost the glitter in her eyes, and her enthusiasm had all but gone. Now that they were spending some time together out of the office, the lawyer had become very aware of these things. He had clumsily asked if she was all right, if she was in need of a little rest to sort through her thoughts, or to take a trip somewhere for a while. Lana had looked at him with surprise, and her first reaction had been to think that she must have made a mistake, and that this was Masters' way of letting her know that he was not content with her work. At that, he had protested resentfully, and had half-loudly gone on for a while about *how hard it was to reason with women*. He didn't get why the intentions of men were forever misunderstood or distorted. Then he had attempted to hint very cautiously - careful not to risk his words being taken as criticism regarding her looks - that it seemed as though she had been a bit more tired of late. He had said that as her boss, he had felt responsible for the well-being of his colleagues, and if there was anything he could do to help, he would happily do it. For a moment, Lana had felt quite puzzled about this unusual gesture. Then, as if a sudden light had come on in her mind, she smiled. She had pictured Pamela at home, giving Thom a speech about how to be more considerate, and to be more kind and understanding towards Lana, who was going through a difficult time, as far as her private life was concerned. She could almost see him arguing reluctantly that he hadn't noticed anything to worry about, and that his wife was only imagining things. Anyway, he had nothing to do with these issues, and if it was about love-sorrow, it would be much more appropriate for women to discuss it between themselves, or to cry their hearts out on each other's shoulder. Lana had been certain that her boss hadn't felt comfortable bringing up private issues; still, the fact that he had nevertheless done just that and had offered help, truly appealed to her.

She had put her hand on Thom's arm and replied that she had honestly appreciated his concern and attention, but that she wasn't in need of recreation. Although lately she had had to face some difficulties, she had hoped that she could cope without taking a holiday. Masters hadn't pursued the matter any further, and had seemed visibly relieved as she resumed their previous discussion of the Chancellery cases.

In the evening Lana phoned Pamela, who of course, had already questioned her husband about everything, but as usual, hadn't succeeded in getting anything useful out of him. Pam grumbled a lot with Masters, but most of it was just a stage show, and they both enjoyed playing their home roles. They took real pleasure in their game, and their relationship was all in all quite good. As overwhelmingly confident and successful as Thom was in his professional life, he was equally as smooth and compromising at home with his wife, who was ten years his junior. Pamela by that time was genuinely worried about Lana, as she had to witness helplessly how her once joyous and fun-loving friend was fading from day to day.

'I don't think it's new to you, Pam', she started on the phone, 'that today Thom and I had a surprisingly confidential conversation.'

'Goodness!' she shouted apprehensively, 'What did that wild beast do this time? I'm sure he was as inconsiderate as ever.'

'You can imagine how embarrassing it was! Especially for him. Poor thing, he was very obviously in pain the whole time through.'

'I can't comprehend how a man who can reason much better than anybody else, and convince

anyone in the courtroom, can be such a twit in private life', Pamela went on incredulously.

'Come on, Pam. Don't be so strict with him. He tried it, after all. And he was really... how should I put it? Helpful.'

Pamela breathed out heavily, and audibly oppressed a smile.

'And did you get anywhere at least?'

'He offered that I could go on holiday if I wanted.'

'And what did you say?'

'I said no. At least, not now', she continued. 'Work does me good. I can't imagine what I would do with myself without constantly working on something.'

'I don't know, Lana', Pamela sighed with disbelief, 'Perhaps it still wouldn't do you any harm if at this point, since you are facing an important decision, you withdrew yourself from the buzz for a little while to give yourself some time.'

'Oh, Pam', Lana responded tiredly, 'I don't know. You might be right. I can't put this off much longer.'

'Talk to him! Speak to Hayden openly.'

'He is away. He's out of the country.'

'For how long? Did he leave on business?'

'Yes. For three weeks.'

'Oh?', she responded in surprise. 'So long? Then I say, make the most of the remaining time, and do make up your mind at last! Whatever your decision might be, honey, you will feel better afterwards. And Lana...'

'Yes?'

'I hope you know that you can count on me for anything. If you need help, just call. Anytime.'

'Thank you, Pam.' Lana wore a pale smile at the other end of the line. 'Nice to know that I have a friend like you.'

'Come on, you would do the same for me, I know it!'

'Thanks anyway. Oh, and another thing...'

'What is it?'

'Promise me that you will never give such a task to poor Thom again! These things are not for his capacity. You weren't there to witness how he was sweating from the effort when he offered to hear

me out about my private problems. For a second, I felt seriously tempted to start talking, just to torture him a bit', she said as the thought of the star lawyer made her giggle as he sat there wiping his sweaty forehead.

'Cruel bitch', Pamela laughed out at the other end.

'But seriously, Pam. Promise me.'

'All right, honey. I promise. But you also promise that you take care of yourself.'

'I will try.'

'Is Saturday still on?'

'The musical? I think so... You know what? I'll definitely be there.'

'Now, this is what I like to hear. Good night, Lana.'

'Good night, Pamela.'

The tickets to the musical had been obtained by an employee at the Chancellery, a certain *over-zealous* Dave Simmons, who was once even seen by Hayden leave the office building in the company of Lana. About ten of them were walking to the theatre together, among them Stephanie, with her husband, and some joined the group from the foundation too. The programme had been organised quite randomly. Dave had come up with the idea about three days before, and Lana had said a very determined yes to the invitation. She knew there would be quite a few of them there, so nothing personal could happen between them. Masters, of course, could not make himself free at such short notice, but Pamela was coming, which by itself was to guarantee a great evening. Anyway, she didn't want to stay home to stare at the walls, while torturing herself with thoughts of what Hayden might be doing in the States. Since he had disappeared into the dusk at Victoria Embankment, near the Temple pier, she had heard nothing from him. Not a call, not even a message had come from him. Well, there was nothing to wonder about that. Although she had been just about dying to text or phone him herself, she hadn't contacted him either. She had often held the phone in her hand, and staring at Hayden's number. Sometimes her finger would even wander as far as the green button, but then she would change her mind, and toss the phone away with a sigh.

On Saturday evening, as planned, the group met at the entrance of the Prince of Wales Theatre. Pamela and Lana arrived together in a taxi. No sooner had they got out of the car, than Dave came and put the tickets in their hands, and directed them into the building, babbling away in his usual, speedy manner. There wasn't much time left until the beginning of the play, so they made their way at once into the auditorium to find their seats. In the meantime, Dave hurriedly introduced the ladies to his cousin, whom he also took to the show that night. The man reached out his hand to them for a handshake while walking towards the seats, and introduced himself as Eric. Lana found it funny as he sized her up and down in his shabby suit and worn jeans, with a slightly bent posture and his blond hair tied together at the nape of his neck. His face gave away no feelings, but as they shook hands, Lana noticed his long, thin fingers. They reminded her of a Bohemian pianist or a rebellious painter. She was wondering what Eric really did for a living, just to find out whether her first

impression was appropriate of the strange fellow. She didn't have to wait very long; Dave soon enlightened her that his cousin was a freelance painter, an up-till-now undiscovered genius with an undoubtedly bright future ahead of him. Lana quickly put her hand to her mouth to prevent herself from laughing out loud. Her instincts had proven to be quite right. She admitted that at first glance she was thinking something very similar. Since the painter was still looking at her with critical eyes, it crossed her mind that she might have come across as a bit rough when she described his looks. So she apologised, and began to explain that she had meant no offence and hoped that Eric wouldn't misunderstand what she had said. He, however, gave no response, but continued to look her up and down. Lana turned to Dave questioningly, but he only waved her down and assured her that his cousin wasn't easily offended, although it could be quite a challenge to communicate with him once inspiration had got the better of him.

Dave assumed that the painter was without a doubt eyeing Lana as a potential model, and was already making mental drafts of her for a future portrait.

They had to leave it at that, because they had reached their seats. Lana had Pamela and Dave sitting next to her. Besides Stephanie and her husband, there were two other colleagues from the Chancellery whom Lana had met, but didn't know very well. Three people had shown up from the IHIN Foundation as well. Two of them, a man and a woman were also volunteers, and they knew each other pretty well from their joint ventures. The third man was called Khalid, and all Lana knew about him was that he also worked for the Foundation, as they had already ran into each other once before at a function.

Turning to the side, she saw that Pamela was staring at Khalid with an open mouth; and sure enough, the guy was quite an Adonis. His exotic Eastern features - perhaps Chinese, she assumed - formed a perfect combination with his European ones. The blend of the two resulted in a black-haired, almond-eyed, and, from the front, almost feminine looking male-beauty with soft facial features, which were counterbalanced by a strongly marked profile. She nudged Pamela, who finally came round and, leaning across Lana, turned to Dave to find out more about the man.

Everybody knew that Dave was like a repository who had up-to-date information on everyone. And once again, he didn't disappoint. He said in a whisper that Khalid was a full-time employee at the Foundation, the one to organise and control missions in the Middle East. Apparently, he had come from such a rich family that he didn't expect a salary for his work, so he was only paid a symbolic fee which he immediately transferred to the accounts of other charities. From where this confidential piece of information had come, the ladies had no clue. Indeed, the man had aristocratic looks: his moves were refined, but his manners were friendly, kind and informal. He waved to Lana and the others with a smile, and signalled that they would talk during the intermission. Pamela waved back excitedly, at which Lana jokingly noted that she had better focus on Masters instead of behaving like a silly teenager. Pamela sniggered, and assured her that no man would ever take the place of Thom Masters in her heart; but the fact that she loved her husband would be no reason for her not to occasionally admire a unique male specimen.

'This is like being in a museum, you know', she explained.

Lana had to admit that the guy's looks did attract attention, and that his features were almost picture perfect.

The auditorium suddenly went dark, the curtains rolled up and the performance began.

The musical, *Mamma Mia*, was exactly what Lana needed; at least, that's what she thought. Well-known songs, evergreen hits that you could sing along with, a light and fun story which ends happily and contains only a minimal amount of drama. Dramas, she didn't fancy. In her unstable emotional state, she couldn't take something like *Les Miserables* or the *Phantom of the Opera*. As much as she could, she switched off her mind and completely surrendered to the joy of music.

During the intermission, they all invaded the hall for refreshments. The show had its expected effect on the group; they were all in high spirits, in a happy mood.

The night had turned pitch dark by the time they finally left the theatre. Most of the group - with the exception of Eric - spoke about the play with loud admiration. No one was really in the mood to head home just yet, so they decided to sit in somewhere for a while. They began to walk on Rupert Street, towards Soho. Despite the late hour, or maybe because of it, there were still a lot of people in the street. People were gathering at the entrances of clubs drinking, smoking, talking. Two or three options came up, but finally they opted for what Pamela suggested: a pub that was right on their way. They had to take a few steps up to enter the place, and it took their eyes a little while to get used to the poor light inside. Quite a lot of people were there, and it was impossible to find a table where they all could fit. Some of them ended up sitting at a round table, while the rest of the group found space elsewhere. They ordered Prosecco for all in the first round, and after just a few sips Lana began to feel the alcohol going straight to her head. It had been quite a while since she had anything to eat. She decided that for once she would put all consideration to the side, and whatever it took, would let herself go with the flow. With delicious food she would always happily drink a glass of good, dry red wine of a well-known label, and she had no objection to moderate, civilised alcohol consumption. Without a doubt, her character had some weak points, but excessive drinking wasn't one of them. She couldn't recall one occasion of her life when she had got really drunk. Whenever she had felt that the drink was going to her head, she had never hesitated in refusing any more drinks offered to her.

Lars Bell also liked good wine and even had a little wine cellar in the basement of his house, where for years he had collected special bottles. He handed down some of the knowledge to his kids, and as Robert got older, he also became interested in unique wines. Lana got as far as being able to differentiate between serious brands with good names and cheap bottles of plonk, and she could even tell the quality of a wine from its smell. Whenever her dad had enthusiastically shared with them the origin and story of a freshly opened bottle at the dinner table, she had listened attentively, but she wasn't excited enough to start her own collection.

In the present situation, she almost welcomed that momentary numbing and the liberating effect of alcohol. She could feel the buzz running through her veins, and during the second glass, she was positively more relaxed. She laughed a lot, and at least for a while, she tried to relieve herself from the pressure. The others also had a good time. After a while even Eric seemed more talkative. He sat down next to Lana, and they started to discuss painting. He told her how he had left the Academy of Fine Arts, because he constantly fell out with the teachers. It also turned out that he saw Manet as his example, at which Lana was quick to make the point that she was also very fond of Manet. When she told him that one time in Paris she had had the opportunity to admire some of Manet's paintings in person at Orsay Museum - for example, *Breakfast in the Open Air* or *The Balcony* - the ice was completely broken between the two of them. Eric asked her if she knew where it was possible to find Manet's paintings in London outside of the National Gallery. Lana didn't know, so he happily told her.

Lana had awoken his imagination. He saw a perfect model in her. In his head, the image had

already come to life: she was depicted sideways, clad in oriental revealing clothes, leaning against the wrought iron bar of a balcony, meditatively staring into the distance. Lana laughed as he drew into the air, describing the sight of her loose hair being caught by the wind. She didn't take the musings of this artistic mind too seriously. During her years at university, she actually got a request to be the model for a nude painting. She had thanked them for the opportunity, but had declined it.

After a while, Pamela became aware of Lana's sudden change in mood. Although she was having a great time as well, she had made sure to keep an eye on her friend. Someone else equally eager in watching Lana from the other table was Khalid. While she was talking to Eric, their eyes would occasionally meet. When the noise got so loud around them that they could hardly make out each other's words, Stephanie was taken to dance by her husband, and Pamela also said yes to Dave's invitation. Lana turned to Eric and asked him if he was in the mood for dancing. Wearing a superior smile, he responded that he never danced. Lana was just about to start persuading him, when out of the corner of her eye she saw that somebody had stopped by their table. Lifting her head, she caught sight of Khalid standing in front of her, with an overwhelming smile on his face, reaching his hand out to her.

'Shall we dance?' he asked quietly.

'With pleasure', she said, and putting her hand into his, she got up from the table.

Just as she stood up and took a step, a spell of dizziness came over her due to the alcohol rushing in her blood. For a moment, she had to grab the edge of the table, so as not to overbalance. Khalid looked back at her and asked if everything was all right.

'Oh yes', she waved. 'It's just that I've had a bit too much to drink on an empty stomach.'

'Would you rather stay here?'

'No, absolutely not!' she objected. 'I want to dance.'

So, getting a hold of his hand, she followed him into the crowd of dancing couples. Khalid took her waist with a firm, yet not overly confident grip. He moved slowly, not being sure how serious her previous spell of dizziness was. At first they just smiled at each other, then, in a while, Khalid began to talk.

'I'm sorry if I sometimes step on your foot. The truth is, I'm not a very good dancer. Actually, I only dance when it's absolutely necessary, but now I just couldn't resist the temptation.'

'Oh, come on!' Lana said, thanking the compliment with her most charming smile. 'You are not a bad dancer at all. You only need to practice more, that's all.'

'You, on the other hand, are the Queen of the Dance floor.'

'The Queen of the Dance floor, who is so slushed that she couldn't even get up from the table without help', she laughed, pushing back her head.

'This is not the first time I've seen you dancing', Khalid admitted mysteriously.

'Is that so?'

Lana studied his face with obvious admiration. She was fascinated by his dark, slightly slanted eyes, the vaulted mouth, the almost perfectly symmetrical cheekbones. She let herself be overwhelmed by his refined, almost femininely perfect beauty. In her unruly imagination she was now a poor beggar girl, who was dancing with Prince Charming from an Oriental Kingdom. It even crossed her mind that her troubles might be solved if she and Khalid happened to...

'At the IHIN gala, remember?'

His voice immediately pulled her back from her musings, and the word 'gala' painfully bit into her consciousness. She looked at him with huge eyes, taken aback. This one word suddenly stirred all her feelings up again. How Hayden had ran into her by accident at the ball, how they had spoken all night, and the times filled with thrill and excitement following that. She remembered the various degrees of insecurity, all the misunderstanding. The fear of bad decisions. The unanswered questions and confessions unspoken. Then the break-up, the fight between them, which resulted in the stillborn decision that they just remain friends. To have a friendship which was completely unnatural, and which Lana never ever desired. A friendship that didn't mirror her wishes in the slightest. Still, she wasn't brave enough to tell him openly that *it wasn't working*. *She did not want this*. She was a coward. She dared not risk losing him, facing the possibility of him completely disappearing from her life, again. So she chose to play along, even though the situation would destroy them both. The recognition sank into her that she had already found her Prince. Found him, lost him, and found him again. Just like in a fairy tale. Only the happy ending was missing. Because in reality nothing happens the way they do in those damn tales. Nothing at all. It all failed, it all went wrong. Hayden did nothing about it, either. Why did he not say anything? Why did he not try to clarify the issue? He was probably trying to get over it now, and the trip to the States was a part of the cure. Who knows where and with whom he was seeking comfort in this unfortunate situation?

She felt dizzy again, and felt like the dance floor was spinning with her. She closed her eyes, only to see Hayden's face again. Her knees were about to fold. She heard Khalid's voice from a distance, calling to her.

'Lana! Lana, what's wrong with you? Are you feeling unwell? Come; let me take you back to your table.'

He gently put his arm around her waist, but she was in such a weak, half-conscious state, that he almost had to carry her. He walked her to the table where Eric was still sitting.

'Sit down. Let me get you a bottle of water from the bar. Just relax and don't go anywhere... Please, take care of her!' he turned to Eric. 'She's not feeling too good.'

Khalid started towards the bar for the water he had promised. Lana stared in front of herself with an expressionless face, feeling like she couldn't take it anymore. She couldn't cry, though. She only felt that in place of her heart there was a dark emptiness, invading everything.

'What happened?' Eric leaned closer to her. 'Can I do anything?'

Lana looked back at him with a face void of expression, and told him quietly that she wanted to leave.

'You want to leave? Should I take you home?' he looked at her inquisitively. 'Do you want me to take you home?'

'Yes', she said bluntly. 'Home.'

'Okay. Let's go, then.' Eric shrugged his shoulders, and put Lana's short jacket over her back.

He folded her arm around his own, and helped her to her feet.

'Come, hold on to me. We'll find a taxi outside.'

They started walking towards the door. Lana let herself be led by him, taking insecure steps. Outside, the air was cold against their face, but she wasn't really aware of it. She listlessly stared ahead and waited as Eric waved to the taxi on the other side of the road. In the meantime, Pamela noticed that Lana was no longer among the dancers, and Khalid was nowhere to be seen, either. Suspecting something bad, she went back to their table, her eyes wandering around the place, looking for her friend. Khalid had just got back with the glass of water, and looked around, puzzled.

'Where's Lana?' Pam asked him.

'No idea. She was sitting here just before. She wasn't feeling too good, dizzy and all. I told her to stay at the table until I got her a drink.'

'And what about Eric?' asked Pam, a bit more upset.

'No clue. He was also here just before. Do you think they... left together?'

Khalid looked at Pamela frowning his eyebrows. She quickly responded that they would soon find out, and made her way for the exit. Stepping outside, the cool night air made her shiver, but she had no time to go back for her jacket. She spotted Eric a few metres from there, opening the door of a taxi and motioning Lana to sit on the back seat. She caught up with him, and in her usual, practical style grabbed Eric's shoulders from behind as he was about to get into the car and pulled him back with one firm move.

'Eric, you are a darling,' she said with a dubious smile. 'Thanks for your help, but it'll be all right now. I'll take care of her.'

He looked back at her dumbfounded, but didn't utter a word. Only stepped back to give way to the determined woman. Pamela popped in next to Lana on the seat, and slammed the door shut. She gave the address to the driver, and the taxi was on its way. After a few yards, though, the brake squealed, and the car came to a sudden halt. The windscreen went down on Pamela's side. She put her head out to shout to Eric, who was still standing where he was before.

'I'd be grateful if you could hand my jacket - brown leather with fur collars - to Dave to take it to the Chancellery tomorrow. Many thanks, my dear!' she quickly added. Then the windscreen went up and the red back light of the taxi slowly disappeared into the night. What else she mumbled half-loudly to herself about him, only she knew.

Lana sat next to her, completely apathetic; Pam knew very well that it would be pointless to try to start a conversation with her. She silently stared out the window, the tears welling up from her eyes. Pamela wrapped an arm around her, and pulled her forehead to her own cheeks. They were quiet for the whole trip. Upstairs, Pamela pulled off Lana's shoes and dress. She saw to Lana as if to a child. She let down Lana's hair and walked her to her bed. She tucked her in, and put a large glass of camomile tea on her bedside table. She even kissed her goodnight on the forehead, and switched the light off in the bedroom. She was about to close the door behind her, when she heard Lana's soft voice.

'Pam.'

She turned back in the bedroom door.

'Thank you, Pam.'

'Sleep, honey. Tomorrow you might see everything in a different light.'

Therewith, she closed the door behind her, and went home with a heavy heart. That night Thom Masters, who was peacefully sleeping in his bed, was woken from his dreams by an unusually romantic and amorous wife.

Hayden's first week in the States was spent very dynamically with a lot of travelling, meetings, and negotiations. Thanks to a tiny pill, he had slept through the eight-hour plane journey to New York. His first destination had been the hotel, where he had once again looked through the documents carefully prepared by Giselle. These included the details of his first meeting. He had met a group of the company's stockholders and had informed them about every detail they needed to know regarding the company. He had negotiated with some possible investors, and most of his nights had concluded with a business dinner in an elegant restaurant. He had obsessively tried to find in himself the enthusiasm he once had for business, and was quite upset to realise that it had vanished as though it had never ever dominated his character.

He was aware of how important this trip was in terms of the company's future, and had done all he could to represent the company to the best of his abilities, but his former commitment seemed to have gone. Whenever he returned to his hotel room after a noisy dinner, and exhaustedly threw himself into an armchair, a scary air of silence surrounded him. He reached for the remote control of the TV and allowed the box to fill the room with an endless, monotonous flow of news. Despite the background noise that he himself generated, he was engulfed by his thoughts and feelings.

The past few years had been a lonely man's escape from the sad fact that he had never been able to recover from the failure of his private life. Not that his work hadn't give him any pleasure. Over time, he had realised that if he wished to live a normal family life, and if he was to be emotionally stable and content, he would never be a workaholic. If the woman whose mere presence made him happy, and whom his whole being desired, was close to him, the order of his priorities would immediately be in balance. Why was he not able to let any other woman get close to him after Lana? And why was it that over the years, he had never really wanted another woman's closeness? Since Lana had reappeared in his life again, he had perceived every other female in an obscure way, as if seen through Lana's face. Could it be that none other could exist for him? That however hard he was to try, it wouldn't work out? But he had tried it! He had even got married. Still, nothing and no one could ever fade Lana's memory. Or was he the one who didn't want it hard enough? Could it be that subconsciously he objected to every change and every new thing? He didn't know the answer. He only knew that he was sitting all alone in a hotel room, his head splitting with a bunch of unanswered questions. Yet he would have to start the next day afresh and energised, standing his ground in the business world which didn't tolerate weakness.

Sometimes he would go to sleep in the armchair with his clothes on. Or the morning found him on the sofa, with a glass of Scotch in his hand from the night before, gone weak by morning. On the mornings after such nights, though, he always appeared with elegance at the business meetings and radiated self-confidence, having chased the demons of the night back to hell with all the power he could muster by daylight.

His journey led him from the East coast to a global media market conference organised for media sharks and publishers, taking place in Florida. The most significant and prosperous entrepreneurs from the far-reaching field of mass media were present there.

On a warm morning in Florida, Hayden Ravensdale made his appearance in the hall of the hotel accommodating the conference in a dashing grey suit, with neatly combed hair, and, what somewhat ruined the overall impression, with deep dark lines under his eyes. It was only half past 8, but he was already on his second coffee. He had had a dreadful night, but such a thing no longer surprised him.

The conference attendees arrived one after the other at the venue, and the elegant, carpeted lounge slowly filled up. After a while, a female voice was heard through the loudspeakers, politely asking the participants of the conference to walk into the hall and take their seats. Hayden looked at his watch and frowned at the crowd growing bigger and bigger. He was looking for Christian. According to the plan, he had also flown to the States for this specific conference. Hayden had insisted on his attendance, so that he could also benefit from the discussions. Since Christian's flight had landed late at night, they had agreed to meet in the hall. Hayden gave up scanning the room and slowly made his way into the hall, following the crowd. He knew that since there were seats assigned to Ravensdale Publications, sooner or later they would catch sight of each other. He was right. Just as he took a seat matted with red velvet in the middle of the huge conference room, he felt somebody tapping his shoulder. He looked up, and a rather tired looking, but nevertheless cheerful Christian looked back at him. His tiepin lopsided.

'Better late than never!' he nodded with a joke, and waved him over to take his place in the seat assigned to him.

Seeing the worn face of his colleague, Hayden assumed that Christian had probably had no more sleep than he had had the night before. However, there was no time to talk, as the welcome speech began to sound from the podium, and the conference-marathon commenced.

Lana Bell at the same time was tossing and turning in her bed, troubled by bad dreams. A few hours later, in the dusk of dawn she pressed the button on her alarm clock before it went off.

After the badly-ending visit to the theatre, she woke up slightly hungover and confused. She tried to rack her brains until finally she was able to put together what had happened the night before. Afterwards, Pamela enlightened her about the missing pieces. In retrospect, Lana felt ashamed about her behaviour in front of her male colleagues. Pamela put her at ease that she had done nothing to be ashamed of. Maybe she had drunk a bit more than usual, and it caused her lapse of memory. Fortunately, Lana was not alone, and Pamela's presence had saved her from any later inconveniences. She was without a doubt very glad about this. Still, she felt like she was coming down with some illness, as she was feeling unusually weak and exhausted, even at the slightest physical challenge. Pam knew what was behind that, and was about to order her to take some days off and take a trip as Masters had already suggested. She was seriously worried about her friend's health, and was constantly thinking about how to talk Lana into facing the problem, rather than sweeping it under the carpet. Lana was acting stubborn and nevertheless went in to work. She struggled through the whole day, but by evening she hardly had the energy to respond when being talked to.

What came over her was a feeling scarily reminiscent of depression, as she had the sensation that the dark cloud over her head was getting thicker and thicker, with no chance for the sunlight to come through.

The next day she dragged herself out of bed, and got ready in a worn, under-motivated mood. When she caught sight of her hollow, off-white face and red-shot eyes in the bathroom mirror, she fell to the floor and gave up. She had no more energy left to pull herself together and make an appearance in the office. She felt like her life was falling to pieces, and had no clue how to start over putting the picture back together. She cried for a long time, sitting on the bathroom tiles, pressing her hot forehead against the cold edge of the bathtub. After a while, she felt some relief. Or, at least, it had become clear to her that she had reached the end of her tether, and it seemed too vain to think that she would be able to fulfil her workplace duties in such a state. She called Thom Masters at once, and asked for an indefinite holiday. She tried to pull herself together for the time of the meeting, and as she had anticipated, Masters generously granted her the holiday. While they spoke, it also became clear to her where she should go, and it happened in the flash of a moment. She called Stephanie too, and told her she was sick, which was actually not far from the truth. Once she hung up, she took a shower, and quickly got dressed and threw a few items of clothing into a sports bag with some of her basic things. Before she stepped out of the apartment, she phoned Pamela, letting her know about her plan, and thanking her again for all her care and help. Tossing her sports bag over her shoulder, she slammed the door shut behind her, and without waiting for the lift to come, rushed down the stairs to her Jeep Wrangler parked in front of the house. She threw her stuff onto the back seat, and since the sharp light coming in through the windscreen was bothering her all cried out eyes, she rummaged through the glove compartment for her sunshades. She took a deep breath and started the engine. Her destination was clear. She headed for Hastings, her parents' home.

The journey took over two hours: a bit longer than usual. This was due to the fact that her thoughts would often wander, and lost in her own world she would sometimes completely remove her foot from the accelerator. At times like this, the car would slow down so much that the people behind her had to overtake her, gesturing wildly. Then she would come to her senses and begin to accelerate, so much so, that after a while she would get scared, and quickly remove her foot from the pedal.

At a rather uneven speed, but no later than by noon, she arrived at her parents' house. As soon as she caught sight of the blue water surface of the ocean, she let the windscreen down and took a deep breath from the salty, moist air, so typical of coastal towns. She had always loved the scent of the ocean, and the closeness of the monumental mass of water filled her with religious adoration. The sight of the horizon running into infinity lifted her mood again, and put an unconscious smile on her face. She came to understand why her parents had longed to move here. She agreed with their decision, despite the fact that every now and then she still felt melancholic thinking about her birthplace in Reading. Plenty of unforgettable memories connected her to the old house. Although the day of the move was not easy for her parents, they never regretted their decision.

The car stopped in front of the two-storey red brick building. Lana was pleased that her parents were able to bring a change to their life even at an old age. They had the guts to start something new. What gave them real security was their marriage and their commitment to each other. They were there for each other, for better or for worse. *Does it really matter where you live if everything else is fine in your life?* The thought made her pull a bitter smile.

The home of the Bells wasn't directly by the sea, but about a 15-20 minute walk from the famous Hastings pier, towards the town centre. It was a peaceful neighbourhood with a lot of trees and thick foliage between the houses and in the street. Lana didn't get out of the car immediately. She stared

at the snow-white entrance and windows for a while. The whiteness of the glass balcony upstairs, vaulted from the facade of the building in a semi-circle, harmonised very well with the typically English red bricks. What was not so characteristic of English homes, was that the building wasn't attached to the other houses on its sides, but stood free, enjoying a breeze of freedom untypical of English houses, in a street not so frequented by traffic. Slowly shaking her head, she smiled at the sight of the palm tree in front of the house, so out of place in the British climate. Previously she had noticed that the tree must be of a very stubborn kind, because it still seemed to be in a surprisingly good condition. Although on moving in, she and Robert jokingly said that they wouldn't give the poor plant a year and it was sure to die, there wasn't even a hint of decay on it. Of course, this tree wasn't the only one in the area; there were a number of palm trees in certain parts of Hastings, but this one - perhaps because it was standing almost right in front of their home - they adopted in thought.

Lana opened the door of the jeep, and got out of it slowly as if a ton-weight weight was pulling her down. She took her stuff from the back seat and started for the door. She placed her finger on the buzzer, and took a deep breath before pressing it. The buzz, however, had no chance to make a sound, as the door opened wide, and her mother, Katie, appeared at the doorstep.

'Lana!' she said, looking at her for a moment with a surprised look.

She was surprised at the unexpected visit, but also shocked by the worn and unusually broken appearance of her visitor. She immediately had an unhappy flashback of her daughter's looks during the time following her university graduation. After leaving Hayden, and before travelling to Africa, she was similarly pale and thin. Only a shadow of herself, with sad eyes, dangerously like the broken figure now standing at the door.

'Lana', Katie repeated, now with some joy in her voice, and a smile on her face.

She opened her arms and embraced her daughter who was still standing at the doorstep hesitantly, as if wondering whether she was welcome. The feeling only lasted until her mother put an arm around her and pulled her into the house. Then she immediately sensed the unconditional love and warmth which always made her feel at home.

'Come in, darling. Why did you not say you were coming? I wasn't even expecting to see you so shortly after the party. What if we were not in?'

'Then I simply would've waited, Mum' she responded with a pale smile. 'I know I should have told you I was coming, but... I only decided this morning to drive here.'

'Oh, come off it. You know fine well I didn't mean it like that. This is your home too; you don't need to announce your arrival. But...' Katie began to study Lana's white face with worry, '...is everything okay? Has something happened?'

'Yes, Mum. There is a problem.'

The woman resignedly dropped her chin and gave a big sigh.